

DISAPPEARANCES ARE BACK. IS THE US INVOLVED (AGAIN)?

Back in the 1970s, when various Latin American countries were disappearing their citizens, the US was closely tied to those efforts via Operation Condor.

According to Human Rights Watch, Mexico is now in the Disappearance business as part of its drug war. In a report released this week, it documents almost 140 cases where some official disappeared Mexicans. And while most of the cases appear to be corrupt local or Federal police partnering with drug cartels (that is, the problem seems to be about corruption as much as it is the state disappearing people), it also describes the Navy kidnapping groups of men, perhaps as an effort to force people to infiltrate the cartels.

Human Rights Watch documented more than 20 cases of enforced disappearances perpetrated by members of the Navy in June and July 2011. The concentration of the cases within a short time period, the similar tactics described by victims' families and other witnesses, corroborated by photographic and video evidence, and the fact that the abductions were spread across three northern states strongly suggests that these were not isolated cases, but rather points to a clear modus operandi by the Navy. Given the number of members of the Navy that allegedly participated in these operations—at least a dozen official vehicles, according to witness accounts—and the fact that the Navy acknowledged that it detained several of the victims, it is unlikely that such operations took place without the knowledge of ranking officers.

Victims' families and witnesses described near identical tactics in the raids. In each case, the Navy arrived in a large convoy of more than a dozen vehicles, the majority of which were marked with official insignia, along with two to four unmarked vehicles. They closed off entire streets, using vehicles as barricades. Heavily armed members of the Navy wearing masks then entered homes, often forcibly, without any search or arrest warrants. According to families, the people in Navy uniforms were not looking for individuals by name. Instead, they indiscriminately took young men, telling their families they were being brought in for questioning and would be released if they proved to be innocent.

That's the Navy we partner with closely, the one our two CIA "trainers" were partnering with when they almost got killed last year. And remember: the Federales with ties to the Beltrán Leyva Cartel said they were investigating a kidnapping, the polite legal term for a disappearance. Remember, too, that one of the the CIA guys got exposed, in part, because he had his post office box in the same place as an earlier CIA guy managing renditions.

Meanwhile, Borderland Beat describes a strategy Mexico's Military Intelligence proposed to President Calderon last summer: to go after the smaller, weaker cartels, because they were causing the most violence.

In the offensive it proposes against what it calls "weak criminal organizations" or "'satellite' criminal organizations" (who orbit around strong cartels), SEDENA proposes the following actions:

1. Reclassify as cartels criminal cells that gain strength in several regions of the country as a result of their

criminal activity.

2. Include their leaders, their lieutenants and their families in the reports about businesses, financial transactions and other properties linked with drug trafficking.

3. Infiltrate them to gain an accurate map of their criminal logistics.

4. Organize the deployment of troops to strike blows to the nerve centers of small criminal organizations.

5. Involve federal and state police bodies in operations against the groups that generate the most violence.

6. Block all kinds of collaboration that they may receive from authorities, police and citizens.

7. Establish a bi-national Mexico-U.S. system of rewards offered to cooperate in the location and detention of the heads of "secondary drug trafficking cells."

8. Request collaboration of international tracking systems so as to locate their operational margins.

The approach is actually consistent with a legal approach the US has been using for a longer period, in which it long partnered with top Sinaloa members as informants who would take out their rivals (though the US may have finally started going after Sinaloa last spring, when it indicted Chapo Guzmán).

One of the smaller cartels targeted last year is the Beltrán Leyva Cartel.

These are just dots – certainly not proof that the US is back in the business of helping Latin American neighbors disappear their citizens (and the HRW report covers a period prior to this new strategy and the attempted killing of our CIA

guys).

But as HRW continues to document the abuses committed as part of Mexico's war on drugs (that will serve American customers), it's worth recalling that we have a history of collaborating in such nasty business (not to mention a fondness for disappearances ourselves).