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# Mexico's missing students' kin in Canada to raise awareness

**MICHELLE PUCCI**  
 SPECIAL TO THE MONTREAL GAZETTE

It was 10:15 p.m. when Hilda Legideño Vargas remembers receiving the call. A group of students had been attacked in Iguala, a city in the southern Mexican state of Guerrero, and her son was one of them.

Six students from a rural teaching college in Ayotzinapa were killed, and another 43 went missing near Iguala on Sept. 26. Vargas's son is still missing.

Since the mass disappearance, families have struggled to find answers about what happened to the students. The months have been marked by violent protests.

Vargas is a single mother of three and works as an artisan making paper flowers, pinatas and accessories. She and others have spent months searching through hospitals, prisons and the area surrounding Iguala.

Her 20-year-old son, Jorge Antonio Tizapa Legideño, worked as a driver while studying. He leaves behind a one-year-old daughter.

On Jan. 28, Mexico's attorney general announced the students had been kidnapped, killed, burned at a garbage dump and their remains thrown in a river by a criminal gang.

But Vargas and the families of other missing students reject this explanation. Amnesty International called Mexico's investigation an "abject failure."

"From the beginning, the government has lied to us," Vargas said in Spanish.

She is part of a delegation from Ayotzinapa heading to Ottawa, after stopping in Vancouver, Montreal, Quebec City, Guelph, Ont., and Toronto.

"For us it's important that people know what happened in Ayotzinapa," Vargas said. "So far, people have shown great solidarity and support."

The delegation, dubbed the Ayotzinapa to Ottawa caravan, has met with New Democratic Party MPs in Vancouver, along with nearby aboriginal and Latin American communities.

"It's an opportunity to make sure that our story isn't forgotten," said Jorge Luis Clemente Balbuena, a student in Ayotzinapa.

Balbuena is a student from the same teaching college known for its students' activism. The students, he said in Spanish, were on



Hilda Legideño Vargas, the mother of one of the 43 students who went missing in Mexico last September. A delegation is asking Canada to remove Mexico from the "safe countries" list. JOHN KENNEY/MONTREAL GAZETTE

their way to the capital to protest against reforms that will "systemize" education and limit the autonomy of teachers in primary schools.

"It's common in Mexico to be attacked by representatives of the government," he said, referring to media coverage and treatment by police and military during protests.

Vargas and Balbuena are asking Canada to remove Mexico from the "safe countries" list and review economic ties with its free-trade partner.

"It's not possible that Mexico is on such a list when there is a situation of organized crime and perpetual violations of human rights," Vargas said.

They're asking that Canada send a delegation to put pressure on the Mexican government to find the students.

Activists also want Mexico to acknowledge the military's role in the disappearance, given their base is minutes from where the attack took place. There is reason to believe the students are being held in clandestine detention centres used primarily by drug cartels.

Before they went missing, the teaching students were on a bus to the capital to join a mass protest. The national march was commem-

orating a 1968 massacre of protesting students that took place days before the Olympics were held in Mexico City.

Police had intercepted the bus, allegedly on the orders of the local mayor's wife. According to the attorney general, they then handed the students over to the drug cartel.

So far only one missing student has been identified in one of several mass graves discovered. Relatives say their sons' bodies couldn't have been burned. An Argentinian team of forensic scientists also found irregularities in the government's evidence.

Pierre Beaucage, professor emeritus in anthropology at Université du Québec à Montréal, said the kidnappings are part of a wider culture of human rights abuses and zero tolerance for protests in

Mexico.

"How is it that we have 30 bodies in a grave, and we don't know where they are from?" Beaucage asked.

Caravans with delegations like this are travelling around the Americas and Europe to raise awareness about the violence faced by students and social workers in Mexico. They are asking for support from countries to ensure Mexico respects human rights and justice is served over the thousands of missing people.

On April 23, the delegation is visiting the National Assembly before heading to Ottawa to testify before Parliament's Subcommittee on International Human Rights.

"We won't accept defeat, we will keep searching," Vargas said. [twitter.com/michellempucci](http://twitter.com/michellempucci)

## NOTE TO READERS

Federal Finance Minister Joe Oliver will present his 2015 budget to the House of Commons on Tuesday afternoon. The Montreal Gazette's new tablet app is normally published at 6 p.m. Monday to Friday. Because of the importance of Tuesday's budget, we will publish our iPad app at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday so we can provide you with a full analysis of the provincial spending plan and its impact on taxpayers. You can download our evening news magazine tablet edition via the Apple Store. Search for "Montreal Gazette for tablet."

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