

## **The Relatives of Missing and Murdered Persons are Exemplary Social Nonviolent Strugglers**

We are in the presence of the Sixth National Search Brigade for Missing Persons, organized by the Civilian Links Network (Red de Enlaces Civiles, in Spanish), with 164 collectives all over the country (in 24 of the 32 Mexican states), and the support of many organizations, NGOs, human rights groups and caring individuals, whose aid and endorsement is vital to the success of such an important initiative in the line of justice and peace.

We feel it is very important to point out that the principal heroes/heroines of civil resistance and nonviolent struggle in this country, as well as the Mexican moral reserve, are loudly and clearly expressed among the relatives of the victims of this so disgracefully misnamed “war on drugs”, and also in those villages, *barrios*, peasant and indigenous groups who defend their natural resources, territories and cultures, on all the resistance fronts against the process of plunder and despoilment taking place in this country.

According to official figures, released on the occasion of the World Day of Detained-Disappeared Persons, August 30, there are 91,000 missing persons in Mexico, representing a humanly incomprehensible and dramatic case of inhumanity (one year later, in 2022, there are officialy 105,000 missing persons in our country).

These relatives of missing persons from all over the country will converge on the state of Morelos (bordering Mexico City) between October 8 and 24, to carry out two weeks of field search for missing persons, alive or dead, but also to exert pressure by means of persuasion and social action on local churches and authorities in the forensic and educational fields.

In terms of nonviolent civil resistance, the action of the Brigade represents, in Gandhi’s words, “a long walk/march on foot (*padyatras*)” of the relatives over hills, knolls, prairies and mountains “in search of their treasures”.

The National Search Brigades came into being around 2016 –although the local and regional versions had started many years earlier—when the relatives of missing persons started to become aware that the authorities were not willing to search for their loved ones; so they decided to do so with their own hands, bodies, resources and solidarity, adopting methods of nonviolent non-cooperation, “without asking permission”, shouldering the job which the authorities refused to undertake, thus debunking the normalization of what had become a sham search.

Nowadays –years later—there are some forms of greater cooperation with some authorities, although there is still a long way to go on this front.

However, the brigades have become a great and growing collective and complex enterprise, born of civilian society and organized under the impetus and leadership mostly provided by women, mothers, sisters and wives of victims of disappearance in this country, as well as some men.

### **Real social strugglers**

It is a truly fundamental experience of organization, bravery, intelligence and nonviolent strategy, which teaches us how to bring to bear a better form of resistance, something of primary importance and which nobody wants us to undertake in the face of the injustices of the dominant social order. “Struggle” is a word with a high –I would say, almost sacred—content of courage, necessary for undertaking to change and humanize our species and the world in which we live; although this concept is frequently misunderstood, due to moralist prejudice and historical ignorance.

From where I stand, the relatives are social strugglers -peace constructors as they call themselves- in the deepest and broadest sense of the term. This conveys a great dignity, and gives greater weight to all their actions. Their quest is not only socially indispensable as a contribution to humanizing us, it is also a defense of truth and life, which reaches far beyond their loved ones.

In this sense, there is a detail I know something about, and that is that almost nobody teaches you to struggle in life, because almost nobody who believes in *statu quo* wants people to clash... Least of all, the young. Under this light, the relatives are the greatest constructors of peace in Mexico over at least the past decade; they are the principal educators and researchers in the reconstruction of the social fabric in the country. They teach us how to oppose nonviolently, and we must learn from them and register their actions in a non-mechanical way, from the point of view of our own reality, and take on board by which means and with what intelligence and strategy, they are facing authority and all forms of organized crime with exemplary courage and acumen.

I believe this is another very important field for anyone who wishes to work in the construction of peace: learn how the relatives –of which ninety percent are women—carry on their struggle.

A primary fact we have learned from listening to innumerable accounts from relatives is that their personal and collective processes have been forced upon them by the inhumanity of the social order which impaled their lives, and the lives of their loved one. Thus, they have been obliged to rebuild their own personal and social identities, transforming themselves from generally non-political and socially indifferent people into defenders of human rights and,

eventually, into true activists and social warriors. Observed from a different point of view, they have graduated from social indifference to resistance, and from resistance to resilience.

This change of identity and social process which has suffused their bodies is hugely complex, and sometimes a single lifetime would not be enough to assimilate it entirely; however, these people have been compelled to travel that road in a very short time, greatly aided and guided by the closeness, company and organization of many other similar identities who are undergoing analogous processes. At first glance, they would seem to be individual courses of action, but a closer observation suggests the contrary, as the individual and collective outlooks seem to merge seamlessly, without any single one establishing differences, or achieving priority over the other.

Their process begins with alarm, incredulity in the face of the absurd, and the searing individual pain at experiencing “social injustice and injury”, which triggers the conviction that we are all in this struggle because “we don’t want this to happen to other people”. This is a very great leap in the moral quality of anybody who utters the words, but it is even greater in those who back their words with actions.

In this great process of change towards the identity of a social struggler, a key issue is, I believe, the discovery –very especially on a collective scale— of the power an active person can achieve. We are talking about women – mostly, plus men who have achieved a similar awareness of empowerment— who were not mindful of the power they possessed, but who discovered it through experiencing pain, because without it they were unable to resist or face authorities.

Another very important issue, in this sense, is the reflection that there are many people who discover this power, but who do not wield it, out of fear or interest; however, the relatives have decided to use their power, notwithstanding the risk of situations that could cause them grievous harm, and this carries huge moral force. Gandhi would say: ”Speak true to power”. When people –like those who followed Gandhi, Luther King, Mandela, the Zapatistas, and now the people of Ecuador, Chile and Colombia—achieve awareness of their power, they begin to organize themselves, and to exert that power in direct action and collective reflection.

### **I am the Way, the Truth, and Life**

In the field of nonviolent action, the possibility of organizing “campaigns” has proved to be of great value in the history of Humanity, in terms of causes related to peace, human rights and justice, because it allows the articulation and reinforcement of a series of actions which, in isolation can lack impact or force.

Furthermore, another fundamental instrument in nonviolent action is the moral reserve that always exists in any given society, and which, in its history, has often contributed words and actions which the people have undertaken because they have trusted in the congruence and truth of those elements of the moral reserve which have greater social power than others. Churches, sometimes, are part of this moral reserve, at least for a certain sector of the population, and this is the case for many relatives of missing persons. Therefore, we believe that this National Brigade can be an excellent opportunity to set in motion a nonviolent evangelical campaign which could be of help to the relatives in their quest, and also to the Institution in its drive to recover part of its “prophetic” and solidary essence.

The campaign which is now underway is called “I am the Way, the Truth, and Life” (John 14,6), and it is aimed at society as a whole, especially at parishioners of all denominations, as well as non-parishioners in the entire state of Morelos. We believe that these beautiful words, spoken by Jesus to Thomas, in response to his doubts concerning the destiny and the path chosen by the apostles, represent a perfect synthesis of the challenge the churches face to support the searches undertaken by the relatives, by means of the solidarity and fraternity of the faithful: they are called upon to indicate a path to reach a grave, which will enable them to know the Truth about the fate of the bodies of their loved ones and, thus, help the families to get their Lives back, Lives which they have lost since the moment their loved ones disappeared.

In these three words spoken by Jesus we can find –I believe—the summary of all the challenges the relatives have to face: “The families who search for their missing loved ones, are also seeking the faith of the people, the solidarity, the hope of building peace and a more humane society”.

Various actions of this campaign involve sharing information anonymously with members of the Brigade: information concerning sites which might possibly contain human remains or material of any type which might reveal information which could lead to finding those remains, or otherwise enable these families to attain peace, in the true sense of this word.

The anonymous nature of the information shared is of paramount importance, and is warranted by the often repeated motto of the relatives: “We seek treasures, not culprits”. Specifically, so-called “Letterboxes for Peace” have been distributed in churches and religious communities in which this extremely valuable information can be placed (especially during weekend celebrations), without incurring personal safety risks.

As part of civil society, we consider of the greatest importance that, as part of this moral reserve, we should not turn our backs on the VI National Brigade, but rather try to place our bodies on the line in any manner or

activity which is within our possibilities, be it solidarity, material resources, company, or time (whether a day, or an afternoon); we should not think in terms of giving what we don't need, but parting with what we do need, because what we are going to receive in return is far more valuable.

In the words of a relative from Ecatepec (State of Mexico, part of the Mexico City urban sprawl), commenting on the magnitude of the violence: "It is not enough to say 'I do no harm'".

It is therefore imperative to place our bodies on the line and search for ways to help. This would contribute to counteracting, in some measure, the hypothesis that we have been hearing recently, which claims that in Mexico we have become a "defeated society" in terms of the support rendered to the relatives of missing and murdered persons in the last decade.

**Pietro Ameglio**

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