



TEUCHITLÁN, JALISCO: BETWEEN SHOES AND QUESTIONS

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On March 5, the collective Guerreros Buscadores de Jalisco discovered a property in Teuchitlán that appears to have been an operation center for organized crime. Photographs of 400 pairs of shoes suggest that a large number of people was gathered there, and their whereabouts remain unknown. This discovery highlights how disappearances linked to criminal activity have become a serious issue that must be addressed. But how can it be countered?

For years, Jalisco has been the state with the highest number of reported disappearances, totaling 15,426 to date. Moreover, it serves as the base of operations for one of the world's most powerful criminal organizations: the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG). These two realities, evident to some, outline a scenario that could explain the existence of a facility where recruitment, training, and execution of individuals likely took place.

Forced disappearances are a critical issue in Jalisco. Acknowledging this problem, one of Governor Pablo Lemus's first actions was to meet with the collective Madres Buscadoras (Searching Mothers), to establish working groups, and moreover, accept their recommendations for key government positions, and create a Secretariat of Intelligence and Search for Missing Persons. This initiative aims to strengthen the work previously carried out by the Special Prosecutor's Office for Missing Persons, the Search Commission for Missing Persons, the Human Identification Center, and the Institute of Forensic Sciences.

However, despite the efforts of the local government, disappearances continue. The exact reasons why these 15,426 individuals—13,656 of whom are men—remain missing are unknown. One of the most concerning hypotheses, reinforced by the discovery in Teuchitlán, is that a significant portion of them were recruited, voluntarily or forcibly, by organized crime. Many of them may have been absorbed into the CJNG or fallen victim to it.

Tracking their whereabouts is challenging, partly because authorities at all three levels of government are reactive: they act only after a crime has occurred. Their work focuses on the most visible aspects of criminal activity, which is reflected in case files based on citizen complaints and legally classified crimes.



However, organized crime is far more complex than the criminal incidence statistics reported each month. Its invisible dimension—unaccounted in official data—poses the greatest challenges. This hidden aspect includes recruitment, training, fraud, and extortion, all of which may be directly linked to the horrifying discovery in Teuchitlán. Authorities seem reluctant to acknowledge this reality, as addressing it would require an extraordinary intelligence and operational effort, something they currently struggle to achieve.

Municipal authorities lack the resources and capabilities to confront a transnational criminal organization like the CJNG. While the state government is better equipped, it does not have the means to guarantee the safety of officials working in security and justice institutions following an intervention. In this context, neither municipalities nor state governments have the conditions or incentives to intervene in criminal scenarios like the one in Teuchitlán.

At the federal level, the situation is no different. While the Armed Forces and the National Guard have significant operational capabilities, other institutions—such as the Secretariat of Security and Citizen Protection, the National Intelligence Center, and the Attorney General's Office—face resource constraints and rely on state governments. Their human, financial, and operational capacities are further limited by centralized practices and austerity policies, preventing them from effectively responding to organized crime scenarios.

Outside of Mexico City, the federal government's investigative capacity is minimal, leaving state and municipal authorities to shoulder the burden. However, local authorities barely manage to respond to common crimes. The dismantling of federal delegations—now mere representations with reduced personnel and resources—has further weakened the federal government's ability to act. This has allowed criminal groups to operate and expand, as none of the three levels of government have the local capacities to confront them.

Strategic recommendation

The federal government must design a comprehensive policy to contain, investigate, and locate victims of forced disappearance. To achieve this, it is essential to strengthen federal delegations or representations in an unprecedented manner. This would allow the development of nationwide institutional capacities with security, mobility, and incentives comparable to those of the Armed Forces, equipping them with the necessary resources to conduct investigations, generate intelligence, and operate in Mexico's complex criminal landscapes.



The case of Teuchitlán is a stark example of the extent to which criminal organizations can develop even in a state like Jalisco, which has relatively strong institutions, financial resources, and nationally and internationally relevant actors. The most concerning aspect is not just that such a site existed in Jalisco, but the likelihood that dozens, if not hundreds, of similar locations exist across the country. These places facilitate criminal activities that go unnoticed by authorities in resource-limited states and, therefore, will remain unresolved.

Teuchitlán will fade into the past, just like other instances of brutality throughout the country. The image of the shoes will remain in the public memory for a few months, but soon, another criminal atrocity will capture our attention. Meanwhile, the Madres Buscadoras and other search collectives will continue to look for their loved ones while uncovering how criminal organizations operate.

Last call

Articles 5 and 12 of the National Security Law would justify the extradition of the 29 detainees to the United States only on terrorism charges. The official narrative, invoking Section III—which refers to acts that prevent authorities from combating criminal activity—makes little sense. Even if this interpretation were valid, the ones who should have been detained and extradited would be the judges and judicial personnel who were about to release the 29 detainees.

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