

Presumed killing of 43 Mexican students deeply affects L.A. immigrants



People gather on 6th Street next to the obelisk in MacArthur Park in the Westlake neighborhood of Los Angeles, demanding justice for the 43 Mexican students who disappeared and are presumed dead. (Francine Orr, Los Angeles Times)

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It was the night President Obama announced his historic executive action to protect millions of undocumented immigrants from deportation.

But on the streets of Los Angeles, the biggest rally wasn't a victory rally but a mournful vigil.

More than 1,000 people, most of them immigrants, gathered to memorialize the 43 students believed to be murdered about 2,000 miles away in southern Mexico. Obama's action was barely mentioned.

"I hurt in my soul for what is happening in Mexico," 77-year-old Rosalio Mendiola said in Spanish.

The abduction of students from Ayotzinapa who were traveling in buses and vans in the town of Iguala and their presumed massacre has rocked Mexico. There it has provoked violent protests and intensified complaints about police corruption and government incompetence.

Mexican immigrants have long been acquainted with stories of atrocities that have marred swaths of their homeland. But the plight of the students has moved many with a renewed intensity. Nearly 1 million people in Southern California trace their roots to Guerrero, the violent and dysfunctional state where the students lived, and it is believed, died.

Living in the United States is giving many immigrants a voice to speak out without fear.

"What's going on right now must be talked about. Our families have been affected by the violence back there," said Gladys Robles, an L.A. community activist who spent about seven years in Acapulco, Guerrero. "Obviously we can have an impact, because we're millions here."

Robles, 40, has helped the group Frente de Resistencia por Mexico since it was formed two years ago. Frente is working with other local groups to raise awareness about problems in the Mexican state and the country. She and others say the connections between families in L.A. and Guerrero still run deep. Many L.A. immigrants send money to their families and return frequently, especially during the holidays.

"My umbilical cord is buried in Iguala, so I will always have a strong connection to it even though I don't live there," said Reyna Grande, an author and UCLA creative writing teacher.

Her family left when she was a girl to escape poverty, and the kin that remain there are still poor, with some cousins who work at a clothing factory making \$50 a week.

Iguala, like the rest of the state, was always poor, she said. But now it's also one of Mexico's most violent states. And no place, at the moment, appears to capture the rot of corruption and violence afflicting Mexico more than Iguala.

That will not stop Grande from traveling to the town of her birth. She plans to return to Iguala this month for a Christmas toy giveaway.

"Before Sept. 26, no one had heard of my hometown. Now ... everyone has heard of Iguala. And sadly, not in a good way," Grande said. "It is more important than ever now for me to hold my Christmas event to bring a little happiness to the children there."

Though proud of their homeland and their culture, most Mexican immigrants hold that country's government in low regard. Jokes about its corruptibility and impotence are staples of Mexican culture.

When vigilante groups sprang up in the central Mexican state of Michoacan in recent years to combat a cartel there, many people with connections to that state in the U.S. sent help — or traveled there to offer assistance. They said they were doing what the Mexican government had failed to do.

The probable mass killing in Iguala also touched a nerve because the victims were young students — not combatants in the country's hyper-violent drug wars.

"We've always had problems in Guerrero, but never like this with students who were trying to make something of themselves," said Eligio Santamaria, 70-year-old owner of the restaurant Antojitos Guerrero in Highland Park.

He said he knows firsthand the corruption that is rampant in Guerrero. His family had been the victim of multiple extortion attempts, and reports to the police were met with indifference. He asked his son, a teacher in Guerrero, to return home. But he refused.

When his nephew reported an extortion attempt by the local cartel, police told him: "We can't do anything. They've got us by the throat."

Adrianna Ramirez's family restaurant in downtown L.A. is tucked between black high-rises, vacant storefronts and a large indoor swap meet at 8th and Hill streets. Above the glass doors is painted its name: "Restaurante Iguala, Gro."

The word Iguala is bracketed in quote marks — a touch of pride for the 49-year-old Ramirez and her family's hometown.

Ramirez said it is with a measure of worry that she will return to Iguala for Christmas. Her 83-year-old mother has been providing her with regular dispatches.

"I don't know in reality how it will be once we get there," Ramirez said.

As classic standards like Enanitos Verdes' "Lamento Boliviano" blended with the buzzing of the fryer in the kitchen of the "Restaurante Iguala, Gro," Ramirez said she has to return home to visit her mother, and a town whose outskirts have become a dumping ground for the dead.

"If there are problems, we should come together, instead of distancing ourselves," said Ramirez, who was born in Iguala. "I don't know what the authorities will do ... or what we as a society can do, to stop this from happening again."

Roberto Mojico, 55, moved to the U.S. when he was 16, but still maintains close ties to his family in Guerrero. He said he does not trust the government to tell the full truth about what happened to the students. The mayor of Iguala and his wife were implicated by authorities in the

disappearance of the students.

"In Mexico they are protesting directly against the government," he said. "Why? Because the state caused this."

Hugo Aguilar, a 23-year-old cook from Santa Ana, said he's worried about his family in Iguala. His mother, his brothers, sisters — he aches for them. And for Iguala.

"It is so sad that through this people have come to learn about Iguala," he said. "Iguala has a rich culture. It's the birthplace of the Mexican flag.... Unfortunately people don't recognize Iguala for the beauty it has always had. They found out about it in the worst way possible."

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