



Embassy

Three Amigos summit delay a missed opportunity January 28, 2015

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper's decision to delay the North American Leaders' Summit does Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto a huge favour. Postponement of the meeting, originally set to occur in Ottawa this February, allows Peña Nieto to avoid a forum in which he could be questioned about the human rights crisis that has only grown under his administration.

On Sept. 26, 2014, police opened fire on a busload of teachers-college students from Ayotzinapa in Iguala, Guerrero. Six were killed, and 43 students forcibly disappeared. The DNA of just one of the students has been identified from a bag of ashes, while the whereabouts of the rest remain unknown.

This event and the bungled investigation that has followed illustrate the shocking levels of collusion between elected officials, public security forces and organized crime in Mexico. They also underscore the lack of political will to address escalating violence. The situation has led to unprecedented mobilizations, with hundreds of thousands of citizens repeatedly taking to the streets to protest endemic violence, impunity and corruption in Mexico.

The Three Amigos summit was the moment for Canada to publicly ask hard questions and apply pressure for change.

Canada could have urged Mexico for a full, impartial investigation into the Ayotzinapa case. The official investigation in Mexico has been sluggish and limited, failing to properly address allegations of complicity by armed forces and others in authority. Instead, it has relied primarily on testimonies from gang members who allege corrupt police officers handed the students over to them at the behest of the local mayor, so they could be killed and their bodies burned in a garbage dump.

However, investigative journalists from the University of California at Berkeley and Proceso magazine have found evidence that key witnesses in the government's investigation were tortured, and that federal armed forces may have been directly involved.



Additionally, Mexican scientists at the National Autonomous University of Mexico determined that it is impossible that 43 bodies could have been burned at the Cocula garbage dump as claimed. They urge an investigation of private and state-owned incinerators.

Canada has lost an opportunity to push the Mexican president to address the pervasive links between criminal groups and government officials, security forces and police—links that this crisis illustrates so well.

The summit could have been a forum to impress upon Peña Nieto the importance of respecting freedom of expression and assembly. The Mexican government's reaction to the protests that erupted after the disappearances has been troubling. Police have used disproportionate force against demonstrators and resorted to arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment of those in custody. Several Mexican states have adopted or sought to adopt laws expanding the use of force by police during demonstrations. And there are disturbing reports that Mexico's intelligence agency is investigating human rights defenders and lawyers who counsel the families of the disappeared Ayotzinapa students, calling them "subversive" and "dangerous to governance."

February's Three Amigos summit could have provided Prime Minister Harper with an important venue to raise these human rights concerns directly. Mexico and Canada are tied together by trade, investment, security co-operation and tourism. Since the signing of NAFTA, Canadian investment in Mexico has grown exponentially. Canada is now the largest foreign investor in Mexico's mining sector and has greater mining assets in Mexico than in any other country in the world. Yet while the rest of the world has been speaking out, the Canadian government has maintained a public silence about the horror that took place last September and the conditions that make such murders and disappearances possible.

The postponement of the summit cannot be an excuse for delaying action to address Mexico's growing human rights crisis. Canada must add its voice to the growing number of countries that are calling on Mexico to get serious about stopping the violence, impunity and entrenched corruption that have become commonplace in what is now being characterized as a "narcostate."

Canada cannot let business interests in Mexico prevent it from taking a stand on human rights.

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