



Mexico's Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace

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Principal Findings

What's new? In 2019, Mexico once again suffered the highest homicide rate in its history. Organised crime, having survived the government's militarised assaults and corrupted many officials, has broken up into smaller outfits active in several illicit businesses. Armed "self-defence" groups have popped up in response, but some have criminal ties themselves.

Why does it matter? Nowhere are these trends clearer – and the trail bloodier – than in Guerrero, west of Mexico City. This state presents President Andrés Manuel López Obrador with his biggest challenge in his quest to reduce violent crime without using military force. Criminal competition is fierce, corruption is pervasive and police collusion rampant.

What should be done? Mexico's government should develop regional intervention plans combining short-term measures to protect vulnerable populations, reforms to strengthen law enforcement and boost economic growth, and tailored peace-building initiatives. Concentrating resources in the country's most violent regions, such as Guerrero, would enhance the prospects for conflict mitigation.

Executive Summary

Guerrero is sadly unique among Mexican states for its history of violence and misrule. Sandwiched between Mexico City and the Pacific coast, the state endured some of the country's most vicious counter-insurgent repression during the Cold War and one of the worst atrocities in recent Mexican history – the disappearance of 43 teacher trainees from Ayotzinapa in 2014. Today, it is the epicentre of organised crime in Mexico, with more groups jostling for turf than in any other single region. At least 40 outfits fight over a portfolio of criminal ventures, ranging from drug production and trafficking, above all heroin for the U.S. market, to several newer rackets, extortion foremost among them. With sky-high rates of impunity for serious offences – a number of judges and high-ranking police are accused of complicity in criminal activity – Guerrero poses the toughest test for President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's promise to bring peace to Mexico. Overhauling civilian police, protecting vulnerable populations and disarming violent groups are all essential tasks if the state is to emerge from its chronic war.

As in Mexico as a whole, however, the immediate prospects for reducing violence in Guerrero are disheartening, especially at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic effects threaten to command official attention and squeeze public resources. The problem is the sheer proliferation of criminal organisations: fewer than a dozen groups dedicated largely to drug trafficking once held most of the money and firepower, but as the “war on drugs” unfolded from 2006 onward, they have broken up into a multitude of smaller and often more aggressive outfits.

In Guerrero, this fragmentation can be traced to the federal forces' killing of criminal overlord Arturo Beltrán Leyva in 2009. Since then, organised crime in the state has spread geographically, broadened its range of enterprises and become more dangerous to locals – above all to those it targets for extortion or suspects of helping competitors. A continuing wave of assassinations, disappearances, enforced disappearances and internal displacements shows how criminal violence has morphed into local armed conflicts of which civilians are the main victims. Early signs indicate that these competing groups have no intention of ceasing their activities as a result of the coronavirus.

Yet Guerrero's violence cannot be ascribed entirely to the convolutions of organised crime. Many of the newest non-state armed actors began as vigilantes who arose to defend indigenous communities against criminal predators, claiming that the state would not or could not do so. Clashes between the self-defence forces and criminal groups now account for much of the violence afflicting Guerrero. But in seizing territory and resorting to extreme violence, some of these *autodefensas* have started to resemble criminals themselves.

The proliferation of self-defence forces reflects the tremendous lack of public confidence in Guerrero's state authorities and security forces. Across the region, the boundaries between state and crime are fuzzy. Not all police collude with organised crime, but over 80 per cent of the force's own rank and file say their fellow officers engage in “illegal” behaviour.* The consequences are plain to see. Municipalities such as Acapulco have disbanded their police forces due to criminal infiltration. The weight

of evidence in the Ayotzinapa disappearances investigation (marred as it is by alleged mishandling of proof and witness testimonies) points to the combined guilt of police and organised crime. Those police commanders who dare to enforce the law in defiance of criminal groups face the threat of retaliatory attacks, including bombings, to oblige them to submit to criminal orders.

President López Obrador won a landslide victory in July 2018 in part due to public discontent with the “war on drugs”, the militarised campaign that repeatedly failed to reduce crime. He vowed instead to address the socio-economic roots of criminal recruitment – a creed encapsulated in the mantra “hugs, not bullets” – while tackling endemic police corruption, including in the security forces. As president, however, his approach has been erratic. His landmark security initiative, the National Guard founded in mid-2019, has no budget of its own and derives most of its personnel and hardware from the armed forces. His social programs aiming to dim the underworld’s appeal have yielded little to date. His plans to clean up the security forces remain on ice. Guerrero’s enduring troubles suggest that his policies will also prove inadequate to the crime-fighting task.

No quick fix is possible. Past reforms of the police, security system and judiciary ran aground because they were too ambitious. A more promising starting point would be to tailor intervention plans for hot-spots such as Guerrero, with the top priorities of curtailing the extreme violence to which defenceless civilians are exposed and severing the ties binding state officials and security forces to organised crime. National Guardsmen and other security forces should protect the vulnerable caught in the crossfire, and help create the conditions for licit economic development, especially for local farmers. Over the medium term, the government should focus on restoring credible civilian policing, ensuring strict external oversight so as to curb institutional corruption.

Mexico’s federal government should also return to its initial proposal of fostering peace through mediation between feuding armed actors. Existing local exercises of this sort have shown some promise, and could, if properly supported, pave the way for disarmament of criminal and self-defence groups at war in Guerrero, reintegrating their members into society without causing still more violent schisms. The government should supply the resources and physical protection to enable local civil society such as victims’ organisations to assume lead roles in these processes.

Such initiatives have yet to win over public opinion. But the government should give them the sustained investment they require. It can no longer react to the agonies of Guerrero and other states with failed remedies from the past or mere laments about criminals bent on subversion.

Mexico City/Bogotá/Brussels, 4 May 2020

** This sentence was changed on 7 May 2020 to rectify the original version that incorrectly stated: “Not all police collude with organised crime, but according to the force’s own rank and file over 80 per cent engage in ‘illegal’ behaviour.” In fact, the 80 per cent figure refers to the proportion of the force’s own rank and file who say their fellow officers engage in “illegal” behaviour.*

Mexico's Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace

I. Introduction

A bold promise – to bring peace to Mexico – propelled Andrés Manuel López Obrador to victory in the July 2018 presidential election. On the campaign trail, López Obrador vowed that corruption would dwindle when he became head of state and that his predecessors' heavy-handed war on crime would end. He ruled out the use of force as a means of fighting lawlessness, pledging instead to address its root causes with social and economic programs. He said the state would outperform organised crime in securing Mexican youth's loyalty, winning back rural areas "abandoned" by the state.¹ Taking advantage of the deep frustration with previous governments, which had been dogged by corruption scandals as crime continued to rise, López Obrador won in a landslide with 53 per cent of the vote.

Violent crime, however, has proven more tenacious than the new president expected. With 35,588 registered cases, the year 2019 saw the most homicides ever recorded in Mexico, surpassing the marks set in 2017 and again in 2018. Officials welcomed the fact that the rise in homicides levelled out at a rate of 1.8 per cent in 2019. But even so, around 100 people are killed on average each day.² In the second half of 2019, several spectacular incidents, including the Sinaloa Cartel siege in Culiacán and massacres in Sonora, Michoacán and Veracruz, broadcast the raw power of organised crime.³ In its intensity and open defiance of government rule, this spate of attacks underlines that Mexico's battles with crime have morphed into lethal conflicts.

The state of Guerrero is emblematic of these trends. Situated along the Pacific coast in Mexico's south west, Guerrero has long been notorious for having seen the worst of the government's "dirty war" on leftist groups and associated civilians from the 1960s to the 1980s.⁴ The state's lengthy coast and rugged but fertile inland mountains, as well as its high poverty rates, make it ideal for drug production and trafficking. At the turn of the millennium, criminal outfits from elsewhere in Mexico began setting up shop in Guerrero, which in turn made it a priority for the government's

¹ "Discurso completo de AMLO por su Primer Informe de Gobierno, en Palacio Nacional", *Animal Político*, 1 September 2019.

² "Sobre los datos de homicidios", *El Universal*, 22 January 2020. The homicide data included on p. 4 of this report highlights steep increases from 2007.

³ On Culiacán, see Falko Ernst, "Picking up the Pieces after Mexico's Criminal Siege", *Crisis Group Commentary*, 22 October 2019.

⁴ In late 2006, Mexico's federal state attorney's office, then called the Procuraduría General de la República, released a report on the "dirty war" titled "Informe Histórico a la Sociedad Mexicana" (Historical Report to Mexican Society). It details "massacres, forced disappearance, systematic torture and genocide" as part of the counter-insurgency campaign in Guerrero. See also "Report on Mexican 'dirty war' details abuse by military", *The New York Times*, 27 February 2006; Carlos Illades and Teresa Santiago, *Estado de guerra: De la guerra sucia a la narcoguerra* (Mexico City, 2014); Claudia Rangel and Evangelina Sánchez, *México en los setenta: ¿Guerra sucia o terrorismo de estado?* (Mexico City, 2015).

militarised campaign against organised crime as of 2006.⁵ The state became synonymous with the worst of what collusion between criminals and security forces could do: in October 2014, both reportedly were involved in the disappearance of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa teaching college – an atrocity that remains unpunished.⁶

Today, multiple criminal organisations with designs on illicit businesses fight over Guerrero, as do self-declared community defence groups that justify their existence by pointing to the authorities' alleged inertia. The resulting security dilemmas stand out among Mexico's most severe and intractable.

For this reason, Guerrero provides a critical test for López Obrador's policies. Although the president spoke on the stump of his determination to scale back militarised policing, he has strayed from this goal since taking office in December 2018.⁷ His landmark innovation in the security domain, the National Guard, is nominally a federal police body, but relies nearly exclusively on the armed forces for resources, including hardware and personnel. López Obrador has sought to justify the military's continued role by arguing that the country cannot trust the police to combat insecurity due to corruption and a general lack of professional merit.⁸ Now deployed in several crime-affected regions, the Guard's operational approach nevertheless remains hard to identify. In general, it has tended to refrain from actively intervening in violent settings, in line with López Obrador's overall stance not to risk confrontations and greater violence.⁹

This report assesses the initial as well as potential future effects of these new security policies on Guerrero. It analyses recent changes in the configuration of violent conflict in the state and proposes steps that the government, civil society and international actors could take to achieve lasting conflict mitigation.

⁵ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°55, *Disappeared: Justice Denied in Mexico's Guerrero State*, 23 October 2015; Chris Kyle, "Violence and Insecurity in Guerrero", Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Mexico Institute, January 2015.

⁶ "Informe Ayotzinapa II", Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2016. As explained in greater depth below, the López Obrador government has made resolution of these disappearances the centrepiece of its commitment to ending impunity. It has appointed a truth commission dedicated to the case. Sources close to the investigation say it has found remains that could belong to some of the disappeared students and sent them abroad for forensic analysis. Crisis Group interviews, Mexico City, January 2020. At the same time, police have released dozens of suspects due to lack of evidence and violations of due process. "Juez libera a otros 3 ligados a caso Ayotzinapa, dice Encinas", *Milenio*, 4 October 2019.

⁷ Prior to assuming the presidency, and for some time thereafter, López Obrador criticised his predecessors for relying on military solutions to insecurity, stating repeatedly that "fire cannot be put out with fire [and] evil cannot be fought with evil". "Toma de protesta de AMLO: las medidas más polémicas de López Obrador para acabar con la violencia en México", BBC Mundo, 30 November 2018.

⁸ In his inauguration speech, López Obrador said: "It is essential to accept that the Federal Police ... lacks discipline, training [and] professionalism. ... As to state and municipal forces, we have to recognise that many are motivated by corruption and not a sense of public service. We do not have police to protect citizens". "AMLO ya es presidente: Ofrece combatir desigualdad y corrupción aunque sin perseguir a funcionarios del pasado", *Animal Político*, 1 December 2018.

⁹ An intelligence agent working in a National Guard area of deployment said its actions were limited to staying visible by patrolling and did not include moves against criminal targets. Crisis Group interview, September 2018.

To explore these matters, Crisis Group carried out research in Mexico City, Guerrero's state capital Chilpancingo and the surrounding mountains of the Sierra Madre del Sur, as well as in the neighbouring state of Michoacán. Among the dozens interviewed between March and December 2019 were state officials, current and former Guerrero state police officers, businesspeople, journalists, human rights activists, security and political analysts, and Catholic clergy, as well as relatives of disappeared people and members of victims' organisations. Crisis Group also spoke to leaders of two different non-state armed groups: the so-called Cartel del Sur, or South Cartel, and its "self-defence" enemy, the Frente Unido de Policías Comunitarias del Estado de Guerrero, or United Front of Guerrero Community Police (FUPCEG), which, according to many sources, is also tied to organised crime.¹⁰ Further interviews were conducted with marijuana and poppy growers as well as a heroin trafficker.

¹⁰ "Autodefensas se acusan de nexos con el narco en Guerrero", Síntesis de Guerrero, 1 January 2020.

II. The Drug War and Beyond

Grim as the bloodshed of the late 20th century was in Guerrero, the “war on drugs” from late 2006 made the history pale in comparison. That year, former president Felipe Calderón initiated what he called an “all-out offensive” involving the armed forces and federal police against organised crime.¹¹ Calderón’s strategy assumed that killing or capturing criminal leaders, or kingpins, would break up criminal organisations and allow the government to “restore” security in localities over which it had lost control.¹² Most criminal leaders placed on the kingpin list were indeed arrested or killed. But the government did not re-establish its writ or reduce corruption in security forces. Organised crime bounced back. Hitherto large criminal organisations splintered into numerous viciously feuding parts that continued to drive rates of violence up, while crime also spread to previously peaceful areas.¹³

The extent to which these iron-fisted security policies backfired is demonstrated by the number of homicides registered in Mexico. That number more than quadrupled over the past thirteen years, with 8,867 and 36,685 registered in 2007 and 2018, respectively. In Guerrero, 766 and 2,367 murders were registered in 2007 and 2018, respectively.¹⁴ The real number is likely higher due to underreporting and disappearances.¹⁵ According to one recent study, the nationwide impunity rate for murder is 89 per cent, while it stands at 96 per cent in Guerrero – the third highest nationwide.¹⁶ Another recent study found the probability that Guerrero authorities will solve a given criminal case to be 0.2 per cent, the lowest in Mexico.¹⁷ Other serious

¹¹ “Calderón declara la guerra ‘sin tregua ni cuartel’, a la criminalidad y sus aliados; las Fuerzas Armadas lo respaldan “sin reticencias”, *Crónica*, 13 September 2008.

¹² “Presidente Calderón: Discurso completo en el auditorio”, Felipe Calderón, 1 December 2006.

¹³ For an overview of Mexico’s “war on drugs” and its effects, see Luis Astorga, *¿Qué querían que hiciera?: Inseguridad y delincuencia organizada en el gobierno de Felipe Calderón* (Mexico City, 2015); Viridiana Ríos, “Why Did Mexico Become So Violent? A Self-Reinforcing Violent Equilibrium Caused by Competition and Enforcement”, *Trends in Organized Crime*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2013); Bruce Bagley, “Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime in the Americas: Major Trends in the Twenty-first Century”, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, August 2012; Wil Pansters (ed.), *Violence, Coercion and State-making in Twentieth-Century Mexico: The Other Half of the Centaur* (Stanford, 2012).

¹⁴ Data from Mexico’s National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI).

¹⁵ According to INEGI’s 2019 “National Survey of Victimization and Public Security Perception”, mistrust of authorities and fear of repercussions explain why 93.2 per cent of all crimes in Mexico are either not reported or not registered by authorities. There is also a long history of political manipulation of crime statistics, particularly by state authorities. See “Fallas de Origen 2019, Índice de Contabilidad de la Estadística Criminal”, México Evalúa, 2019. In January 2020, the López Obrador government updated the number of missing persons in Mexico to 61,637, a total 50 per cent higher than its predecessor had recorded. See “A new toll in Mexico’s drug war: More than 61,000 vanished”, *The New York Times*, 6 January 2020.

¹⁶ “Impunidad en Homicidio Doloso en México: Reporte 2019”, Impunidad Cero, December 2019. The percentage of crimes either unreported or unregistered in Guerrero is, at 98 per cent, the highest nationwide. See “Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública 2019”, INEGI, September 2019.

¹⁷ “Índice Estatal de Desempeño de Procuradurías y Fiscalías 2019”, Impunidad Cero, September 2019.

crimes have spiked in similar fashion.¹⁸ Ranking consistently high or highest nationally in each of these categories, Guerrero has become one of Mexico's most violent places, an official drop in homicides in 2019 notwithstanding.¹⁹

Guerrero represents an extreme even within Mexico's array of lethal conflicts, as well as a harbinger of how crime will evolve elsewhere in the country.²⁰ More than anywhere else, the state has suffered from Mexican organised crime's fragmentation: what were once a few cohesive criminal organisations are now an ever more diverse cast of squabbling outfits, relying on a far wider range of illicit businesses than before and tighter, more aggressive forms of territorial control.²¹

Organised crime is only part of the problem. Overall, there are at least 40 non-state armed groups active in Guerrero today.²² Open-source analysis carried out by Crisis Group shows that at least twenty of these are criminal organisations that assert control over swathes of territory.²³ An equivalent number of self-defence groups (in Spanish, *autodefensas*) are also active in the state, with some having gained significant political and social clout on turf of their own.²⁴ As explored in depth below, all the latter outfits claim that the state's inability to protect citizens from organised crime's aggressive turn has spurred them to take up arms. The boundaries between some of the *autodefensas* and purely criminal groups have grown porous, however, while the state's deep collusion and complicity with both aggravate the chronic lack of basic security for Guerrero's inhabitants.²⁵

¹⁸ Between 2006 and 2013, kidnappings increased nearly tenfold and extortion nearly fivefold, according to official data. "Cifras de Homicidio Doloso, Secuestro, Extorsión y Robo de Vehículos 1997-2017", Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System, 2018.

¹⁹ Guerrero consistently ranks as one of Mexico's five most lethal states, including in 2019, according to INEGI homicide data.

²⁰ According to a high-level UN source, Guerrero has "foreshadowed" many core developments in Mexico's conflict. Crisis Group interview, Mexico City, 23 September 2019.

²¹ For overviews, see Pansters, *Violence, Coercion and State-making in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, op. cit.; and Crisis Group Latin America Report N°69, *Building Peace in Mexico: Dilemmas Facing the López Obrador Government*, 11 October 2018.

²² See Appendix B: Map of Armed Groups in Guerrero 2018-2019. A 2018 map by Guerrero's state government identified eighteen nominal criminal groups and twenty self-defence groups. See "En Guerrero operan 20 grupos de autodefensa y 18 bandas criminales: informe oficial", *Proceso*, 27 June 2018. Missing from the government's count were Los Viagras, which is active in the Tierra Caliente region, according to Crisis Group sources among criminal groups, media reports and videos posted to social media by the group itself. "CJNG presume haber matado a 15 sicarios de Los Viagras en Guerrero", *La Verdad*, November 2019. Other groups have splintered since then. "Los nuevos jefes de la sierra de Guerrero", *Excélsior*, 4 November 2019. Jane Esberg, "More Than Cartels: Counting Mexico's Crime Rings", Crisis Group Commentary, forthcoming.

²³ Crisis Group's open-source analysis indicates that even more criminal actors operate in Guerrero. Not all, however, seek territorial control, with some limiting themselves to occasional processing and export of heroin or other transactions. Crisis Group interview, heroin trafficker operating out of Guerrero, Apatzingán, Michoacán, April 2019.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May, June and September 2019. See also "El poder de las autodefensas", *La Jornada*, 23 August 2019.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May, June and September 2019. See also the discussion of ties between criminals and *autodefensas* in Section III.C below.

III. A Criminal Transformation

Drug production and trafficking are by no means new to Guerrero. The cultivation of marijuana and poppy, the latter mashed into paste and subsequently refined into heroin, goes back decades, and has long dominated the state's illicit economy. Poppy production became a prominent feature of the local economy in the 1960s, in response to burgeoning demand from the U.S.²⁶ For peasants in Guerrero's highlands, it first was a way to supplement subsistence-level agrarian incomes.²⁷ As prices rose from the 1990s onward, again due to increased U.S. demand for poppy derivatives, the crop became so widespread as to constitute one of the regional economy's central pillars.²⁸ A grower, who states that he cultivated poppy from the late 1970s, said, "a lot of people benefited from it, up here [in the highlands] but also shops down in the city [Chilpancingo] selling us cars, TVs, fridges".²⁹ The transformation of the drug market has driven the rising rates of violence in the state.

A. Drug Trafficking and Diversification

Guerrero's drug markets were initially decentralised, with few barriers to entry for would-be producers or traffickers. Organised drug trafficking northward from Guerrero began over 40 years ago. A former "mule", or drug carrier, said a "señor" from the nearby state of Jalisco hired her and other young women from the coast to smuggle heroin to the U.S. border in the late 1970s.³⁰ According to the abovementioned poppy grower, "everybody would grow on their own". "Outsiders", he said, "would come in to buy. But there were no restrictions on who entered the area or who you could sell to. There really weren't any cartels like today with all the violence".³¹ Other growers from the region, as well as the head of a criminal organisation involved in heroin trafficking, painted a similar picture in interviews.³²

This laissez-faire underworld became more structured and more violent as large criminal organisations from northern Mexico entered Guerrero. At the turn of the millennium, competition over trafficking hubs and routes intensified across Mexico, particularly between the Sinaloa and Gulf Cartels.³³ Both moved aggressively to establish bridgeheads in strategic locations. Guerrero fitted the bill as both a major drug production site and a transshipment corridor for South American cocaine brought ashore in coves up and down the coast, as well as on Acapulco's docks.³⁴

²⁶ On Guerrero's history of drug production and trafficking, see Humberto Padgett, *Guerrero, Los hombres de verde y la dama de rojo, Crónica de la Nación Gomera* (Mexico City, 2015).

²⁷ According to INEGI, Guerrero is the state with the lowest socio-economic development index. "Índice de Rezago Social", INEGI, 2010.

²⁸ "No More Opium for the Masses", NORIA, 10 February 2019.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Chilpancingo, May 2019.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Apatzingán, Michoacán, May 2012.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Chilpancingo, May 2019.

³² Crisis Group interviews, Chichihualco and Sierra Madre Sur, May, June and September 2019.

³³ Competition between these two criminal protagonists drove much of the lethal conflict in Mexico from 2006 onward. On the evolution of criminal organisations in Mexico, see two books by Luis Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas: el narcotráfico, del Porfiriato al nuevo milenio* (Mexico City, 2005); and *Drogas sin fronteras* (Mexico City, 2015).

³⁴ On the influx of criminal organisations from other parts of Mexico into Guerrero and the evolution of organised crime in the state, see Kyle, "Violence and Insecurity in Guerrero", op. cit.

Two incursions starting in 2004 – those of the Beltrán Leyva group, a powerful segment of the Sinaloa Cartel, and Los Zetas, then the Gulf Cartel's principal armed wing – did particular harm to Guerrero. Parts of the state experienced steep climbs in lethal violence. Acapulco, for instance, became a battleground between the two groups – and one of the world's deadliest large cities.³⁵ Beyond the fierce internecine competition, which often saw civilians caught in the crossfire, the influx of outside groups also brought far more malign criminal practices, most notoriously through Los Zetas.³⁶ The groups targeted residents and small businesses with extortion rackets and kidnappings for ransom.³⁷

These groups began to compete for territorial control to make bigger profits on drugs and other commodities. Diversified criminal revenues in turn helped spur sharper fighting among groups. One criminal leader said his group's confrontation with others "isn't as much about heroin anymore [but] mostly about mining".³⁸ In other regions, the portfolio of resource exploitation includes illegal logging.³⁹ The variety of goods traded in the criminal economy makes it more resilient to shocks in particular markets.⁴⁰

B. *Backlash from the Kingpin Strategy*

Violence in Guerrero reached a zenith after the Mexican government's kingpin strategy backfired.⁴¹ On 16 December 2009, the Mexican navy killed Arturo Beltrán Leyva, the eponymous group's dominant figure, in an action that then-president Felipe Calderón hailed as a victory in the "war on drugs".⁴² The Beltrán Leyva group had, by that

³⁵ "Guerrero: La violencia circular", *Nexos*, 1 November 2014; "How Acapulco became Mexico's murder capital", *Washington Post*, 24 August 2017.

³⁶ Los Zetas' core group was initially composed of former elite soldiers. It was one of the first criminal outfits to prey on local populations for income. See Diego Osorno, *La Guerra de Los Zetas* (Mexico City, 2012); and Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas Inc.: Criminal Corporations, Energy and Civil War in Mexico* (Austin, 2017).

³⁷ Camilo Pantoja, "La permanente crisis de Guerrero", in Raúl Benítez Manaut and Sergio Aguayo Quezada (eds.), *Atlas de la seguridad y de la defensa 2016* (Mexico City, 2017).

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Guerrero, September 2019. On mining as a conflict driver in Mexico, see "Illegal Mining a Golden Opportunity for Mexico Crime Groups", *InSight Crime*, 26 September 2016.

³⁹ "Insostenible, la ola de violencia que azota a la sierra de Guerrero, afirman durante foro", *La Jornada*, 25 January 2019.

⁴⁰ The rising popularity of fentanyl among U.S. consumers has led to lower heroin prices in Mexico, severely affecting local peasants. See "No More Opium for the Masses", *op. cit.* Yet it has not put traffickers out of business. Asked if fentanyl's advent threw his group's survival into question, the South Cartel's head said he had "other sources" of income besides heroin. Crisis Group interview, Chichihualco, September 2019. A heroin trafficker operating out of Guerrero also said the heroin business was still "perfectly worth it" for him. Crisis Group interview, Michoacán, April 2019.

⁴¹ The "kingpin strategy" was a key building block of the "war on drugs". It is grounded in the belief that criminal organisations wither when their leaders, or "kingpins", are captured or killed. "La kingpin strategy: ¿qué es y cómo llegó a México?", *Nexos*, 21 October 2019.

⁴² Calderón, who made militarisation of public security the centrepiece of his presidency, said at the time: "This action represents an important success for the Mexican people and the Mexican government and a decisive blow against one of Mexico's and the continent's most dangerous criminal organisations". "La muerte de Beltrán Leyva es un golpe contundente: Calderón", *Informador*, 17 December 2009.

time, gained the upper hand in Guerrero, most prominently under the command of the kingpin's lieutenant Jesús Nava Romero, aka "El Rojo".⁴³

The Beltrán Leyva group attained its position partly by lending muscle – personnel and firepower – to existing crime rings and assuring them of market access. It thus proved particularly effective at installing local satellites. A leader of one prominent criminal band, for instance, said the new group's arrival gave his prior poppy growing and trafficking operations a boost: "Initially, we received support from them".⁴⁴ This backing appears to have aided his group, the South Cartel, in its ascent in Guerrero's heroin business.⁴⁵ The South Cartel, along with other criminal groups, have become synonymous with insecurity in the state. Among the others are Los Rojos ("The Red Ones"), the original satellite set up by the Beltrán Leyva group and headed by Nava Romero, and its splinters Los Ardillos and Los Guerreros Unidos ("The United Warriors").⁴⁶ The latter group is widely believed to have been involved in the disappearance of 43 students at the Ayotzinapa teaching college in 2014.⁴⁷

Beltrán Leyva's death robbed Guerrero's criminal landscape of its central figure, leading to far greater autonomy for the local units making up his network and to factionalism that stoked violent conflict. First, it introduced more potential conflict parties, with approximately 40 illegal armed groups active in Guerrero today.⁴⁸ The extraordinary density of criminal factions gave rise to extreme territorial fragmentation, one of the greatest challenges to improving security in Guerrero.⁴⁹ Each faction fights to protect and expand its own little patch of turf. Rivalries are kindled by mistrust and personal animosity among criminal bosses. A high-ranking officer said:

All of them were part of the same [structure]. They all know each other; they all came up together. But when the big one [Arturo Beltrán Leyva] wasn't around anymore, nobody accepted the other's leadership and they started betraying and fighting each other. That's the situation we're in today.⁵⁰

⁴³ "La lucha por el mercado de la droga en Guerrero", *Nexos*, 12 March 2015; Pantoja, "La permanente crisis de Guerrero", *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Chichihualco, September 2019.

⁴⁵ Padgett, *Guerrero*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ The former group's name is derived from its founder's nickname, La Ardilla, or "the Squirrel".

⁴⁷ "Informe Ayotzinapa II", *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ Organisational fragmentation as a result of the kingpin strategy is widely described as a driving force of Mexico's rising violence in the past thirteen years. The number of criminal armed groups in Mexico is 231, according to one estimate. "Mapa criminal de México 2020. Informe sobre las organizaciones criminales con presencia en México", Lantia Consultores, 2020.

⁴⁹ Even the Jalisco Cartel New Generation, which many portray as Mexico's next criminal hegemon, has been unable to pacify the areas for which it contends, including its core territory of the state of Jalisco. In other high-conflict areas, a similar hyper-fragmentation can be observed. "Células criminales avanzan con violencia; grandes cárteles se han fraccionado en grupos rivales", *Excélsior*, 4 February 2020.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Guerrero, May 2019. The informant described himself as close to Beltrán Leyva, a description corroborated independently by third parties. Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May, June and September 2019.

Secondly, as connections between groups in the drug production and trafficking chain broke, many small to medium-sized criminal groups phased from narcotics to predatory rackets.⁵¹ Extortion increased sharply and has become a chronic affliction across the state, particularly in cities. In 2018, the extortion rate per 100,000 inhabitants in Guerrero was 18,478, meaning that nearly one in five people said someone had tried to bully them into paying for “protection”.⁵² Merchants in Chilpancingo refer to “generalised extortion”, with businesses as small as produce stalls being charged such payments.⁵³ One businessperson drove Crisis Group by a restaurant that was shuttered in 2019, after the owner was shot dead for refusing to meet extortion demands. The interviewee said, “the choice is to pay up, flee or face the consequences for us and our family members”, adding that competition over extortion and kidnapping rackets underlies the city’s violence.⁵⁴ Guerrero is among the Mexican states hardest hit by economic losses due to insecurity.⁵⁵

Predatory criminality is worse in rural areas such as the Tierra Caliente, or Hot Land, which borders Michoacán. What happens in these areas stays largely outside the public eye, as criminals intimidate media outlets into self-censorship with violence or the threat thereof.⁵⁶ Groups such as La Familia Michoacana and Los Viagras have built veritable fiefdoms in the Hot Land.⁵⁷ Residents of the region’s north, parts of which are controlled by La Familia Michoacana, said the group charges each household a monthly *cuota*, or tax, of around \$10.⁵⁸ Criminals reportedly also strong-arm

⁵¹ For a discussion of changes within Mexico’s criminal economy and the trend toward extortion, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Mexico’s Out-of-Control Criminal Market”, Brookings Institution, March 2019.

⁵² “Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública 2019”, INEGI, September 2019.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, Chilpancingo, June 2019.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Chilpancingo, May, June and September 2019. The media has documented extortion in Acapulco extensively. See, eg, “How Acapulco exemplifies Mexico’s ongoing security crisis”, *Forbes*, 21 March 2019.

⁵⁵ According to the Institute for Economics and Peace, overall economic losses in Mexico due to insecurity amount to 2.5 trillion Mexican pesos (\$130 billion) per annum, equivalent to 11 per cent of Mexico’s 2018 GDP. See “Mexico Peace Index 2019”, Institute for Economics and Peace, April 2019. The same report ranks Guerrero as the second least peaceful state in Mexico. By 2017, according to some estimates, insecurity had forced 2,000 businesses to close in Acapulco alone. See Teresa Santiago and Carlos Illades, “La guerra irregular en Guerrero, 2007-2017”, *Relaciones, Estudios de Historia y Sociedad*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2019). According to Moody’s, Acapulco’s tourism industry suffered a 63 per cent loss in international visitors from 2012 through 2017. See “Moody’s alerta sobre el impacto de la violencia en la economía de Acapulco”, *Proceso*, 5 March 2019.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May, June and September 2019. According to the think-tank CASEDE, criminal organisations in Mexico often create “zones of silence”, mainly through threats and physical violence directed at journalists and others, as a means of social control. “Informe 2019: Libertad de expresión en México”, CASEDE, September 2019. In 2019, eleven journalists were murdered in Mexico. Since no one investigates the killings, the culprits are unknown. “Journalists killed in 2019”, Committee to Protect Journalists, 2020.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews and text message exchanges, residents and criminal organisation members, Guerrero and Michoacán, May–June 2019, January 2020. La Familia Michoacana is originally from Michoacán but has expanded deep into Guerrero. See Pantoja, “La permanente crisis de Guerrero”, op. cit.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Guerrero, June 2019.

local business owners into making a “contribution” ranging from \$250 to \$2,500 per month, forcing many to flee the area.⁵⁹

Criminal groups in the Hot Land also exploit their territorial control to levy taxes on commerce.⁶⁰ In 2018, for instance, Coca-Cola Mexico ceased production and distribution in the area due to extortion and physical attacks on personnel and facilities.⁶¹ Local merchants said criminals now import and sell soft drinks themselves at up to three times the market price.⁶² Traders said they no longer enter the area due to continuous threats.⁶³

C. *New Entrants and Self-defence Forces*

Guerrero is a welter of local feuds. Each quarrel is distinct, based on the structure of the groups involved as well as the resources over which they are fighting. Indications are that, far from abating, violence in the state could remain at the highs of recent years or climb even higher.

An acute concern is the incursion of the Jalisco Cartel New Generation (Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación), part of its brutal and nationwide expansionist drive.⁶⁴ The Hot Land was exposed to this cartel's sorties in 2019. It has been the site of fierce battles between Jalisco and an alliance including Los Viagras, La Familia Michoacana and remnants of the Knights Templar. A high-ranking member of one group involved said the sides are fighting in Guerrero, as well as Michoacán, over a northbound smuggling corridor that traverses the two states.⁶⁵

The human cost is mounting, with the feuding alliances targeting locals with economic or social ties to the enemy.⁶⁶ In Guerrero, this escalation has led to numerous disappearances and cases of internal displacement, with one side attacking and partly burning down villages associated with the other.⁶⁷ One woman who grew up in the

⁵⁹ “El éxodo de Tierra Caliente”, *Forbes*, 4 May 2018.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May-June 2019.

⁶¹ “El éxodo de Tierra Caliente”, op. cit.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May 2019.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, June 2019.

⁶⁴ This cartel is expanding in the states of Baja California Norte, Michoacán, Veracruz, Jalisco, Morelos and Guanajuato, among others.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Mexico City, January 2020.

⁶⁶ For an overview of targeting of civilians, see Falko Ernst, “Mexico’s Hydra-headed Crime War”, Crisis Group Commentary, 3 June 2019.

⁶⁷ To date, there is no comprehensive study of the true scope of internal displacement in Mexico. According to one NGO, as of 31 December 2018, there were 338,000 internally displaced persons “as a result of conflict and violence” in Mexico, with 11,000 new cases recorded in 2018. See “Country Data Mexico”, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2019. The Centre says that the “estimate ... is far below the real number”. See “Violencia en México desplazó a 380 mil personas en 10 años: IDMC”, *Informador*, 23 July 2019. Drawing on INEGI’s yearly “National Survey of Victimization and Public Security Perception” (2011-2017), the Mexican Secretariat of the Interior (SEGOB) as well as a Mexican NGO cite a total of 8.7 million people “who had to change their residency to protect themselves from crime”, or more than one million per annum. The total for Guerrero was 255,274. “Entre la invisibilidad y el abandono: un acercamiento cuantitativo al desplazamiento interno forzado en México”, Mexican Commission for the Defence and Promotion of Human Rights, February 2019; “La violencia como causa de desplazamiento interno forzado. Aproximaciones a su análisis en México”, SEGOB, March 2019. While most displacement follows a “drop-by-drop” pat-

region and now lives in a nearby city said she has provided refuge to her family “after they had to leave in a type of exodus with their neighbours, leaving behind their house, businesses, schools, their lives. The place has become hell”. Their birthplace, she said, “has become a ghost town”.⁶⁸

In 2019, the Jalisco Cartel also began shouldering into Guerrero’s northern region, which connects the Hot Land to the west and to the north, via the state of Morelos and toward Mexico City.⁶⁹

In parallel, community police and self-defence groups have proliferated to join Guerrero’s array of armed competitors. The growth of such groups, dating from 1995, has coincided with the state’s inability to protect citizens from the criminal predatory turn. Community police are rooted in indigenous people’s constitutional right of partial self-governance and autonomy in administering justice.⁷⁰ Yet these and other manifestations of self-defence have spread far beyond their original legal and territorial reimits.⁷¹

It has become increasingly difficult to draw a clear line between legal and illegal self-defence groups. In January 2020, for instance, Guerrero surfaced in international headlines after the the Coordinadora Regional de Autoridades Comunitarias-Pueblos Fundadores (Regional Coordination of Community Authorities-Foundational Peoples, or CRAC-PF), an indigenous self-defence group, presented child recruits between the ages of six and fifteen to the media. The week before, the criminal group Los Ardillos had allegedly ambushed and killed ten indigenous musicians.⁷² Some of the children had lost their fathers in the attack. Public reaction to the recruitment of children oscillated between comprehension and outrage, but much suggests that several nominal *autodefensas* have strayed far beyond citizen protection. Accusations in this vein from the media, locals, state officials and NGOs range from abuse of power, such as arbitrary detentions, to collusion with criminal groups to serving as fronts for illicit interests.⁷³ Rival self-defence groups call each other criminals, leading to open confrontations in Guerrero that turn violent.⁷⁴

tern – individuals or small groups fleeing – there have lately been more registered incidents of mass displacement (more than 50 persons) in Guerrero than in any other state, with seven in both 2016 and 2017 and thirteen in 2018. Together, such incidents uprooted 5,056 persons in 2018 alone. See “Episodios de desplazamiento interno forzado masivo en México”, Mexican Commission for the Defence and Promotion of Human Rights, May 2019. Mass displacement incidents continue, particularly in Tierra Caliente, including the displacement of 400 people around 18 November 2019 and 800 people around 20 January 2020. See “Alcalde de Zirándaro denuncia ingobernabilidad y desplazados por pugna entre narco”, *Proceso*, 19 November 2019; “Huyen 800 pobladores de Guerrero por combates entre narcos”, *La Jornada*, 16 January 2020.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group text message exchange, 31 January 2020.

⁶⁹ “Amagan con narcomantas de una ola de violencia en Iguala y Taxco”, *Proceso*, 20 October 2019.

⁷⁰ “Para entender a la Policía Comunitaria de Guerrero”, *Nexos*, 4 June 2018.

⁷¹ “A Mexican town wages its own war on drugs”, *The New Yorker*, 27 November 2017.

⁷² “Los niños soldados de Guerrero: nueva señal de la descomposición por la violencia en México”, *El País*, 22 January 2020.

⁷³ Guerrero’s state government jailed Nestora Salgado, a former commander of another self-defence umbrella, the Coordinadora Regional de Autoridades Comunitarias-Policía Comunitaria (Regional Coordination of Community Authorities-Community Police, or CRAC-PC), and a senator from the ruling party, on kidnapping and homicide charges from 2013 to 2016. She denounced her imprisonment as persecution. A court eventually dismissed the charges against her, although Mexico’s

Long-time observers in the state said opposing umbrella groups are now able to mobilise far more fighters across a wider area. They also voiced concern over changing tactics, which have in various ways mutated to resemble paramilitary operations.⁷⁵

At the same time, many illegal armed groups in Guerrero – and not just the self-defence forces – now claim for themselves histories that portray them as motivated primarily by the need to defend themselves and their communities from external attack or internal subversion.⁷⁶

One leader of FUPCEG – a nominal *autodefensa*, part of an alliance that reportedly operates in 762 communities across 39 municipalities in Guerrero's highlands and northern coast, and comprises more than 10,000 members – said he was forced to take up arms after family members were targeted for kidnapping.⁷⁷ He now operates out of a mountain village with simple wooden and concrete homes, which serves as an operational hub on the edges of territory held by FUPCEG's criminal rival, the South Cartel. He underlined his past as a successful tomato farmer. "Do you think that I chose to be in a place like this, sleeping in the dirt and eating beans and eggs all the time?", he asked. "Of course not. And do you think I want to have to teach these men [points to armed guards close by] to kill? I don't. But it's not by choice. It's something I've had to do".⁷⁸

In nearly identical terms, the leader of the South Cartel, nominally a criminal organisation, claimed that aggression against his family forced him to establish an armed group for self-defence. "I started working poppy [sic] around '98. I was just working. But then, about eight years ago, the whole thing with the cartels started. The Zetas entered our state. That's when the war started. They started to cut off heads.

National Human Rights Commission found that community police under her command had violated detainees' human rights. See "A Mexican town wages its own war on drugs", op. cit.; "8 claves sobre el caso Nestora Salgado", *Animal Político*, 28 May 2018. FUPCEG stands accused of acting as a front for a criminal group. See "Los nuevos jefes de la sierra de Guerrero", *Excelsior*, 4 November 2019. Another *autodefensa*, the Unión de Pueblos y Organizaciones del Estado de Guerrero (Union of Villages and Organisations of the State of Guerrero, or UPOEG) was accused of making a pact with the criminal group Los Dumbos before entering into conflict with them in 2019. See "Historia de una policía que se alió con el crimen: Xaltianguis", *Amapola Periodismo*, 18 November 2019. A self-defence leader himself boasted that his group had grown so strong that he could impose terms on La Familia Michoacana, with which he said he had an "understanding". Crisis Group interview, self-defence leader, Guerrero, May 2019.

⁷⁴ In 2015, the Frente Unido para la Seguridad y el Desarrollo del Estado de Guerrero (United Front for Security and Development in the State of Guerrero, FUSDEG) split off from UPOEG. Open confrontations between the two have become a main driver of lethal conflict on the outskirts of Acapulco ever since. See "Historia de una policía que se alió con el crimen: Xaltianguis", op. cit.; "Enfrentamiento entre grupos de autodefensa deja seis muertos en Guerrero", *Proceso*, 19 June 2019.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May, June and September 2019.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group research has found that leaders as well as *sicarios* (foot soldiers) of criminal groups in Michoacán repeat similar narratives. See Falko Ernst, "The Life and Death of a Mexican Hit Man", Crisis Group Commentary, 17 October 2018.

⁷⁷ Salvador Alanís, the FUPCEG coordinator, told reporters in March 2019 that he commanded "more than 11,000" combatants. See "Autodefensas de Tlacotepec anuncian incursiones armadas en Chilpancingo", *Proceso*, 21 March 2019. The group's leadership said the number was "more than 10,000" but left open whether that refers to the group itself or the alliance of which it forms part, including criminal groups. Crisis Group interview, Filo de Caballos, May 2019.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Filo de Caballos, May 2019.

It had nothing to do with the *narcos* from before. It was terrorism”. He stated that his area of operation – the mountains in and around Chichihualco, key for poppy production in Guerrero – became embroiled in conflict among rival groups, with locals subjected to new and harsher criminal exactions. “[Los Rojos] started installing themselves here. When you entered [town], they started asking you questions, who you were with. And then they started to kidnap people and ask businesses for money. You knew, but you didn’t say anything. You see the gun and you shut up”.

The leader said he was still targeted after paying a ransom of 700,000 pesos (at the time about \$54,000) for the release of kidnapped relatives. An ambush followed, in which a family member was killed, and he and others were wounded, prompting him to take up arms.⁷⁹

I didn’t want problems. But I had to start defending myself. Me, a brother, eight friends from work began to organise. We got ourselves some guns and we went to town. To shoot at them [Los Rojos]. And we chased them out of my village. And then the whole thing started growing, people joined us since they knew that we were already fighting them.⁸⁰

D. *Mutation to a New Phase*

The similarities between criminal organisations and some of Guerrero’s self-defence groups extend beyond origin stories to include how they work.⁸¹ Some *autodefensas* use the same weaponry as their criminal counterparts, train cells of enforcers, hire former military personnel and rely on comparable battle tactics.⁸² They have also de-

⁷⁹ At that point in the interview, the leader lifted up his shirt and showed scars on his chest allegedly stemming from bullet wounds.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Chichihualco, September 2019. Contrary to the leader’s portrayal of the South Cartel’s origins as self-defence from Los Rojos, a former high-ranking member of the group said “they were all part of the same [structure]” before “differences” emerged over leadership as well as “what was permissible to make money”, ie, whether and to what degree extortion and other predatory practices were acceptable. Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May and June 2019. Furthermore, according to media reports, the two groups’ leaders are linked by kinship ties. “Señor de la I’ a la conquista del centro de Guerrero”, *La Silla Rota*, 11 June 2017; “El origen del sanguinario ‘Cártel del Sur’”, *La Silla Rota*, 2 October 2019.

⁸¹ There are stark differences among self-defence groups in Guerrero. Segments of the earliest umbrella organisation, the CRAC-PC, continue to administer community justice. The CRAC-PC’s geographical expansion entailed the inclusion of non-indigenous communities, as well as splinter organisations such as the FUSDEG, which largely abandoned community justice. Meanwhile, groups such as CRAC-PF, an indigenous CRAC-PC splinter, are generally more passive, focusing on defending indigenous populations and territories, and relying on lighter weapons such as hunting rifles. Others, such as the FUPCEG, are far more expansionist, and militarily both more sophisticated and aggressive. See María Teresa Sierra, “Policías comunitarias y campos sociales minados en México: construyendo seguridad en contextos de violencia extrema”, *Revista sobre acceso á justiça e direitos nas Américas*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2018); Pantoja, “La permanente crisis de Guerrero”, *op. cit.*

⁸² Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May, June and September 2019. The self-defence leader claimed, for instance, that his group has hired “deserting” naval officers. Former military men have long provided Mexico’s non-state armed groups with combat expertise. See “‘The training stays with you’: The elite Mexican soldiers recruited by cartels”, *The Guardian*, 10 February 2018. On FUPCEG’s use of U.S.-made high-calibre weapons, see “Mexicans are killing each other at record rates. The U.S. provides the guns”, *Los Angeles Times*, 6 October 2019.

ployed violence for propaganda purposes, including dismembering enemy bodies on camera for release on social media.⁸³ Interviewed by Crisis Group, one self-defence leader admitted to these parallels, arguing: “Unfortunately, we had to become like this, this extreme and aggressive, to respond to our enemies”. He described escalating patterns of violence, in which his fighters laid down hunting rifles to pick up heavier weapons, including semi-automatic rifles, and adopted insurgent-like methods such as the use of car bombs.⁸⁴

The current breed of self-defence groups has developed into large-scale umbrella organisations present in hundreds of communities and commanding thousands of armed members. This expansion defies the trend toward fragmentation among Mexico’s illegal armed groups. As to the evolution of conflict in Guerrero, it also entails a new phase, as the *autodefensas* acquire an operational scope and strategic sophistication that surpasses those of most criminal groups.

One incident that encapsulates these changes is the invasion of Filo de Caballos. Situated 80km from Chilpancingo, this mountain village sits in the middle of a major poppy-growing and heroin-producing region. It owes its strategic value to the winding road connecting it to the state capital, which is one of the few paved routes to the highlands from the lowlands, and is vital for exporting illicit drugs and getting to gold mines.⁸⁵ Hostilities here between the South Cartel and an alliance of FUPCEG and the so-called Cartel de la Sierra, another group formerly tied to the Beltrán Leyva and Los Rojos, intensified from 2017, former residents said, to reach a climax on 11 November 2018.⁸⁶

Around noon that day, said a man who lived in Filo de Caballos at the time, an invasion began:

They were about 3,000 [men]. We first heard shots being fired outside [the village] and thought it was more of the same. But then it drew closer and they entered the community. The shooting lasted until about 7pm. Bullets were flying

⁸³ For instance, in one video that a local journalist showed Crisis Group, three men identifiable by their red armbands as FUPCEG members repeatedly thrust their bayonets, mounted on semi-automatic rifles, into a corpse, cutting it open.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Filo de Caballos, Guerrero, May 2019. The self-defence leader said he had hired a “deserted navy officer to show us” how to make and use car bombs. In April 2019, a car bomb exploded in Xaltianguis, just outside Acapulco, in front of UPOEG installations. FUPCEG is fighting for control of the town. “La explosión del coche bomba en Xaltianguis, Guerrero, fue planeada, asegura la policía comunitaria”, *Sin Embargo*, 4 April 2019.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May, June and September 2019. “En la Sierra, la disputa para controlar corredor donde habrá una mina”, *El Sol de Chilpancingo*, 13 November 2018.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May, June and September 2019. According to various sources, FUPCEG and the Cartel de la Sierra are one and the same organisation, with FUPCEG acting as the self-defence component. The Cartel de la Sierra is headed by Onésimo Marquina Chapa, alias Necho, whom a South Cartel leader identified as an archenemy, referring to alleged past betrayals. In late 2019, the Cartel de la Sierra reportedly fused with the fragment of the Guerreros Unidos headed by Gildardo López Astudillo, alias El Cabo Gil, a main suspect in the disappearance of the Ayotzinapa students who was released from jail in September 2019, and with the fragment of Los Rojos headed by Cándido Nava Millán, alias El Japo. “Liberan a ‘El Gil’ acusado de ordenar la desaparición de los 43”, *Proceso*, 3 September 2019; “Los nuevos jefes de la sierra de Guerrero”, *Excélsior*, 4 November 2019.

everywhere, hitting the rolldown shutter [of our store front]. I was hugging the floor the whole time. I didn't even dare to get up to go to the bathroom.⁸⁷

When Crisis Group visited the village six months later, houses riddled with bullet holes and semi-automatic rifle shells on the street still spoke to the battle's intensity.

In total, on 11 November 2018 alone, according to local informants, human rights organisations and press reports, the battle drove 1,600 people out of Filo de Caballos and surrounding hamlets. They feared either being caught in crossfire or being targeted afterward by the invading force for their association with the South Cartel. The displaced people moved down the mountain to supposedly safer Chichihualco.⁸⁸ They have since received threats not to return, according to human rights activists and some of the displaced themselves.⁸⁹ A spokesman and organiser for the displaced said he fled to the U.S. with his family to ask for asylum. "I was starting to become a problem for the [state] government because I was denouncing the government's complicity in all this. I received various calls telling me that if I loved my family I had to shut up or face the consequences".⁹⁰ As noted above, forced displacement is the regular fallout of territorial competition among illegal armed groups in Guerrero, as in other parts of Mexico.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, Guerrero, May 2019.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May, June, September 2019. See also "En Guerrero huele a miedo, mil 600 huyen de Filo de Caballos por violencia", *El Universal*, 14 November 2018.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May, June, and September 2019.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group text message exchange, October 2019.

IV. The Role of the State

Guerrero is often held up as a prime example for how non-state groups carve out fiefdoms in competition with the state or in its supposed absence.⁹¹ But judicial investigations conducted in the aftermath of the 2014 disappearance of the 43 students at the Ayotzinapa teachers' college indicate that the line separating state and armed groups in Guerrero is thin to non-existent. According to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, the case shows the "extremes the association between state agents and organised crime can reach".⁹² A special investigation ordered by the Commission concluded that, given the variety of state and security officials involved, there must have been "a level of central coordination".⁹³ The investigators' report underlines the participation of the criminal group Los Guerreros Unidos, which had "extensive ties with municipal police".⁹⁴

Persistent media coverage of the mass disappearance prompted hope among local civil society activists and journalists that "the whole cesspool [of state-crime complicity] would finally be aired", as one put it.⁹⁵ But state bodies have since allegedly tarnished the case with efforts to manipulate the truth and mislead victims' families.⁹⁶ A 2018 report by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Mexico said federal authorities have obstructed justice by failing to pursue possible lines of inquiry or question people of interest, as well as by torturing suspects.⁹⁷ By October 2019, authorities had released 78 of 142 suspects for lack of evi-

⁹¹ See eg, George Grayson, *Mexico, Narco-Violence and a Failed State* (New York, 2010).

⁹² "Corrupción y Derechos Humanos", Inter-American Human Rights Commission, Organization of American States, 6 December 2019, p. 47. A report by the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts, which probed the case on behalf of the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, reveals that on the night of 26 September 2014 the Ayotzinapa students took over five privately owned buses in order to transport their peers to a commemorative protest march in Mexico City on 2 October. (Such "taking" of passenger vehicles is common practice among Mexican students, particularly for the purpose of protests. "50 years after a student massacre, Mexico reflects on democracy", *The New York Times*, 1 October 2018.) A series of repressive actions followed over the next four to five hours, including the police shooting at students; detaining and torturing students; carrying out the extrajudicial execution of six students, including two who were shot from a distance of less than 15cm; killing four football team members, whom they apparently confused with students; attacking 80 people who mobilised in support of the students; and collaborating with Los Guerreros Unidos in the 43 students' disappearance. "Informe Ayotzinapa II", op. cit.

⁹³ "Informe Ayotzinapa I, Resumen", Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts, Inter-American Human Rights Commission, Organization of American States, 2015.

⁹⁴ "Informe Ayotzinapa II", op. cit. Arrested members of Guerreros Unidos have made contradictory statements as to whether they or state officials gave the orders and carried out the disappearances. Authorities obtained many of these testimonies at least partly under torture. See "Doble injusticia – Informe sobre violaciones de derechos humanos en la investigación del caso Ayotzinapa", Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Mexico, March 2018.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Chilpancingo, May 2019.

⁹⁶ An unpublished version of the Interdisciplinary Group report names several state officials who should be questioned to shed light on the events. Crisis Group interview, Mexico City, April 2019.

⁹⁷ "Doble injusticia", op. cit.; Ximena Suárez-Enríquez, "La nueva Comisión de Investigación para el caso Ayotzinapa", Washington Office on Latin America, 28 June 2018. In September 2019, the sub-secretary for human rights of Mexico's Secretariat of the Interior, Alejandro Encinas, accused Jesús Murillo Karam, Mexico's state attorney from 2012 to 2015, of attempting to cover up the case,

dence, including the man who was head of Los Guerreros Unidos at the time of the incidents.⁹⁸ Concerns persist about the proximity of organised crime to the state in Guerrero.

A. *Corruption and Policing*

Guerrero has one of the highest levels of official corruption in Mexico, including among the security forces, and the lowest degree of adherence to the rule of law.⁹⁹ The poor working conditions for police make them particularly vulnerable to graft. Federal police in the state work 81.4 hours per week on average, while state police toil for 93.7 hours, although average monthly wages for all police stand at approximately \$500. In one survey of Guerrero police officers, 82.7 per cent said their superiors displayed “improper or illegal” behaviour, including acts of aggression against citizens as well as accepting bribes, while 88.1 per cent said the same of their peers on the force. Police are also poorly trained: 32 per cent of Guerrero’s officers in late 2018 had received no training at all.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, Guerrero suffers from a lack of police: the state has 0.9 police officers per 1,000 inhabitants, a ratio half of what Mexico’s federal government defines as the “minimum standard” for police presence.¹⁰¹

B. *Criminal State Forces*

Guerrero’s police put their lives at risk – 26 officers were killed in the state in 2019, the fifth highest toll nationwide – but many are also perpetrators of violence and accomplices of organised crime.¹⁰² An inhabitant of one mid-sized town who said he had suffered extortion by local police said “the question is not whether police are corrupt or not ... but which [police force] works with [which criminal group]”. He described a constellation of criminal outfits seeking out partners among authorities that are also internally divided, in which “the municipal police works for one [group], the state [police] for another and the federal [police] for [yet] another”.¹⁰³ The municipal

committing torture and planting false evidence. See “Liberan a 24 personas más ligadas al caso Ayotzinapa; quedan sólo 65 detenidos de 142”, *Proceso*, 15 September 2019. In January 2020, Encinas said Murillo Karam would be summoned to testify about these accusations. See “Por caso Ayotzinapa, llamarán a declarar a Jesús Murillo Karam”, *UnoTV*, 21 January 2020.

⁹⁸ “Juez libera a otros 3 ligados a caso Ayotzinapa, dice Encinas”, *op. cit.*

⁹⁹ “Índice de Estado de Derecho en México 2018”, World Justice Project, 2018; “Índice Mexicano de Corrupción y Calidad Gubernamental”, *México Social*, 2019; “Encuesta interna a miembros de COPARMEX, enero-febrero 2019”, Employers Confederation of the Mexican Republic, 2019.

¹⁰⁰ “Encuesta Nacional de Estándares y Capacitación Profesional Policial”, INEGI, 12 November 2018. “Violencia en Guerrero: síntoma de la debilidad institucional”, *México Evalúa*, 12 December 2018.

¹⁰¹ “Modelo óptimo de la función policial”, Security and Citizen Protection Secretariat, 30 June 2019.

¹⁰² A total of 446 police officers were killed nationwide, setting a new record. See “Registro de policías asesinados 2019”, *Causa en Común*, 2020. Recent scandals affecting police in Guerrero include the disarmament and investigation of Acapulco’s entire municipal force by federal authorities, due to its “probable infiltration by criminal groups” and its “complete inaction ... confronting crime”. Two commanders were arrested on homicide charges, and the military found that 71 weapons were “missing” from the police arsenal. “México: desarmen e investigan a toda la policía de Acapulco por supuestos vínculos con el narcotráfico”, *BBC Mundo*, 26 September 2018; “Dan formal prisión a mandos de SSP de Acapulco detenidos”, *Milenio*, 2 October 2018.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, Guerrero, June 2019.

police enforce local business owners' compliance with criminals' extortion demands, claimed a young man who is in hiding. He showed a scar on his lower right leg, saying it stemmed from a police bullet that hit him as he escaped from a police raid on his father's business. His father had refused to pay protection money.¹⁰⁴

In a major Guerrero town, eyewitnesses told Crisis Group that municipal police seized a young woman before their eyes, allegedly at the command of a criminal organisation lieutenant. A family member said he had made several advances toward her, telling her "he wanted her as his girlfriend", which she rejected. One night, they said, showing Crisis Group bullet holes in their house's inside and outside walls, eight municipal police officers forced their way indoors and took the woman away as her children watched.¹⁰⁵ The victim's family said they have personally confronted the police as well as the criminal leader, with her mother begging the latter for information and receiving death threats in response. The woman's whereabouts are still unknown.¹⁰⁶

Overall, from 2014 through 2018, 544 enforced disappearances, ie, disappearances involving the participation of state officials or security officers, were registered in Guerrero – more than anywhere else in the country.¹⁰⁷

C. *Accommodation between Police and Crime*

The police's failure to protect citizens is rooted in poor working conditions: the force is understaffed, underprepared, outgunned and underpaid.¹⁰⁸ These conditions, a former Guerrero police officer said, mean that instead of targeting criminal groups, and risking their own and their families' lives, police commanders routinely engage in *pláticas*, or conversations, with criminal leaders. "Basically, once you get to a new area, you try to reach some kind of arrangement", he said, indicating a quid pro quo: "you [the criminal leader] let me do my job, and I let you do yours ... so we don't get into any problems".¹⁰⁹ Another active state police officer described pressure from superiors to pass protection payments up the chain as conducive to corruption and collusion between police and criminals. Moreover, he added, police officers have "a lot of opportunities" to take up roles themselves within criminal groups.¹¹⁰

An accommodation between law enforcement and organised crime can generate a degree of stability and lessen violence. In such cases, the former police officer said, the "rotation principle", meant to curb collusion by limiting officers' stay in a given locality so they cannot form close personal ties with criminals, is abandoned.¹¹¹ Pacts

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, Guerrero, June 2019.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, June 2019. A family member present at the scene said: "I tried to hide [her] behind the bed [in a back room] and to stop them from entering, but one of them beat me with the butt of his rifle, leaving me on the ground. They went in and took her".

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, June 2019.

¹⁰⁷ "Guerrero, con al menos", op. cit.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, former state police officer, Guerrero, June 2019. Successive Mexican governments have grappled unsuccessfully with police reform. Daniel Sabet, *Police Reform in Mexico: Informal Politics and the Challenge of Institutional Change* (Stanford, 2012); "Mexico's Police: Many Reforms, Little Progress", Washington Office on Latin America, May 2014.

¹⁰⁹ On state-crime accommodation, see Crisis Group Report, *Building Peace in Mexico*, op. cit.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Guerrero, June 2019.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Mexico, April 2019.

between law enforcement and criminals are thus rewarded.¹¹² But lasting arrangements are not the norm. Criminal competition over a given area extends to struggles over access to or control over law enforcement, spurring attacks on police collaborating with rival criminals. That is one reason why police continue to be murdered in Mexico; refusal to cooperate with organised crime at all is another.

A former high-ranking federal security officer highlighted the existence of similar arrangements between federal forces and criminal groups in the state. Claiming that “[poppy] crops in Guerrero are being looked after by the army”, he said both sides engaged in “delimitation of spaces”, with designated poppy fields sporadically “given up” for eradication. “It’s a publicity game. You’ve got to give something to the police, the armed forces, to make them look good”, he said.¹¹³

D. *Producing Impunity*

The degree to which criminal interests have bent law enforcement in their favour is most starkly expressed in the 96 per cent impunity rate for murder in Guerrero, as well as the 0.2 per cent probability that authorities will solve any given crime.

Victims’ groups make brave efforts to reduce impunity, as in the Ayotzinapa case and in others. They have staged protests, blockades and press conferences in their clamour for judicial redress. Crisis Group attended a meeting in which an ad hoc victims’ group formed by displaced people from Filo de Caballos and its surroundings discussed with a local human rights organisation how to increase pressure on the federal government.¹¹⁴ The attendees deliberated whether to take over toll booths on the Chilpancingo-Mexico City highway, both as a means of protest and a way of raising money for their campaign.¹¹⁵

Groups searching for disappeared people, so-called *colectivos de búsqueda*, are composed predominantly of mothers searching for their missing children. They rely on methods similar to those of victims’ groups. Thanks to legal know-how gathered and

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, Guerrero, June 2019.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, May 2018. On the historical continuity of corruption and collusion in Mexico’s armed forces, see Astorga, *Seguridad, traficantes y militares*, op. cit. Allegations of military complicity in organised crime are common, though high-level representatives of previous administrations have repeatedly dismissed them. In January 2020, López Obrador spoke of Mexico’s army as one the country’s “institutions least penetrated by corruption”, saying it would be gradually cleansed, without specifying how. See “Sedena, entre las menos penetradas por la corrupción: AMLO”, *La Razón*, 10 January 2020.

¹¹⁴ The victims wished to see the SEGOB sub-secretary for human rights, Alejandro Encinas, fulfil a promise to deploy federal forces to prevent FUPCEG from taking over Chichihualco, where the majority of the displaced remain. Encinas had signed this promise following a 39-day protest camped in front of the Presidential Palace in Mexico City. FUPCEG has threatened to seize Chichihualco unless Guerrero’s state government arrests the South Cartel leader. “Civiles anuncian incursión armada en Chichihualco, contra el Cartel del Sur”, *El Sol de Chilpancingo*, 12 October 2019. The area where federal forces were to be deployed has seen recurrent clashes between the groups, as well as further displacement. “Al menos 800 nuevos desplazados en El Naranjo, Guerrero, por choque de grupos armados”, *Proceso*, 1 July 2019; “Una balacera de 8 horas, quema de automóviles y corte de energía eléctrica: el violento ataque desatado en la Sierra de Guerrero”, *Infobae*, 29 December 2019.

¹¹⁵ The temporary takeover of toll stations is common practice among Mexican social organisations. In the first half of 2019, 161 such cases were registered at a toll station situated on a road leaving Mexico City for Cuernavaca (Morelos) and Chilpancingo.

pressure applied by the *colectivo* in the case of the missing woman described above, the federal government assumed jurisdiction in the probe, prompting hopes for a proper investigation. Nevertheless, the family said, no progress has been made: neither the criminal leader nor the police allegedly involved has been questioned or impounded in any way to date.¹¹⁶ In 2019, according to the federal state attorney's data, only 0.29 per cent of enforced disappearance cases (four of 1,363) have been passed on to judges.¹¹⁷ A federal field agent working on disappearances in Guerrero said "nothing has changed in [his] work" under the López Obrador administration so far.¹¹⁸

Impunity persists largely because the victims' campaigns, however vocal or tactically creative, pale in comparison to the financial and coercive power that organised crime can deploy. Criminal groups are perfectly willing to lash out at state officials who are trying to enforce the law and at anyone resisting their dominion. They intimidate both campaigners against injustice and anyone threatening to reveal criminal wrongdoing or instances of state-criminal complicity. Criminal organisations killed five human rights and environmental activists in 2019 alone.¹¹⁹ Journalists are also targets: since 2000, 24 have been killed in Guerrero, the fifth highest number nationwide.¹²⁰ The latest victim was Victor Fernando Álvarez, a journalist from Acapulco who was decapitated in April 2020 after receiving threats from a local crime group.¹²¹

E. *New Ways of Cowing the State*

Escalating violence has become the means whereby Guerrero's criminal groups cow the state when bribery is insufficient. Threats of attacks have become part of negotiations with the state, while corrupt relationships have become more volatile, losing much of their power to temper criminal behaviour. In the past, one relatively cohesive state apparatus struck lasting deals with a few criminal groups; today, Guerrero and other states in Mexico are home to multiple competing state-crime linkages.¹²² The roots of this transformation lie in the fragmentation of organised crime, alongside a parallel phenomenon in the state, whereby partisan competition and alternation in government hinders stability in state-crime ties.

The difficulties in securing stable pacts between criminals and politicians can generate sudden surges in violence. One FUPCEG leader, for instance, stated that he contributed a large amount of money to a top Guerrero state official's campaign but

¹¹⁶ Mexican law distinguishes between local and federal jurisdictions, the latter of which deals with state and organised crime. In spite of low federal clearance rates for disappearances, the *colectivo* in question here said being stuck in state-level judicial systems meant "no progress at all guaranteed". Crisis Group interview, Guerrero, June 2019.

¹¹⁷ "FGR esclarece menos del 1% de casos desapariciones forzadas, tortura y delitos contra migrantes", *Animal Político*, 28 January 2020.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Guerrero, June 2019.

¹¹⁹ "México: Más de 30 defensores de Derechos Humanos y activistas asesinados en 2019", *Avispa Midia*, 8 January 2020.

¹²⁰ Data from Mexico's National Human Rights Commission. "Casi 150 periodistas asesinados en 19 años en México, 13 en gobierno de AMLO, impunidad total ante los crímenes", *Plumas Libres*, 4 January 2020.

¹²¹ "Hallan la cabeza de un periodista mexicano asesinado en Acapulco", *El Mundo*, 12 April 2020.

¹²² Ríos, "Why Did Mexico Become So Violent?", *op. cit.*

soon learned that the official had asked other heavyweights in the state for similar sums.¹²³ As a result, the self-defence leader encountered resistance when calling in favours, including when he asked the state official in question to withdraw police from Xaltianguis, the locality just outside Acapulco for which FUPCEG competes. “I called the dude and told him: ‘*Ábrete!* (open up!)’”, he recalled.¹²⁴ He said the official first refused and that, as a consequence, “I put him [sic] four car bombs there and we let one explode”.¹²⁵ While the explosion damaged only property, injuring no one, it sufficed, according to the leader, to achieve his goal: the state police withdrew from the town.¹²⁶ Matters are complicated even further in Guerrero by local arrangements between illegal armed groups and security forces. In a number of cases, politicians such as mayors, who among other things command the municipal police, have direct kinship ties to local criminal groups.¹²⁷

As multiple armed groups jostle for the favours of rival political forces and candidates, elections are fertile ground for collusion and the cause of violence. The run-up to the 2018 federal elections set a record for murders of state officials or candidates.¹²⁸ A total of 32 political murders took place in Guerrero – the most of any state in Mexico.¹²⁹ Family members, spouses or other people close to criminal leaders are meanwhile installed in office.¹³⁰ Territorial control by illegal armed groups also translates into control of blocks of votes, with local voters frequently forced to make the “right” choice. Those seeking office thus have an incentive to make some kind of arrangement with criminal leaders.¹³¹

¹²³ The absence of judicial proof prohibits publication of the official’s name. But a number of other local informants, including from criminal groups competing with the FUPCEG, echoed the accusations. Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May, June and September 2019.

¹²⁴ “*Ábrete*” literally translates as “open yourself up”. Carrying an implication of sexual dominance, it is one of the most offensive phrases in Mexican Spanish.

¹²⁵ As noted above, the media widely covered the car bombing by FUSDEG in April 2019. See “La explosión del ...”, op. cit.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Filo de Caballos, May 2019. The fighting over Xaltianguis, between FUSDEG and UPOEG, is ongoing. “Los Dumbos cazan a familiares de los autodefensas del UPOEG en Xaltianguis”, *Proceso*, 9 May 2019.

¹²⁷ Examples include the Iguala municipality at the time of the Ayotzinapa atrocity (“Los Pineda Villa, el clan fundador de la mafia guerrerense”, *Proceso*, 18 October 2014); the Montaña region, where brothers of one family head the criminal group Los Ardillos, allegedly behind the killing of ten indigenous musicians, while another sibling is a former municipal president as well as a leading state legislator (“Quiénes diablos son Los Ardillos”, *El Universal*, 16 November 2015); and the Tlacotepec municipality, home of both Cartel de la Sierra and FUPCEG, where the municipal president is criminal leader Onésimo Marquina Chapa’s brother-in-law (“Ejecución de militares confronta a líderes de grupos delictivos en Guerrero”, *Proceso*, 15 October 2019). Additional examples abound.

¹²⁸ “Séptimo informe de violencia política en México 2018”, Etellekt, 9 July 2018.

¹²⁹ “Mexico Peace Index 2019”, Institute for Economics and Peace, April 2019, p. 22.

¹³⁰ See the family ties mentioned above, as well as “El crimen organizado condiciona la elección de muchos cargos locales en México”, *The New York Times*, 1 July 2018.

¹³¹ Following the Ayotzinapa incident, the PRD, then in power at the municipal and state levels, admitted to such ties in a report produced at the party’s behest. “Informe del PRD sobre el caso Abarca”, Centre for Political and National Security Studies, 6 May 2015. See also Brian Faughnan et al., “Subnational Electoral Contexts and Corruption in Mexico”, *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2014).

A political operator, who said he has been brokering such arrangements since the 1970s, added that this practice continues in Guerrero as the 2021 state elections approach: “It’s pretty much business as usual, also now with MORENA [President López Obrador’s party]. This is about power, about winning, and the way you do that is by reaching some deal with who can give you the vote. The only thing that’s changed is that back in the old days, you would sit down in some normal place and have your Nescafé and now you meet at Starbucks”. Given how much territory they now control, he added, self-defence umbrella organisations have become central to these arrangements.¹³²

The self-defence forces’ territorial expansion enhances their political leverage and electoral power. *Autodefensas* have sought to mould obedient community police forces, which, according to local informants with access to territory held by FUPCEG as well as to members of the group, serve as their backbone. These forces combine with smaller, but better trained and equipped enforcers – the *sicarios*, or gunmen, who spearheaded the Filo de Caballos invasion.¹³³

The same pattern is followed in the co-option of political structures, notably the *asambleas comunitarias*, or “community assemblies”, which act as semi-autonomous government bodies headed by elected commissaries.¹³⁴ Control over local political structures by illegal armed groups is by no means a new phenomenon in Guerrero, or in Mexico in general.¹³⁵ What is striking now is the veneer of legality given to the process. A local informant who was once part of a community assembly in the Leonardo Bravo municipality said: “They stick to formal procedures [in that] agreements are signed ... but there really is no choice involved in it”.¹³⁶

¹³² Crisis Group interview, Chilpancingo, June 2019.

¹³³ Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May, June and September 2019. See also “Desplazados: vivir en vilo”, *Amapola*, 19 August 2019. A FUPCEG leader stated in an interview with Crisis Group that those who had left the community had done so under pressure from his group. He has repeatedly said the displaced were involved in illegal activities for the South Cartel. “Se cumple un año de la ocupación del corredor Xochipala-Filo de Caballos”, *Diario21*, 11 November 2019.

¹³⁴ For an overview of local government structures, see René David Benítez Rivera, “La Policía Comunitaria: Experiencia de organización y lucha en la Montaña de Guerrero”, *Política y Cultura*, no. 44 (2015).

¹³⁵ Organised crime is well known for seeking control over municipal state structures as part of its quest for turf. Guillermo Trejo, “Municipios y crimen organizado en México”, *El País*, 20 February 2015.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Mexico City, April 2019.

V. The López Obrador Government's Responses

The evolution of violence in Guerrero underlines the scale of the challenges facing President López Obrador. It is by far “the most complex” of Mexico’s local conflicts, according to one security expert.¹³⁷ No swift solution to its perpetual crisis is conceivable. But progress toward mitigating the violence would provide valuable lessons for other troubled areas across the country.

Crucial to any progress will be reduction of impunity and improved protection of citizens, which in turn requires curbing corruption and collusion between organised crime and the state, most importantly through mechanisms that create transparency and accountability in the public sector and security forces. Organised crime’s power to bend public officials to its will is grounded in the porous boundaries between the state and illegal outfits across Mexico.¹³⁸

So far, the president’s professed approach to security has rested on three pillars: ending the previous two administrations’ reliance on force to fight crime, eliminating corruption and addressing the economic drivers of crime. Less than a year into his term, López Obrador declared “the war” and official corruption over.¹³⁹ He rolled out ambitious social and economic programs to combat the root causes of crime, and also announced during his election campaign transitional justice measures to “pacify” the country, including amnesties. Grave doubts persist, however, as to whether the government has followed through with the aforementioned policies and whether in any event they will work.

A. Security Forces

During his campaign, López Obrador presented himself as a staunch opponent of militarised security policy, blaming it for Mexico’s rising levels of violence and promising to get the armed forces “off the streets” under his watch.¹⁴⁰ Yet, as of late 2019, 62,954 army soldiers were deployed throughout Mexico, up from 54,980 during the last year of his predecessor’s term.¹⁴¹ Moreover, shortly after his victory at the ballot box, López Obrador announced that he would create a National Guard equipped with military resources and manned predominantly by soldiers. He deemed this step necessary due to police corruption and ineffectiveness.¹⁴² At the National Guard’s official inauguration on 1 July 2019, López Obrador called it central to the “fourth

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Raúl Benítez Manaut, Mexico City, 20 February 2020.

¹³⁸ A high-level example is Genaro García Luna, security secretary and architect of the drug war under the former president, Calderón. García Luna was arrested in late 2019 in the U.S., where he is being tried on corruption and organised crime charges. He allegedly accepted millions of dollars in bribes from the Sinaloa Cartel. He has pleaded not guilty. “Architect of Mexico’s war on cartels is accused of taking bribes from one”, *The New York Times*, 10 January 2020.

¹³⁹ “Ya se acabó la corrupción y el ‘bandidaje oficial’: AMLO”, *Milenio*, 18 November 2019. On 30 January 2019, less than two months into his term, he said: “Officially, there is no more war. We want peace”.

¹⁴⁰ “El Sabueso: ¿Promover reformas constitucionales? ¿Sacar al Ejército de las calles? AMLO se contradice”, *Animal Político*, 21 November 2018.

¹⁴¹ “Alcanzan militares despliegue histórico”, *Reforma*, 9 December 2019.

¹⁴² “‘Rebelión de policías federales demostró que no estaban a la altura’, dice AMLO”, *Animal Político*, 8 July 2019.

transformation”, his “historic” project of reforming Mexico.¹⁴³ Within Mexico’s federal security secretariat, the perception is that “in terms of public security, all that seems to matter to [the president] is his project of the National Guard”.¹⁴⁴

According to the Mexican government, the National Guard will serve as the “prime instrument ... for crime prevention, conservation of public security [and the] reestablishment of peace ... in the entire country”.¹⁴⁵ During its first year of operations, the National Guard failed to recruit the intended 92,000 officers originally intended, enlisting only 76,000.¹⁴⁶ It has deployed to 150 of the 260 regions where it will eventually go, with all 69 of its bases situated in Jalisco, Michoacán, and Guanajuato, according to López Obrador.¹⁴⁷ So far, these deployments have failed to curb violence in these areas.¹⁴⁸ Under U.S. pressure to stop Central Americans from passing through on their way north, Mexico has channelled a significant portion of the National Guard’s resources to migration control.¹⁴⁹

Civil society critics insist that the Guard is deepening militarisation of public security even though it falls under the command of the Secretariat of Security and Citizen Protection, a civilian authority.¹⁵⁰ The government itself defines it as similar to “an armed institution of a military nature” whose internal structure is that “of the armed forces’ discipline [and] hierarchy”.¹⁵¹ Even so, López Obrador has repeatedly promised that he will “never use the armed forces for repression of the people”, adding that “human rights will be respected and ... the National Guard will be like the peace army [sic] of the UN”.¹⁵²

¹⁴³ López Obrador has equated his presidency to a “fourth transformation” of Mexico, the first three being, in his reading, independence from Spain in 1821, the liberal state reforms of 1861 (“La Reforma”) and the 1910-1920 revolution. “Versión estenográfica: Diálogo con pueblos indígenas, en Coatetelco, Morelos”, AMLO, 22 November 2019.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Mexico City, 2019.

¹⁴⁵ “Peace and Security Plan 2018-2024”, Mexican Federal Government, 2019.

¹⁴⁶ Only one in ten candidates passed the exams establishing lack of criminal ties and physical fitness. With a stated goal of 50,000 new recruits in 2020, the force is to grow, eventually, to 170,000. “Guardia Nacional se queda corta: no llegó a la cifra de elementos que tenía previstos para terminar 2019”, *Animal Político*, 7 February 2020; “Guardia Nacional, año uno con pocos resultados”, *Reporte Índigo*, 20 February 2020.

¹⁴⁷ As it stands, the National Guard is staffed by 36,000 new recruits, with the rest transferred from the army, navy and federal police. “Avanza fortalecimiento de la Guardia Nacional; concluye construcción de 69 instalaciones en tres estados para despliegue de elementos”, AMLO, 14 February 2020.

¹⁴⁸ According to data from the Mexican federal government’s Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System, homicide rates in each of these states were up from 2018.

¹⁴⁹ A reported 25,000 officers have been assigned to border control. “México: débil despliegue de la Guardia Nacional”, *Deutsche Welle*, 21 December 2019.

¹⁵⁰ “México necesita una Guardia Nacional realmente civil”, *The New York Times*, 8 August 2019.

¹⁵¹ “Peace and Security Plan 2018-2024”, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

¹⁵² “Nunca daré una orden al Ejército para reprimir al pueblo: AMLO”, *Forbes*, 2 October 2018. “La Guardia Nacional sería como los cascos azules de la ONU: AMLO”, *La Jornada*, 21 February 2019. In April 2019, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights signed an agreement with Mexico’s government stipulating that the National Guard receive human rights training and open itself to UN scrutiny in human rights matters. “ONU capacitará a Guardia Nacional; Bachelet señala pendientes en seguridad”, *Forbes*, 9 April 2019. No concrete measures to this effect have yet been made public, and local UN staff say “there has been no activity of this sort” since the agreement was signed. Crisis Group interview, Mexico City, 18 January 2020.

The lack of transparency about the military's involvement in public security extends to the National Guard's operational model. According to one military and security expert, "what exactly the National Guard is doing remains an enigma".¹⁵³ In particular, it is unclear what the Guard's strategy is for lowering violence. Following the botched detention of a criminal leader in Sinaloa in October 2019, which saw the Sinaloa Cartel lay siege to the city of Culiacán, the government reversed its decisions not to pursue kingpins and not to deploy the navy to this end.¹⁵⁴ In the same vein, and in response to criminals' attacks on the armed forces, López Obrador has said they were authorised to react with measured force, albeit never "to kill injured people, to massacre ... like before".¹⁵⁵

A total of 2,500 National Guard officers were deployed to Guerrero by mid-2019, with state governor Héctor Astudillo highlighting the armed forces' role in a 28 per cent drop in homicides in 2019 from 2018.¹⁵⁶ But neither Mexico's security institutions nor Guerrero's state government has pointed to novel approaches or operations to account for the decline. Criminal figures in the Guerrero-Michoacán border area said the "presence [of the National Guard] has not made any difference" in curbing their clashes.¹⁵⁷ Civilians in the Leonardo Bravo municipality, where the confrontation between the South Cartel and FUPCEG displaced hundreds, told of sporadic patrols but little action "against the armed [groups] that continue on our lands".¹⁵⁸ Leaders of armed groups as well as local observers suggested that the creation of new alliances explains the reduction in violence, which could be short-lived.¹⁵⁹

By law, Mexico's armed forces, including soldiers currently embedded in the National Guard, must withdraw from the streets by mid-2024.¹⁶⁰ But to meet this goal, the government will have to strengthen civilian policing at the state and municipal levels, since the National Guard, even if it reaches its personnel targets, cannot keep the country safe by itself. One high-level security official said police reform "is not the president's priority" but something that came to be "tolerated by him" after bureaucrats exerted pressure.¹⁶¹ A police reform framework now exists, the National Police and Civic Justice Model, but many doubt it will succeed where other past initiatives have failed, above all as regards the essential goals of strengthening external civilian oversight for police forces, reinforcing disciplinary measures for officers who

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Raúl Benítez Manaut, Mexico City, 20 February 2020.

¹⁵⁴ Previous administrations following the "kingpin strategy" used the navy a great deal in capture-or-kill operations. "Mexico, under U.S. pressure, adds muscle to fight against drug cartels", *Wall Street Journal*, 7 February 2020. As of 21 February, 30 criminal suspects had already been extradited to the U.S. in 2020, suggesting revamped bilateral collaboration under the "kingpin strategy". "Suspected Mexican cartel figure handed over to U.S. amid surge of extraditions", *Washington Post*, 21 February 2020.

¹⁵⁵ "Responderán militares a agresiones, sin abuso de fuerza: AMLO", *La Jornada*, 11 September 2019.

¹⁵⁶ "Despliega gobierno 56 mil 191 elementos en apoyo a la Guardia Nacional", *El Universal*, 13 August 2019. "Reconoce Astudillo labor del ejército en Guerrero", *Eje Central*, 19 February 2020.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group text message exchanges, November 2019 and February 2020.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group text message exchange, February 2020.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May, June and September 2019.

¹⁶⁰ The Law of the National Guard, passed on 27 May 2019, permits the armed forces to remain active in public safety tasks for five additional years.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Mexico City, January 2019.

break the law, investing in the training of officers able to implement the Model's prescriptions, and resolving coordination problems between police and prosecutors.¹⁶²

B. *Anti-corruption and Economic Programs*

Fighting corruption and creating jobs for young people lie at the heart of López Obrador's long-term plan for reducing the incentives to engage in criminal activity. As regards the first, the president asserts that his personal example and high ethical standards will trickle down through the state apparatus to bring about the desired effect. "If the president is not corrupt", he says, "no officials will be corrupt".¹⁶³ López Obrador appears intent on producing swift results in the anti-corruption fight by concentrating discretionary powers in his own hands. His goal, according to one legal scholar, is not to establish an autonomous system to combat graft, but to "limit the worst abuses at the top level in order to be able to redistribute revenue and support his social programs".¹⁶⁴ López Obrador himself has asserted that fighting corruption means "cleaning from the top down, like stairs".¹⁶⁵

The president wants to pursue the top-down approach instead of promoting reforms essential for creating the strong, autonomous institutions that previous presidents have failed to build.¹⁶⁶ For instance, the National Anti-Corruption System (Sistema Nacional de Anticorrupción), created under former president Enrique Peña Nieto but never fully established, does not seem to be a priority for López Obrador.¹⁶⁷ The Financial Intelligence Unit (Unidad de Inteligencia Financiera, UIF), in charge of fighting money laundering and recovering criminal assets, has certainly stepped up its activities.¹⁶⁸ But the criteria by which the UIF sets its priorities are unclear, and it has been accused of carrying out politicised investigations.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶² Crisis Group interview, Juan Salgado, Mexico City, 25 February 2020. For more on the issue of police reform, see Crisis Group Report, *Building Peace in Mexico*, op. cit.; Sabet, *Police Reform in Mexico*, op. cit.; "Mexico's Police: Many Reforms, Little Progress", op. cit.; "El incierto destino del Modelo Nacional de Policía", México Evalúa, 18 July 2019.

¹⁶³ "Minuto a minuto: Primer debate presidencial", Debate, 22 April 2018.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Jacobo Dayan, Mexico City, 13 February 2020.

¹⁶⁵ "Combatiremos la corrupción como se barren las escaleras: AMLO", Televisa, 15 December 2017.

¹⁶⁶ Under Peña Nieto (2012-2018), Mexico dropped 32 places in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index to rank 130th among 180 nations, or fourth lowest in Latin America. According to Mexico's Federal Superior Auditor, at least 51 billion Mexican pesos (\$2.7 billion) of public resources have not been accounted for. "Saqueo sin límites: documentaron despilfarro de Peña Nieto por más de 51,000 millones de pesos", Infobae, 21 February 2020.

¹⁶⁷ Gina Hinojosa and Maureen Meyer, "El futuro del Sistema Nacional de México: La lucha anticorrupción bajo el mandato del Presidente López Obrador", Washington Office on Latin America, August 2019.

¹⁶⁸ The UIF targeted 1,371 suspects and embargoed 12,074 accounts worth 5 billion pesos in 2019. "Comunicado UIF No. 011 UIF presenta informe anual", Mexican Federal Government, 27 December 2019; "Hacienda investigó a 124 mil personas por presunto lavado de dinero; solo bloqueó cuentas de 14", *Animal Político*, 13 December 2019.

¹⁶⁹ Critics say the UIF unduly pressured Eduardo Medina Mora, a Supreme Court judge, to resign by freezing accounts under allegations of money laundering, only to free them up after the resignation. The UIF has rejected these accusations. "Cuentas de Medina Mora se congelaron tras renuncia, no fue presión: UIF", *Expansión*, 10 October 2019.

Critics from civil society, academia and the media have also rounded on López Obrador's alleged lack of support for the National Electoral Institute (Instituto Electoral Nacional, or INE), the body in charge of guaranteeing free and fair elections, and the National Human Rights Commission, which reports on transgressions by state officials.¹⁷⁰ The INE said an 8.5 per cent cut to the 2020 budget it had requested meant "putting at risk the 2021 elections", in which Mexicans are to choose fifteen state governors, including Guerrero's, and other officials.¹⁷¹ According to the 2020 spending bill passed in late 2019 by the ruling-party majority, the budget the National Human Rights Commission had asked for was trimmed by 1.9 per cent.¹⁷² The same bill also slashes the budget the federal state attorney's office had asked for by about 9 per cent, with spending on forensics and organised crime investigations reduced in particular.¹⁷³ These budget allocations, which could be shaved further as the COVID-19 pandemic hits the Mexican economy, point to the López Obrador administration's lack of commitment to the strong, autonomous institutions needed to tackle state collusion with organised crime and overall impunity in Guerrero in the near term.

Meanwhile, the state is building an apparatus intended to channel resources to deprived areas in order to diminish crime's allure. This new bureaucracy is intended to stretch from the president down to low-level officials in every region and to reverse the decline in state power that followed the country's neoliberal turn in the 1980s.¹⁷⁴ In each state or federated entity, so-called super-delegates command regional delegates, who in turn coordinate "servants of the nation" (*servidores de la nación*). The latter are the foot soldiers of the "fourth transformation": they go door to door trying to forge links between citizens and the state. While admitting to a bumpy start, insofar as "it has not been easy to find qualified people [to fill local posts]", a mid-level staffer in this new structure said the new officials are to "replace all other [social and

¹⁷⁰ López Obrador has said the INE serves as an "adornment" only, and members of its governing body have accused him of wanting to impose commissioners, which he has denied. See "AMLO califica al INE de 'florero'", MVS Noticias, 20 August 2019. In 2019, a self-described López Obrador loyalist was appointed as head of the National Human Rights Commission and has since been criticised for speaking out in favour of state officials accused of failing to tackle human rights abuses, including against journalists, migrants and women. "¿Han asesinado periodistas?, la frase de Rosario Piedra que indignó al gremio", *Expansión*, 13 November 2019; "Mujeres que piden respeto a sus derechos no deben portarse como criminales: Rosario Piedra", *Animal Político*, 27 November 2019; "Recriminan a presidenta de CNDH por no manifestarse por situación de migrantes", *Milenio*, 22 January 2020.

¹⁷¹ "Tras el recorte presupuestal, el INE se alista para operar 'en el límite'", *Expansión*, 25 November 2019.

¹⁷² "Presupuesto para CNDH, con baja del 2% para 2020", *La Silla Rota*, 21 November 2019.

¹⁷³ "FGR en 2020: menos dinero para investigación y servicios forenses; más para Fiscalía Anticorrupción", *Animal Político*, 6 January 2020.

¹⁷⁴ López Obrador has labelled "neoliberalism" the root of most of Mexico's problems, including insecurity and shaky morality, and pledged that the state will lead large-scale infrastructure projects such as building a new Mexico City airport, a refinery and a tourist train. Christopher Wilson, "Mexico's Economic Competitiveness Strategy at a Geopolitical Inflection Point", Brookings Institution, May 2019. On the Mexican state's retreat from rural spaces and its effects on security, see Peter Watt and Roberto Zepeda, *Drug War: Mexico, Neoliberalism and Violence in the New Narcoeconomy* (London, 2012).

political] leaderships at the local level”.¹⁷⁵ This plan puts flesh on the otherwise abstract vow by López Obrador to “rescue rural spaces”. It would amount to an overhaul of Mexican state operations.¹⁷⁶

The president is investing significant funds and political capital in these efforts. The 2020 budget allocates a total of 181.5 billion pesos, or about \$7.5 billion, to programs such as *Sembrando Vidas* (Planting Lives) and *Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro* (Youngsters Building Future), aimed at reactivating rural economies and providing young people with opportunities so that the state can outperform criminal groups in gaining their trust.¹⁷⁷ As López Obrador said, directing his words to organised crime: “We will win the youth from you”.¹⁷⁸

Evidence suggests that inequality and absolute poverty contribute to criminality and organised crime recruitment.¹⁷⁹ Sceptics nevertheless wonder whether these programs will have the expected impact. Officials in charge of the *Jóvenes Constuyendo el Futuro* program in one crime-ridden locality said that in exchange for receiving stipends of 3,748 pesos (\$155), local youths are expected to pick up trash, attend pizza baking workshops or participate in other such activities.¹⁸⁰ Relatives of the participants said they remained members of armed groups despite taking part in these schemes, and questioned whether the government’s programs could succeed in keeping youngsters from taking up or sticking with their roles in criminal organisations.¹⁸¹

Formulated as stand-alone policies, López Obrador’s flagship economic initiatives are not part of a wider strategic framework for conflict mitigation. It is unclear how the programs will support existing law enforcement and crime prevention efforts.¹⁸² According to the above-mentioned official, there are still no guidelines for coordinating responsibilities between the security forces and the bureaucratic structures running the programs.¹⁸³ Furthermore, the programs have thus far proceeded without clear oversight, though early signs suggest that they are susceptible to fraud.¹⁸⁴ Local informants, for instance, said they know of businesses enlisting young apprentices without expecting them to show up for work, for which they charge them one third

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Mexico, 2019.

¹⁷⁶ “Rescate del campo”, AMLO, 10 April 2018; “Se impulsará el campo con apoyo a ‘los de abajo’: AMLO”, MVS Noticias, 11 July 2019.

¹⁷⁷ “El presupuesto de 2020 y las prioridades de AMLO”, *El Universal*, 18 November 2019.

¹⁷⁸ “Les vamos a ganar a los jóvenes; AMLO a delincuencia organizada”, *Tiempo*, 31 January 2020.

¹⁷⁹ “Citizen Security with a Human Face: Evidence and Proposals for Latin America”, UN Development Programme, November 2013. Bandy X. Lee, “Economic Correlates of Violent Death Rates in Forty Countries, 1962-2008: A Cross-Typological Analysis”, *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, vol. 19, no. 6 (November 2014).

¹⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Mexico, July 2019. Details of the *Jóvenes Constuyendo el Futuro* program are available on its website.

¹⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, Mexico, October 2019. Alán López, “Jóvenes perdiendo su futuro”, *Nexos*, 17 February 2020.

¹⁸² Crisis Group telephone interview, David Ramírez, México Evalúa, 16 April 2020.

¹⁸³ Crisis Group interview, Mexico, 2019. The official said it was as yet unclear how he was to coordinate with municipal police.

¹⁸⁴ In 2019, contrary to legal stipulations, the programs had no “operational rules”, which are to guarantee oversight and accountability in public spending. The government has introduced such rules for 2020. “Presupuesto 2020 le pone reglas de operación a 13 programas ‘estrella’ de AMLO”, *El Financiero*, 25 November 2019.

of their stipends.¹⁸⁵ By late January 2020, 102 complaints had been filed before the Secretary of the Public Function, in charge of monitoring federal spending, against super-delegates for corruption and nepotism, among other charges.¹⁸⁶

In their current shape, the economic initiatives appear incapable of loosening organised crime's grip in Guerrero. It is questionable, moreover, whether these efforts are at present suited to absorb the shocks associated with COVID-19, which is expected to hit the poorest Mexicans the hardest, potentially playing into the hands of organised crime. López Obrador has doubled down on the programs, allocating them additional funds as his principal response to the country's brewing economic crisis.¹⁸⁷

C. Recommendations

López Obrador is a still popular president with more than four years left in his term. Even if his priority now is tackling the health and economic effects of the pandemic, he could still make great strides toward reversing the extremes of lethal violence in Guerrero and elsewhere in Mexico.¹⁸⁸ An essential requirement, however, is for his government to recognise that national strategies – whether his predecessors' failed institutional reforms, or López Obrador's own personalistic and centralist approach – ought to adapt to the particularities of regional conflicts.

Addressing conflict-affected settings such as Guerrero requires tailored plans concentrating resources in Mexico's most violent places. Short-term interventions should be guided by the imperative of saving lives and alleviating humanitarian crises. In troubled places such as Leonardo Bravo, a limited, even purely defensive deployment of the National Guard could curb further displacement. Preventing human rights violations during such possible operations is critical, requiring independent oversight and the sort of support for the Guard envisaged in the abovementioned agreement signed between the Mexican government and the UN, which has yet to be translated into action. At the same time, local victims' organisations, including those looking for disappeared people, should receive greater state recognition, resources and, above all, physical protection. Cooperating with victims would signal the federal government's commitment to their cause, beyond the handful of symbolic cases that make headlines. Victims' collectives have in the past shown great pragmatism in collaborating with state forces to advance their causes.

Over the medium term, the government should focus on creating credible law enforcement bodies that are free of corruption generally and collusion with private interests, particularly illegal armed groups. This task requires external, independent transparency and accountability mechanisms supervising security forces and collaborating closely with other agencies investigating collusion, especially among state officials, politicians and criminal groups in the course of election campaigns. The

¹⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Mexico City, September 2019.

¹⁸⁶ "Suman 102 denuncias contra superdelegados federales: SFP", *El Economista*, 23 January 2020.

¹⁸⁷ "AMLO enfrentará crisis de Covid-19 a través de programas sociales", *Aristegui Noticias*, 5 April 2020.

¹⁸⁸ According to two surveys, his approval rates dropped from nearly 80 per cent (March 2019) to 57 and 59 per cent (February 2020), respectively. "La aprobación de AMLO registra una caída en picada en un año, revelan encuestas", *Expansión*, 5 March 2020.

government's determination to break these links will in large part decide whether it achieves lasting progress. Past reforms failed not least because they aimed at sweeping, system-wide change and got watered down when they met resistance. The immediate priority should be to build enclaves of integrity within the state, such as joint elite task forces of National Guard, police and prosecutorial services operating to support regional intervention plans under conditions of strict external oversight.

Spurring licit economic development to allow small-scale farmers and others to exit employment in illicit business and escape the orbit of criminal groups should be another priority. The pending legalisation of marijuana provides one such opportunity, but only if it is designed to benefit local rural workers instead of large commercial interests.¹⁸⁹ Similarly, major investment in the mining sector, under the auspices of Guerrero state authorities as well as the federal government, could foster economic growth in the region. But the government would need to take care that new or enlarged mines did not continue to provide a source of income for illegal armed groups through protection rackets, as is now the case with existing mining operations, and thus worsen violent conflict. Independent oversight and accountability mechanisms to curb state corruption and collusion as outlined above are paramount in this respect, as are guarantees of protection for mining communities in mining areas through deployments of state forces, again under conditions of strict oversight.¹⁹⁰

Lastly, the government should also aim to foster local processes of mediation between feuding non-state armed actors. While their success is far from certain, mediators, including from the Catholic Church, said they have contributed to lowering violence in certain areas in Guerrero.¹⁹¹ Experiences such as these should be included in a broader discussion about mitigating lethal violence, particularly that driven by personal grudges and not merely economic motives.¹⁹² The same is true of transitional justice and amnesty measures, which the federal government should reconsider supporting as a means of breaking the cycle of conflict.¹⁹³ A clear opportunity for such an approach exists with poppy farmers, who have been hit hard by the downturn in the heroin market and are looking for pathways to legality. The government should seize this rare chance to weaken criminal markets and legislate in favour of small farmers.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁹ A legalisation model designed to benefit rural communities would have to limit production licenses to selected regions, including Guerrero's highlands, so as to prevent a decline in market prices and ensure that potential revenues are high enough to allow locals to exit criminal economies. Legalisation would also have to be part of wider regional intervention plans, so as to inhibit criminal groups from continuing to tax and otherwise harm rural economies. See "Ventajas de la legalización de la marihuana", *Proceso*, 19 October 2019.

¹⁹⁰ "Aumentará 300% derrama de Clúster Minero de Guerrero", *Milenio*, 12 February 2019; "Mexicans are killing each other at record rates. The U.S. provides the guns", *op. cit.*

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, Guerrero, June 2019.

¹⁹² Both FUPCEG and South Cartel leaders signalled willingness to engage in mediation, for instance with a neutral international mediator. Crisis Group interviews, Guerrero, May, June and September 2019.

¹⁹³ López Obrador flirted with such ideas before assuming office. Crisis Group interviews, Daniela Malpica and Jacobo Dayan, legal experts, Mexico City, 6 and 13 February 2020.

¹⁹⁴ Pending marijuana legislation could in principle benefit these farmers. "Ventajas de la legalización de la marihuana", *Proceso*, 19 October 2019; "Los grupos de presión frustran la regulación de la marihuana en México", *El País*, 30 October 2019.

VI. Conclusion

López Obrador is so far falling short on his promises of immediate, sweeping results in stemming Mexico's record levels of violence, while the months ahead could prove exceptionally challenging. His staunch supporters absolve him of blame, pointing to the "wretched inheritance" of his predecessors' failures.¹⁹⁵ They are not wholly mistaken. Mexico's security problems – with their underlying causes of state weakness, corruption and collusion between officials and criminals – are too deeply rooted for a quick fix. Neither are the president's backers wrong in wishing to tackle joblessness and poverty, or in distancing themselves, albeit inconsistently, from the iron fist approach championed by previous governments. But the new approach – criticism of which is rejected as the work of reactionary, right-wing "political enemies" – is simplistic when measured against the complexities of lethal violence in Mexico.¹⁹⁶

Guerrero illustrates that López Obrador's new policies by themselves will not be enough to mitigate violent conflict. As a bellwether of crime trends in the country, the state brings alarming news, above all the continuous multiplication of local conflicts among continuously fragmenting criminal outfits, the rise of self-defence groups, the predatory turn by most criminal organisations and the depth of the authorities' complicity. The social cost, whether measured in unpunished murders, disappearances or internal displacement, could rise, while the coronavirus pandemic could divert public security resources and tempt armed groups to expand further. Hostilities in and around Chichihualco during the pandemic's early stages have led to additional displacement and death, highlighting the importance for the Mexican government of balancing disease control with its existing security tasks.¹⁹⁷

To date, neither Guerrero's state nor the federal government has presented a concrete plan for protecting citizens, curbing state collusion with criminal interests and reducing impunity. Absent such steps, Guerrero will remain the stage for some of the country's worst horrors.

Mexico City/Bogotá/Brussels, 4 May 2020

¹⁹⁵ "La herencia maldita' limita a AMLO para lograr todos sus proyectos: Solalinde", Radio Fórmula, 2 December 2019.

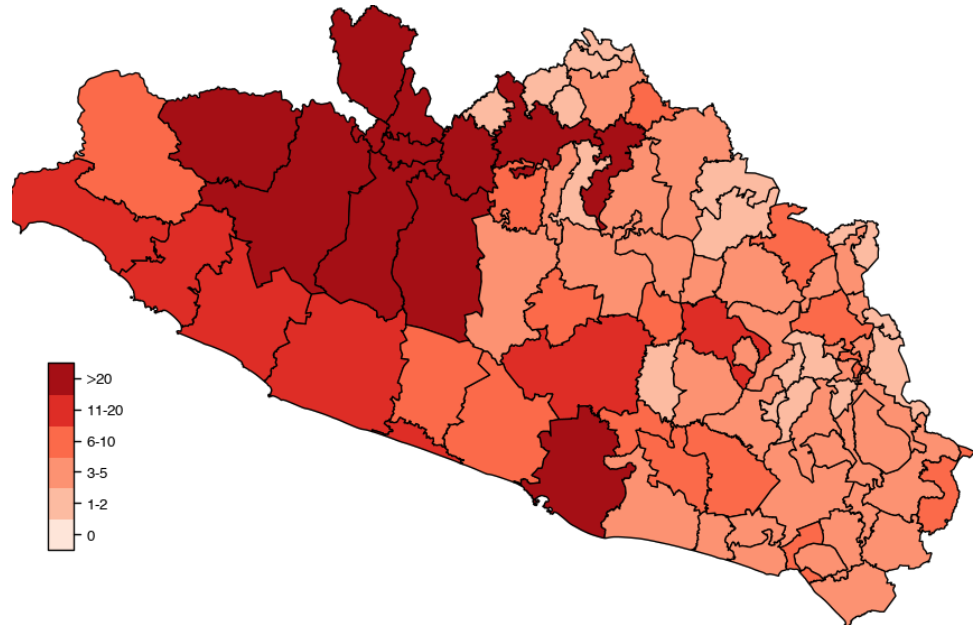
¹⁹⁶ Journalists, victims' organisations, civil society groups, women protesting femicides and organisers of "caravans" of Central American migrants have been explicitly included in this category. "El sesgo discursivo de AMLO hacia la sociedad civil", *Animal Político*, 25 February 2019; "AMLO y la prensa mal portada", *The New York Times*, 7 August 2019; "Acusa AMLO conducción política detrás de caravana migrante", *Razón*, 14 January 2020; "Reitera AMLO mano negra en la protesta", *La Jornada*, 22 February 2020.

¹⁹⁷ "Desplazados en Guerrero: 'Aquí el virus que está matando a la gente es la violencia'", *Proceso*, 25 March 2020.

Appendix A: Map of Mexico



Appendix B: Map of Armed Groups in Guerrero, 2018-2019



Map by Crisis Group, based on data from ElBlogdelNarco.com.

Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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