

Published: 07.02.2008

Videos show Mexican police using torture methods

City's chief says acts are training for elite unit; public sees dark side

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MEXICO CITY — Videos showing Leon police practicing torture techniques on a fellow officer and dragging another through vomit at the instruction of a U.S. adviser created an uproar Tuesday in Mexico, which has struggled to eliminate torture in law enforcement.

Two of the videos — broadcast by national television networks and displayed on newspaper Internet sites — showed what Leon city Police Chief Carlos Tornero described as training for an elite unit that must face "real-life, high-stress situations," such as kidnapping and torture by organized crime groups.

But many Mexicans saw a sinister side, especially at a moment when police and soldiers across the country are struggling with scandals over alleged abuses.

"They are teaching police ... to torture!" read the headline in the Mexico City newspaper Reforma.

Human-rights investigators in Guanajuato state, where Leon is located, are looking into the tapes, and the National Human Rights Commission also expressed concern.

"It's very worrisome that there may be training courses that teach people to torture," said Raul Plascencia, one of the commission's top inspectors.

One of the videos, first obtained by the newspaper El Heraldo de Leon, shows police appearing to squirt water up a man's nose — a technique once notorious among Mexican police. Then they dunk his head in a hole said to be full of excrement and rats. The man gasps for air and moans repeatedly.

In another video, an unidentified English-speaking trainer has an exhausted agent roll into his own vomit. Other officers then drag him through the mess.

"These are no more than training exercises for certain situations, but I want to stress that we are not showing people how to use these methods," Police Chief Tornero said.

He said the English-speaking man was part of a private U.S. security company helping to train the agents, but he refused to give details.

A third video transmitted by the Televisa network showed officers jumping on the ribs of a suspect curled into a fetal position in the bed of a pickup truck. Tornero said that the case, which occurred several months earlier, was under investigation and that the officers involved had disappeared.

Mexican police often find themselves in the midst of brutal battles between drug gangs. Officials say that 450 police, soldiers and prosecutors have lost their lives in the fight against organized crime since December 2006.

At the same time, several recent high-profile scandals over alleged thuggery and ineptness have reignited criticisms of police conduct. In Mexico City last month, 12 people died in a botched police raid on a disco.

The National Human Rights Commission has documented 634 cases of military abuse since President Felipe Calderón sent more than 20,000 soldiers across the nation to battle drug gangs.

And \$400 million in drug-war aid for Mexico that was just signed into law by President Bush doesn't require the U.S. to independently verify that the military has cleaned up its fight, as many American lawmakers and Mexican human-rights groups had insisted.

The videos may seem shocking, but training police to withstand being captured is not unusual, said Robert McCue, the director of the private U.S. firm IES Interactive Training, which provides computer-based training systems in Mexico.

All content copyright © 1999-2008 AzStarNet, Arizona Daily Star and its wire services and suppliers and may not be republished without permission. All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution, or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the expressed written consent of Arizona Daily Star or AzStarNet is prohibited.