

OUTSOURCING DRUG WAR DISAPPEARANCES TO MEXICO

The other day I asked whether the US was complicit in any of the hundreds of official disappearances and tens of thousands of other disappearances propagated in Mexico's drug war.

Friday, Spiegel published an interesting profile of a former DEA officer, Salvador Martinez, who ended up going to prison for trying to have his cousin's killer murdered.

And sure enough, he describes allowing this kind of violence – even encouraging it – to happen. He describes leaving his counterparts in Ciudad Juárez to conduct torture.

In one of his first assignments, which he carried out together with the Mexican police, he was there when a commandant arrested a dealer. The police led the prisoner to a house on the edge of town. The officer hauled the prisoner to the bathroom, put his head in the toilet and flushed three times, says Martinez. The prisoner remained silent. The officer put a plastic bag over the prisoner's head. "Who paid you? Who paid you, cabrón?" he demanded. Then, to Martinez, he said: "Have you seen enough?"

When he got into his car to leave, Martinez watched in the rearview mirror as a Mexican police officer took a small rod out of his car trunk. Martinez had seen a rod like that before; it was an electric cattle prod.

And he describes identifying suspects for Mexican cops to disappear.

He arrested a Mexican that he knew was working in the middle management of a cartel. He had no proof; he just knew

it. After three weeks on trial, the court had to let the manager go free. So Martinez told the Mexican commandant what that man looked like and when he would be freed. After he crossed the border, a black minibus on the Mexican side stopped beside him and took him away.

“Alright,” says Martinez, taking a deep breath. So far he has laughed a lot on his journey through the memories. But he tells the next chapter without looking up, describing operations that weren’t recorded in any files.

“A lot of people disappear in Mexico,” he says. “They are buried where no one will find them. Some are eaten by tigers and some by sharks. There are also big tanks with acid in them.” He pauses for a long time between the sentences.

“We didn’t manage to catch all the bad guys. In those cases, we gave the Mexicans their names and said, ‘Do what you need to do.’ The Mexicans made those people disappear.”

Now, this guy appears to have been arrested in 1999. That is, this violence precedes the more recent disappearances Human Rights Watch and others have been documenting (and Juárez, at least, seems to be turning around finally).

But none of this is surprising.

As more and more people talk about the disappearances happening in Mexico, in a war that exists largely because American consumers create the demand that drives the violence, we should be careful not to blame it all on the Mexicans. Because we’re not just letting it happen, we’re asking for it to happen in some cases.