

BACKGROUND PAPER: IGUALA DISAPPEARANCES AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

(SBU) The Peña Nieto administration faces a political crisis following the disappearance and apparent murder of 43 students in Iguala, Guerrero. Local police in Iguala opened fire September 26 on protesting college students, reportedly on orders from the town's mayor. Police killed six in the shooting and allegedly handed over 43 students to cartel members. Mexican authorities have arrested 79 individuals - including the former mayor and police chief - as they search for the students' remains. The attorney general announced November 8 that cartel members confessed to killing the students and incinerating their bodies. Federal officials drew criticism for joining the state-led investigation only under pressure. After uncovering clandestine graves associated with other violence and contaminating evidence, authorities called on outside experts - including the FBI -- to assist in the forensic investigation.

(SBU) The disappearances, missteps in the investigation and discovery of many unmarked graves, galvanized massive public outrage over indiscriminate violence, cartel influence over public officials, poor state-local-federal cooperation, and weak rule of law. Tens of thousands have taken to the streets across the country to protest the students' and some 26,000 other disappearances at the hands of criminal gangs and security forces (particularly local police). Marchers call for the government to end violence, return the students alive and for Peña Nieto's resignation. A minority set fire to government property, vandalized businesses, and briefly seized airports in Acapulco and Oaxaca. As protests intensified, Peña Nieto's approval rating dropped to its lowest point since taking office.

(SBU) Peña Nieto announced November 27 a 10-point plan to address long-standing problems of violence, impunity, and corruption. His plan emphasizes the problematic municipal level, including a constitutional measure to allow congress to dissolve local institutions infiltrated by criminal groups ordering municipalities to transfer police power to the 31 states, and intensify training of state police forces. Other measures include accelerating judicial reforms and the immediate deployment of federal forces into areas of organized crime in Guerrero and Michoacan states. To succeed in cutting the violence and rebuilding public trust, the plan will need support from the main political parties and a stronger focus on strengthening the rule of law than the administration has yet shown.

Background - Iguala.doc

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