

Captives in hell – Marcela Turati

The overflowing levels of narco-violence in Mexico have meant an increase in kidnappings and 'levantones'.¹ Whilst the federal authorities automatically presume that the victims of these crimes are dead, the families and organisations that search for disappeared people, collect every day more proof of survivors of safe-houses or slave labour camps. It is because of this that they ask that, as well as finding the remains of the dead, the authorities investigate the trail of those who might remain alive.

“My brother disappeared when he was 19 years old. He worked in the town, as a carpenter, and one day some friends asked him to help them make a delivery to the mountains. Arriving there with the furniture they were told 'You are all going to stay here to work', and they gave them powerful weapons and vehicles and they ordered them to look after the town. They were under the orders of a commander, amongst the people, killing. Because they told them to kill. But my brother never killed.”

This testimony is that of a young girl from Chihuahua. It is one of many of the many accounts whispered during the meetings of families dedicated to the search of one of their own – lost, taken, kidnapped or disappeared – which show that not all of the disappeared are dead, some are alive, enslaved; this story contains facts, names of towns, descriptions of the criminals.

“They arrived at the houses and just like that aimed their weapons, raped women. They were treated really badly, they couldn't wash for 15 days, to eat they were given only instant noodles, they were going around stealing, armed, going round and round the town.”

- And how do you know this? -someone asks
- My brother told us.
- How?
- One day he managed to go to a hill and and at the top he phoned my father to say that he was alright, but that they were treating him very badly. Another day he appeared at our house... he took advantage of a shoot-out... he escaped.

The girl, although she speaks in a low voice, does not look scared. It seems she needs to tell her story. This is a meeting between families from the whole country who are also searching for their loved ones. Here she found out that her case is not an isolated one and she has just promised that she will never stop searching for her older brother who returned from hell and described it to her, but who had to go back to it, by his own means, in order to save his family from being put through their own slow, cruel, savage living hell on Earth.

“When he escaped, they [his aggressors] called my brother to tell him to go back or else they would kill us. My parents sent him to live in Chihuahua with an uncle, but he couldn't relax. He spent a few days there, came home – we think, in order to hand himself back over – and they came for him immediately and they took him back to the mountains. The last time we heard from him was a day when he called crying, saying that he didn't want to be there, that he couldn't take it, that he saw things, that they committed many crimes. We haven't heard from him in two years.

The hell which she describes is a jail without bars. An open-air prison; her brother was living with only other young people, some recruited by force, others were there by their own will, in an abandoned

¹ The term *levantón* is usually used in Mexico to describe kidnappings where the subject is pulled into a moving vehicle. It can sometimes be used to refer to kidnappings where no ransom is demanded and the subject is later found murdered. In other cases it is used to describe what are also referred to as *secuestros exprés* where the object is to extort as much money from the victim in a short space of time, often by exhausting their bank account.

house on the outskirts of town. They rotated amongst themselves to carry out patrols and prevent other groups from coming to shoot. “They were the police there”, she says.

Those 'police' were armed, patrolled in stolen pick-up trucks, didn't have time to rest, ate what they could, lived “crazily”, high on marijuana or cocaine, and their excesses often ended in shootings and killings. They couldn't quit the job, since they captors know their families.

“From here there are lots of young people who the *linieros* (members of *La Linea*, armed branch of the *Juárez* drug cartel) have kidnapped like that. They take some of them to work in Cuauhtémoc, Guachochi, San Juanito, Creel, La Junta, Guadalupe y Calvo, Batopilas, to different places, or nearby. Some have escaped, but if they come home, they are kidnapped again.

The agreement for this interview is that I shan't reveal details which might help to identify the informant, who now lives in another region of the country. However, she says that the numbers of young people recruited by force are so high, that almost anybody could have told the story.

The possibility that some of the people considered disappeared are alive – prisoners, working as slaves – is a certainty for many of the families who have dedicated themselves to investigating the whereabouts of their loved ones and also for human rights organisations in Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Mexico City and Guanajuato; as well staff of migrant shelters, the Mexico City Human Rights Commission (CDHDF), the Archbishop of Saltillo Raúl Vera and even the Governor of Coahuila, Rubén Moreira.

This reporter has confirmed that the families presented this evidence to the current heads of the federal Attorney General's office (*Procuraduría General de la República*, PGR) and the Interior Ministry (*Secretaría de Gobernación*, Segob), evidence which suggests the existence of ranches, safe-houses and warehouses, where organised crime groups hold slaves, the majority of them men of productive age. Many of them migrants.

The Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam asked the families to give him time in order to create a specialised search unit, which would have an investigative area as well as one of force in order to free the prisoners of the drug cartels in operatives without deaths. The families continue to wait.

Raúl Vera is convinced that the disappeared people are not just bones: “There are strong suggestions that these people are in concentration camps, where they are carrying out forced labour. We know people who say: “I escaped”, who were in camps, they were training them to use guns. Migrants have told us that they were kidnapped in safe-houses.

According to reports by civil society organisations, the victims are forced to work as lookouts, as hitmen, planting marijuana, in extortion, in the construction of tunnels, cleaning the safe-houses and feeding the prisoners, as sex slaves or in the installation of communications systems. Or they serve as police in the regions which the drug traffickers already control.

“It's very probable that they are walking amongst us, alone, but under surveillance because they have a job to do” says Alberto Xicotécatl, director of the Saltillo Migrant Shelter (*Case del Migrante de Saltillo*), shelter to which survivors of this tragedy, which the PGR has qualified a “humanitarian crisis”, have arrived.

In Mexico the preliminary count of disappearances under the previous federal administration is of 27

thousand people and register continues to swell under the present one.

Juan López, lawyer for United Forces for our Disappeared in Mexico (*Fuerzas Unidas por Nuestros Desaparecidos en México*, FUNDEM), estimates that a third of the people absent by force could have been enslaved.

The discoveries of the marines and the army in the safe-houses stuffed full of prisoners – the majority of which are migrants – confirm that this is a growing phenomenon. Just last June 4th, 165 migrants were rescued in one operative.

Nobody answers

The phenomenon of the disappearance of people began to become evident in 2007 in areas disputed between organized crime groups and the federal forces. Shortly after, human rights organisations heard the first accounts of people dragged out of their home and later seen alive.

One of these testimonies is that of the Mexican-American José Esparza Cháirez, of the US air force, who told journalist Carmen Aristegui that when he searched for his three brothers disappeared in January 2009 in Cuencamé, Durango, various people told him that they had seen them working as hitmen in the region, disguised in Investigative Police uniforms.

Information like this used to be difficult to believe and were attributed to the hopes held by the families that their loved ones might be alive. The hypothesis was that the cartels quickly killed the people they kidnapped. With time, as the families began to get together and detected similar typologies in the cases, the theory changed.

Blanca Martínez, the director of the Fray Juan de Larios Human Rights Centre (*Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Juan de Larios*), which supports the family organisations FUNDEM/FUNDEC, created in 2009 in Coahuila, says: “We took a while to arrive to this hypothesis of forced labour. We were very careful to not encourage a utopia. We knew that the families, in their pain, have to cling on to any hope, but later we found various signs that this is possible”.

- Such as?
- The families receive phonecalls on dates of intimate significance, such as their mothers' birthdays, or anniversaries. The telephone rings but nobody speaks on the other end. The mother begin to speak, because they believe that their children are reporting although they don't speak, because they are being held by force, and they communicate in that way to not put their family at risk.

In various cases family members report having seen in the street a relative considered disappeared, with whom they can barely make eye contact in order to not put them at risk. What's more, the national migrant shelter network has taken testimonies from people who have escaped from the places here described.

“They said that they were in safe-houses, in the countryside, in non-urbanised spaces, together with other captured people and without permission to speak amongst themselves. Every day they sent them out to work. Some lasted six months, others a year, in a state of terror because every week their captors would get everybody together and kill one of them. They could escape when there was an operative by the Marines, in the confusion they could run”, says Alberto Xicoténcatl.

The National Human Rights Commission (*Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos*, CNDH) registered similar testimonies in 2010, in a report regarding the kidnapping of migrants. In only 2009 to 2013, the Defence Ministry (*Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional*, Sedena) released, in 531 operatives, 2,352 captive persons, 855 of them migrants, according to a report obtained via the transparency law. The majority of the municipalities-prisons where they found dozens of kidnappings are in the states of Nuevo León, Coahuila, Veracruz, Tabasco, San Luis Potosí, Michoacán and principally Tamaulipas

Doubly disappeared

The lawyer Juan López says that although they have known of people who 'appear' in other states, they have been unable to interview them: “The people who escape are in pieces, psychologically broken. It is known that they appeared, but not where they are. It's so crushing the experience that when they manage to arrive to their homes, they take their things and they go. They force themselves to disappear and to start their lives somewhere far away”. The priest Pedro Pantoja, founder of the Saltillo Migrant Shelter, who has spent time with the survivors of this hell, describes them: “They arrive thin, maltreated, horrorised because they had them 'working'. They can't always speak, and if they do it is with terror for what they lived in those hotels, lots or warehouses where they have them, where they saw the police arrive. Some were tortured, other arrive almost with a loss of personality.

It is such the trauma of these men and women that they had to create a mental health area to attend to them.

The nation's human rights organisations have registered that the majority of the disappeared in the zones disputed by the cartels are men of productive age (from 19 to 35 years old) and that many of them carried out specialised work. One example are the 12 technicians, professionals in maintaining and installing telecommunication antennas, 10 of whom disappeared in Tamaulipas and two in Coahuila.

“Amongst those who we search for there are engineers, and it makes you think when you see the discovery of the so-called narco-tunnels [made] with engineering expertise. Also, there are [disappeared] vets, builders and various with skills which make them susceptible to working in a big business like organised crime”, says Blanca Martínez.

Alfonso and Lucía, father and mother of the systems engineer from Mexico City Alejandro Moreno Bacam, disappeared on January 27th 2011 whilst at a toll-booth travelling from Sabinas Hidalgo towards Texas, share the hypothesis of many families: “They (the criminals) need all types of people so that the machinery works. It's logical. They need doctors, nurses, engineers, labourers, builders, that's why they take them”.

The couple discovered that the drivers of another four cars disappeared on the same stretch of road. But it wasn't until August of 2011, when two federal policemen were found in the area killed with their throats sliced, that the army and the federal police carried out operatives in those municipalities – found in the state of Nuevo León on the border with Tamaulipas – and discovered a camp where around 200 future assassins were being trained, ranches occupied by the *Zetas* cartel, 28 antennas in Escobedo and 43 transmitter towers in Saltillo. A shootout occurred in El Vallecillo, where 20 'hitmen' were killed and 49 escaped.

Whilst he explains this story, Alfonso Moreno reflects: “Somebody has to be operating the antennas

that organised crime use, we don't know if that's where they take the youngsters, obliging them to work, or if they forced my son to be an assassin and if he's one of those which the news says escaped”.

He doesn't say it but it's clear he shares the fear expressed by many families: “And if one of those is my son and the army shoot to kill without giving him the time to say something?”

On last June 5th, after several months of talks with the families of FUNDEC, the Coahuila Governor Rubén Moreira, who has recognised that in his state two thousand people have disappeared, announced that his government also searches for people alive. Against the national grain, they don't only search for remains.

The evidence is there to see all over the country. In Mexico City, Carlos Cruz, director of the organisation Citizen Channel (*Cauce Ciudadano*) which accompanies young people at risk, says that one of their guardians (the location of whom is reserved for security) found a group of 15 year-old teenagers who were kidnapped in their neighbourhoods in Nuevo Laredo and during 90 days were taken from town to town until they ended up in a training camp of the *Zetas* cartel.

The human rights defender Malú García, of the Chihuahuan organisation Our Daughters Returning Home (*Nuestras Hijas de regreso a casa*), says that since 2008 when the army and the federal police occupied Ciudad Juárez, members of the *Los Aztecas* gang, observing a decrease in drug dealing, started to dedicate their labours to the trafficking of women. At least 30 have disappeared and the organisation presumes that whilst they remain a business, they will be kept alive.

Teresa Ulloa, director in Mexico of the Coalition against the trafficking of Women and Children in Latin America and the Caribbean (*Coalición Contra el Tráfico de Mujeres y Niñas en América latina y el Caribe*) says that in all regions disputes between drug traffickers is evidenced by the disappearance of young girls who are probably used as sex slaves by the heads of the gangs or his troops.

One human rights defender, who asked to remain anonymous, recounts the testimony of a survivor of confinement in Tamaulipas: “He says that they gave him a truck and guns and they sent him to collect [debts]. He had to hand over a quantity of money each month and ensure that he had it to hand over if he wanted to stay alive. So they started to extort everybody and obliged the petrol stations to fill their tank. And even though they had trucks and guns, they weren't free, they were in an open prison and they had to pay a quota to the Municipal President and the police. The people considered them part of the bad guys, how were they going to escape?”

A human rights defender from Chihuahua consulted for this report mentioned that they had received reports of young people brought to work harvesting vegetables in Sinaloa. Once there, they made them prisoners and they made them plant marijuana. Few have the opportunity to escape in these camps which are under the surveillance of armed killers.

Another human rights defender who asks to remain anonymous cites the story of somebody who, in order to search for her son entered, in disguise, a warehouse on the outskirts of a city, also in the North, where she saw people piled up (“in more than 200”), heard their cries, breathed the concentrated smell of urine, excrement and sweat. She remains traumatised.

One member of the national migrant shelters network says that this year they took the statement of a man who said he had been on a ranch in Tamaulipas where people were kept imprisoned in cages with wire meshing “like a chicken cage, where they had them day and night, in sun and rain, eating bread

and water once a day, until their families pay the ransom. He escaped one night when his guards were too intoxicated on drugs. Testimonies such as these are received more and more frequently by human rights organisations, but nobody dares say “I was disappeared” for fear of the perpetrators, who *are* protected.

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