

MEXICO - Police Brutality in San Salvador Atenco (by John Gibler, Znet)

Monday 8 May 2006, by [Manuela Garza Ascencio](#)

[Znet](#) - San Salvador Atenco, Mexico - At 7 AM this past Wednesday, May 3rd, state police blocked 60 flower vendors from setting up their stands at the Texcoco local market in the State of Mexico, about 20 miles east of Mexico City. The police beat and arrested those who resisted. The flower vendors called to the residents of neighboring San Salvador Atenco for help and the Atenco residents blocked the highway that borders their town and leads to Texcoco.

The police response was overwhelming: hundreds of state and federal police, most clad in riot gear, arrived to lift the blockade. Atenco resisted, with machetes, clubs, Molotov cocktails and bottle rockets. The police tried to lift the blockade five times throughout the day, and five times they were repelled.

The violence was extreme. Photographs published in local papers show Atenco protestors beating a fallen policemen, police beating tens of fallen protestors. Severe beatings. Protesters kicking one fallen police officer in the face, groups of police pulverizing tens of protestors with rocks and batons.

Police also attacked photographers from both the national and the international press. Photographers and television cameramen from Associated Press, Reuters, Milenio, Jornada and Televisa all reported beatings and attempts to confiscate cameras. Photographs and film coverage of the beatings were published on the internet and shown on national television. Local and international news articles however, have not mentioned the systematic police violence against reporters.

All told on Wednesday, over 50 people were injured and 100 detained by the police. Protestors took 11 police hostage, but released them to the Red Cross later in the evening. A fourteen year-old boy was shot in the chest and killed in the afternoon. Local media reported that the boy was killed by projectiles from the protestors, but the death certificate said otherwise: bullet wound to the chest.

Atenco is famous across Mexico for having resisted in 2002 the forced displacement from their community to make way for a new Mexico City Airport. Villagers, mostly small farmers, formed the People's Front in Defense of Land (Frente del Pueblo en Defensa de La Tierra) and, wielding their machetes, became a symbol of popular protest in Mexico.

Organizers from the People's Front have attended several meetings of the Zapatista's Other Campaign, and hosted subcomandante Marcos' arrival in Atenco. During his visit, Marcos promised to align the Zapatista Army of National Liberation with Atenco's struggle. The Atenco Front, with machetes in hand, was in charge of providing security for Marcos during the May first Labor Day march to Mexico City's main plaza where the Front's leader, Ignacio Del Valle, spoke before tens of thousands gathered in the plaza.

Two days later riot police stormed the house where he had been hiding since the attack in Texcoco. At that moment the Televisa cameraman was outside the house filming the police operation when some five police officers approached and repeatedly beat him with clubs. As a result there is no film coverage of the police raid.

Several newspaper photographers, however, photographed Del Valle's arrival to prison several hours later that night. He was carried in a headlock by a masked police officer, who, in the photographs, is pointing for the photographers to leave the area. Another masked officer walked slightly behind, grabbing Del Valle's back. The two masked officers walk Del Valle through a gauntlet of a hundred riot police with

helmets and shields. Del Valle's head is covered with a towel in the pictures, but his face, swollen and bloody is partially visible. Also visible is a blood stain the size of a fist on the groin of his jeans, evidence of repeated strikes to his testicles.

Police Siege Town, Take over 200 prisoners

The following day, Thursday May 4th, Mexico woke to the bloody images of violence from the day before. Atenco woke to a police siege that led to hundreds more wounded and detained.

Around 6:30 AM, over three thousand police surrounded Atenco and invaded, filling the streets, cutting down everyone in their way with clubs and firing tear gas, both to disorient, and to kill. Several protestors were shot in the head at close range with metal gas pellets three inches long and an inch in diameter.

Within two hours the police had occupied Atenco.

Then the terror began. The police went house to house, breaking windows and doors, pulling people into the street, beating them and then piling them in police vans and trucks. The police had a masked individual in civilian clothes who pointed out which houses to raid. Several people who had participated as speakers in high-profile Other Campaign events in Mexico City were singled out and beaten. One woman who spoke in the Zocalo in Mexico City on May first was pulled into the street and kicked repeatedly in the groin.

The police violence on Thursday was indiscriminate. Both mainstream and alternative press reporters were attacked. Several members of the caravan that accompanies the Other Campaign across the country were beaten and arrested.

Samantha Dietmar, a young German photographer who has been covering the Other Campaign since January was grabbed in the doorway of her hotel, beaten in the face and thrown into a truck. A neighbor who witnessed the attack said that she asked why the police were taking her: "What did she do?" The police officer responded, the woman said: "She did whatever I say she did."

Dietmar was taken to a women's prison on the outskirts of Mexico City. A human rights lawyer who was able to interview her said that she had serious pain in her eyes from the tear gas, and that she had been beaten in the face and body. Dietmar will most likely be deported.

The same lawyer said that five women were raped in the police vans when taken to jail.

Between two and three hundred people were detained, but only 109 have been recognized by the police. A list is circulating on the internet, compiled from witness accounts, of 275 people who have been detained. At least 18 people are missing.

Hundreds of people sought hiding in houses across the town. In one house, 23 people were packed into a 12-by-12 foot room. Just outside the hiding room, Alexis Benhumea, a 20-year old economy student in Mexico City, laid unconscious for 12 hours. Just after 6:30 AM he was shot in the head, most likely with a gas pellet. The impact broke his skull open in two places, exposing his brain.

Alexis was carried into a house by his father and two friends for hiding. One of the protestors hiding out in the house made an impromptu bandage for the wound to stop the bleeding. The thick bandage was soaked in blood by the afternoon. Alexis's father and those hiding out in the house so feared for their lives, and Alexis' life, that they dared not leave their hiding place. Indeed, just outside the house, state and federal police blocked both ends of the street and constantly patrolled up and down the street.

"I was sure that they would kill him and dump him somewhere if I tried to go out and seek medical help," said Angel Benhumea, Alexis' father. "I didn't think he would make it."

After coordinating by cellular telephones with friends in Mexico City, correspondents with Indymedia Chiapas were able to rent a taxi van (which operate in Mexico like public buses rather than individual

taxi) and stage a rescue, taking Alexis and his father to a hospital 40 minutes away, on the eastern border of Mexico City. Alexis arrived alive and survived four hours of intensive brain surgery: hemorrhaging had filled 30 percent of his brain. At the time of writing, Alexis' condition is still critical, and the extent of brain damage is unknown.

Alexis Benhumea was attacked twice: first with the pellet that broke his skull, and second with the police siege that made it impossible for his family to seek medical attention.

By mid-afternoon Atenco was an occupied city. Burn marks and broken glass, thousands of police standing guard, leaning in doorways, lying in stairways, sprawled out sleeping in the shade of the central plaza. Yet the climate was tense. When I took a picture from a car window of a group of police, one whipped around and loaded a gas pellet in his rifle, but not in time to fire.

Around 5:30 in the afternoon, the state and federal police lifted their siege, piling into their trucks and driving off.

Zapatistas March to Atenco

Thursday in the evening the Zapatista Army of National Liberation and local labor and student organizations convoked a march for Friday at 4PM from the University of Chapingo to Atenco.

At 4PM Marcos arrived at the university-leaving the house in Mexico City where he had been surrounded by police and federal intelligence officers since Wednesday evening. About a thousand people had already gathered for the march by the time of his arrival.

The march left from Chapingo at around 5PM with some two thousand people. But the march kept growing. Standing on overpasses, it was impossible to see the end of the march as it occupied the highway that leads to Atenco. Estimates among local reporters ranged from 4 to 10 thousand people by the time the march reached Atenco.

As the march crossed through the town of Texcoco, where the violence began on Wednesday, locals closed the metal doors used to cover their windows at night, making the fear in Texcoco visible and audible. In the four months of the Other Campaign, nothing like this has happened before. Yet the police were not waiting for the marchers. A few motorcycle state police went ahead of the march, and several trucks with federal police trailed behind.

The marchers arrived in Atenco without confrontations with the police. In the central plaza, several local community leaders and parents whose children had been beaten and detained spoke to the crowd that filled the town plaza.

"My boy was on his way to work when they grabbed him," one woman said, "is that justice?"

Subcomandante Marcos attacked the media manipulation of the violence in Atenco, accusing the government of directing newspaper, television and radio directors of holding back images of police brutality while publishing and passing over and over the same images of protestors beating police.

Marcos held in the air five empty shotgun shells, most likely slug shells, that locals found on the ground after the siege. "Here is the proof of who killed the boy," Marcos said.

He offered to hand one of the shells over to reporters from Televisa and TV Azteca, the largest media corporations in Mexico, but the reporters refused to identify themselves. Marcos said he would grant interviews to any reporter who agrees to publish the interview "without cuts or edits," signaling a major shift in the Zapatista's media policy during the Other Campaign, which had been to refuse all interview requests.

Marcos reinstated the Zapatista's support for Atenco and its political prisoners.

"You are not alone," he said, "We will continue carrying out mobilizations across the country until all the political prisoners are freed."

He also accused the government of plotting the repression: why were the police ready to attack here if the problem was in Texcoco, he asked. "Because they want their airport once again, and they are coming for your land."

Marcos said that he and participants in the Other Campaign would stay in Mexico City indefinitely and called for a national public gathering in Atenco over the next two days.

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