

# The Disappeared: Mexico's Industrial-Scale Human Rights Crisis



Credit: Raquel Cunha/Reuters via Gallo Images

MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay, Apr 28 2025 (IPS) - They found shoes, hundreds of them, scattered across the dirt floor of an extermination camp in Jalisco state. These abandoned shoes, once belonging to someone's child, parent or spouse, stand as silent witnesses to Mexico's deepest national trauma. Alongside charred human remains and makeshift crematoria meant to erase all evidence of humanity, they tell the story of a crisis that has reached industrial-scale proportions.

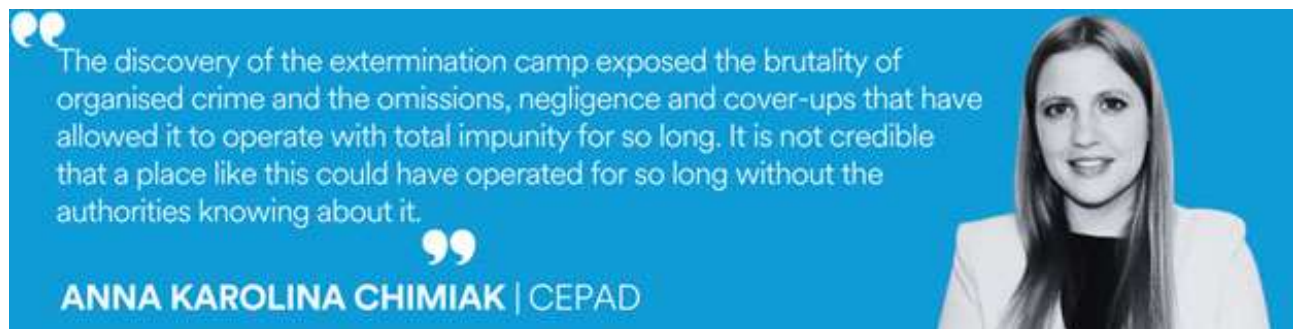
In March, volunteer search groups uncovered this sprawling death camp operated by the Jalisco New Generation Cartel in Teuchitlán. The discovery wasn't made by sophisticated government intelligence operations but by mothers, sisters and wives who've transformed their personal grief into relentless collective action. For them, the alternative to searching is unthinkable.

Mexico is experiencing a humanitarian catastrophe of staggering proportions. Over [121,000 people have disappeared](#) over the past decades, with 90 per cent of cases occurring since 2006, when then President Felipe Calderón militarised the [fight against drug cartels](#). Add to this the [estimated 52,000](#) unidentified human remains held in morgues across the country and the true scale of this national tragedy begins to unfold.

## A web of complicity

What makes Mexico's crisis particularly sinister is the systematic collusion between arms of the state and organised crime. The Jalisco camp's proximity to federal security installations raises

troubling questions about official complicity and active participation in a system that treats [some populations](#) as expendable.



The crisis follows a well-established pattern. In states such as Jalisco and Tamaulipas, criminal organisations collaborate with local authorities to enforce territorial control. They use violence to recruit forced labour, eliminate opposition and instil terror in communities that might otherwise resist. Security forces are often implicated, as seen in the 2014 disappearance of [43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College](#), where investigations revealed that military personnel witnessed the attack perpetrated by a criminal organisation but failed to intervene.

Young people and women from poorer backgrounds bear the brunt of this horror. In Jalisco, a third of missing people are [between 15 and 29 years old](#). Women and girls are systematically targeted, with disappearances often linked to human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Ciudad Juárez has become notorious for femicides, with [over 2,500 women and girls](#) disappeared and murdered since the 1990s. Migrants transiting through Mexico are vulnerable to abduction for extortion or forced recruitment, as seen in the [2010 San Fernando massacre](#), when 72 migrants were executed for refusing to work for a criminal group.

### Mothers turned activists

Faced with government inaction or complicity, civil society has stepped in. Human rights organisations document disappearances, support victims' families and demand accountability, including by organising public demonstrations, collaborating with international bodies and bringing cases before international courts. But the most remarkable response comes from grassroots collectives formed by families of the disappeared. Throughout Mexico, hundreds of groups such as Guerreras Buscadoras, predominantly led by women – mothers, wives and sisters of the disappeared – conduct search operations, comb remote areas for clandestine graves, perform exhumations and maintain secure databases to document findings.

Their courage comes at a terrible price. In May 2024, Teresa Magueyal was [assassinated](#) by armed men on motorcycles in Guanajuato state after spending three years searching for her son José Luis. She was the sixth mother of a disappeared person to be murdered in Guanajuato within a few months. Another mother, Norma Andrade, has survived [two murder attempts](#). Despite knowing the risks, she and countless others continue their quest for truth and justice.

Years of pressure from civil society culminated in the [2017 General Law on Forced Disappearance](#), which formally recognised enforced disappearance in national legislation and established a [National Search Commission](#). While a significant achievement, implementation has proven problematic, with inconsistent application across Mexico's federal system, inadequate information systems, insufficient forensic capacity and minimal penalties for perpetrators.

### Time for change

The discovery of the Jalisco extermination camp has generated unprecedented public outrage, sparking [nationwide protests](#). President Claudia Sheinbaum has declared combating disappearances a national priority and [announced](#) several initiatives: strengthening the National Search Commission, reforming identity documentation, creating integrated forensic databases,

implementing immediate search protocols, standardising criminal penalties, publishing transparent investigation statistics and enhancing victim support services.

For meaningful progress, Mexico must undertake comprehensive reforms that address the structural underpinnings of the crisis. Critical measures include demilitarising public security, strengthening independent prosecutors and forensic institutions, guaranteeing transparent investigations free from political interference and providing sustained support for victims' families.

The UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances has [announced](#) the opening of an urgent procedure examining Mexico's disappearance crisis – a step that could elevate these cases to the scrutiny of the UN General Assembly. International oversight is needed to ensure state compliance with human rights obligations.

This moment – with public outrage at its peak, presidential commitments on the table and international scrutiny intensifying – creates a potential inflection point for addressing this national trauma. If there was ever a time when conditions favoured substantive action, it's now.

But whatever happens at the official level, one thing remains certain: Mexico's mothers of the disappeared will continue their quest. They'll keep searching abandoned buildings, digging in remote fields and marching in the streets carrying photos of their missing loved ones. They search not because they have hope, but because they have no choice. They search because the alternative is surrender to a system that would prefer they kept silent.

And so they continue, carrying their [message](#) to the disappeared and to a state that has failed them: 'Until we find you, until we find the truth'.

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