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A Mexican Village Mourns Its Abducted Sons

By GINGER THOMPSON

EL QUEMADO, Mexico, July 23 — The past haunts farmers in this village, set high in the mountains that rise over Mexico's Pacific Coast.

The corn was close to harvest, they remember, in September 1972, when soldiers surrounded their fields one afternoon and summoned all male residents above the age of 16 to a meeting on the concrete basketball court at the center of the village. About 95 men and boys lined up, as soldiers took down their names, ages and the number of hectares of land each owned. Then the farmers were herded into a one-room house that had been used as an elementary school. And their lives went dark.

The farmers said soldiers forced them to take off their shirts and tie them around their eyes as blindfolds. Their hands, they said, were bound with wire. They were not allowed to sit down for hours.

Evaristo Castañón Flores, 65, said some of the men were pulled outside, and he heard soldiers bark questions about rebel groups that had occupied the area. Then he began to hear screams.

"I shouted for the soldiers to stop the torture," he said. "I told them we were not guilty of any crimes. I asked them why they were committing this act of injustice."

The answer to that question was shrouded for decades by government denials and cover-ups. But the hope for justice was ignited here three years ago, when Mexico embarked on a landmark transition by ending the 71-year rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party and elected its first opposition president, Vicente Fox.

Promising to root out corruption, Mr. Fox appointed a special prosecutor to investigate Mexico's most heinous atrocities, including the 1968 massacre of about 100 students in the capital plaza of Tlatelolco, and the disappearances of hundreds of suspected guerrillas during the so-called Dirty War of the 1970's.

But last week, a prominent international human rights group criticized the investigation, saying the effort had been obstructed by a lack of resources and by limited cooperation from the military. The group, Human Rights Watch, charged that President Fox had failed to put the authority of his office behind the effort, leaving his government's most prominent human rights initiative to languish.

"We believe the special prosecutor's office was only created to help President Fox's image abroad, because it has meant nothing to the people here," said Tita Radilla, director

of an association of relatives of the disappeared in neighboring Atoyac de Álvarez. "The government has not shown real political will to clear the atrocities we suffered. Without justice, how do they expect the wounds to heal?"

Disappointment wears hardest on communities like El Quemado, where the legacy of past atrocities continues to affect daily life and stifle progress. Situated in the southern state of Guerrero, a couple hours' drive from the resort of Acapulco, it was the scene of some of the fiercest military campaigns of the Dirty War.

These mountains had been claimed by the rebel leader Lucio Cabañas and his Party of the Poor. Former President Luis Echeverría, who has failed to respond to government questions about the Dirty War, sent 16,000 troops to crush them.

El Quemado, loosely translated as "the burned place," was one of several villages to get caught in the cross-fire. Of the 532 cases of disappearances recorded during the 1970's by the National Commission for Human Rights, more than 300 were missing in Guerrero.

The people of El Quemado recall as if it were yesterday the September morning when soldiers took all their men away. Military helicopters landed in clearings around the village. Soldiers loaded them with the 95 men and boys who had been detained the night before on the basketball court. Those who had eluded capture fled the village.

The men were accused by the military of having helped guerrillas stage an ambush that left several soldiers dead. Human rights investigators report that it appeared that some of the men of El Quemado had supported the guerrillas. Others were tortured into signing false confessions. At least seven of those arrested, according to residents of El Quemado, have never been seen again. Close to 50 of them were convicted of treason and held in prison between three and four years.

Gathered again on the basketball court, several of the former prisoners said they had lost more than their freedom. Juan Romero Radilla, 65, said his two children died during his imprisonment. He believed that they suffered from malnutrition because his wife had no means to provide for them on her own. Another farmer, who refused to give his name, said his family's only hope of progress was lost when his oldest son had to stay home to help take care of six siblings rather than go to law school.

Human rights investigators report high rates of alcoholism and domestic violence among the affected families.

"The greatest injustice is what happened to our families," Mr. Castañón said. "Our village was occupied by soldiers, and there was no one to work the land. Many women and children died from hunger. Others were so sad they wanted to die."

Today the state of Guerrero remains under heavy military occupation, with rotating checkpoints along coastal highways and the dirt roads that wind into the mountains. Decades of poverty, poor health and low education levels have shattered many rural

families beyond repair. A lingering sense of lawlessness influences many young men. Some have taken up arms against the government, joining small rebel groups, including the Popular Revolutionary Army. Others migrate to the United States.

"When Fox became president we felt like hope was born again," said Luis Radilla, 65, who was arrested and held in prison for four years. "But now our hope for justice is weak. We have not seen advances. Many people feel we are going backward."

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