

Javier Sicilia - political activist from Cuernavaca, Mexico

**"Sharing responsibility!"**

*The "Caravan for Peace and Justice" is rolling across the U.S. to create awareness of the ongoing drug war in Mexico*

He has less fear for his own life than for the lives of his countrymen. Javier Sicilia gained fame beyond the borders of Mexico, when his 24-year-old son, Juan Francisco Ortega Sicilia, died last year in the absurd chaos of an escalating drug war in his homeland. With tape covering his mouth and signs of brutal violence on his body, the young medical student and six of his friends were found left behind on the outskirts of Cuernavaca, Sicilia's hometown. Juan Francisco died because he attempted to retrieve a friends' stolen camera and fell into the clutches of drug cartel members.

Sicilia's son is one of 50,000 victims of the armed struggle against drugs in Mexico. The escalation of the conflict started after former President Felipe Calderon employed the army to tackle the cartels inside Mexico, immediately after taking office in 2006, a policy Sicilia says "failed, with terrible consequences for my country."

A collective sense of responsibility and his personal destiny turned the Catholic poet into a man who is driven by pain and faith. The introverted Javier Sicilia became a political activist because he "wants to spare many more parents in Mexico the agony of loss." Last Sunday Javier Sicilia's "Peace & Justice Movement for Dignity," reached the United States. The bus convoy crossed the Mexican border in Tijuana and San Diego, California was their first stop. "What do you want in the U.S.," asks the U.S. journalist Amy Goodman in an interview. "Sharing responsibility," Sicilia replies.

About seventy Mexican activists, many of whom are related to victims of the drug war, and about thirty Americans accompany Sicilia on their journey across the USA. Their trip will extend from the West Coast through the Deep South, with a final stop in Washington, DC, six weeks before the U.S. presidential elections in November.

Sicilia's political ambitions are clear: "I support among other aspects the legalization and regulation of the drug market, in particular, for marijuana." About sixty percent of the profits that flow annually into the coffers of the Mexican drug cartels come from the illegal cannabis trade.

The New York Times reported in June that Colombian and Mexican cartels generate an annual 18 to 39 billion US dollars. Here, only a small portion of drugs sold by Mexican dealers are for domestic consumers, the larger part is smuggled across the border into the United States. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged a few years ago that the "insatiable demand for illegal drugs in the U.S." favors the criminal industry.

Mexico can to date be sure of military assistance provided by the United States. Not only do Mexican soldiers receive training by American military officials, their powerful neighbor also delivers arms, such as Black Hawk helicopters and drones for air surveillance. Sicilia, however, wishes a US-Mexican cooperation of a different kind, one that is geared to the solution of urgent security issues, the

promotion of economic co-operatives and the end to the War on Drugs. "The violence is escalating in Mexico. The war has brought great suffering to my country, so we demand the abolition of military assistance through the United States to Mexico," says Sicilia quietly, always modestly, almost apologetic.

In addition to the official arms exchange in between Mexico and the US, the illicit trade of weapons is evolving into another real problem. "The smuggling of arms in border areas of the United States and Mexico, particularly in Texas and Arizona, has to be stopped," explains Sicilia. According to a report by the Mexican government up to 90 percent of the firearms and ammunition used by the cartels against their own countrymen, are delivered illegally straight from the US.

The billion dollar profits the cartels generate are often laundered with the help of international financial institutions. "International banks must be held accountable for the laundering of drug money, and the Mexican refugees who flee due to the ongoing violence in our country need a secure residence status in the U.S.," urges Sicilia.

The activist's claims stand to reason as well, as they are of humanitarian interest. Whether they will be heard in the U.S., particularly in Washington DC during a presidential campaign is uncertain. "I hope that U.S. and international media will report on our caravan, so that a dialogue with the U.S. government becomes possible," says Sicilia. The fear of some U.S. politicians and political analysts that Mexico might become a security problem for the United States could work out to Sicilia's advantage.

The activist also has the backing of numerous South American heads of state. At a regional meeting in Columbia this April, which included President Barack Obama, the presidents of Guatemala, Colombia, Costa Rica, Argentina, Brazil and Ecuador openly criticized for the first time in its history, the violence and the misery brought to their homes by a on ongoing, forty year war that was initiated by the U.S. government.

Sicilia's story makes the step into political activism appear as a logical consequence. "Losing a child is something very unnatural," says Sicilia. After the murder of his son, he led a protest march into the capital where 150,000 people gathered on Mexico City's main square. "With the people comes the responsibility," says Time magazine's 2011 Person of the Year, Javier Sicilia.

The first protest march from Cuernavaca to Mexico City was followed by a meeting with the Mexican president. "One of the most gratifying moments occurred during the conference at Chapultepec Castle, when President Calderón met a woman named María Elena Herrera from Calderón's home state of Michoacán, whose four sons disappeared after being abducted by gangsters. The President hugged her, and I could see he was shaken by her experience. I saw his recognition that the victims are human beings and not statistics. I saw his face of pain, and in that moment the President himself became more humanized to me."

Sicilia abandoned spiritual poetry after the murder of his son in favor of political articles. Last weekend, he communicated via the Huffington Post, "The goal of our month-long caravan is to become citizen-diplomats -- to reach out to you in the United States and seek your help in building a true, bi-national movement for peace and justice. Let us work together as neighbors to bring an end to the drug war.

Don't wait until that pain reaches your intimate lives to hear the cry of those of us who cannot keep from uttering it. Do not wait until the senseless death that this war has unleashed reaches your lives like it has reached ours, to know that such death exists and that it must be stopped. This is the moment for us to come together and change this policy of war and rescue peace, life, and democracy. "

The U.S. media reacts to Sicilia's arrival with numerous articles and reports, because Sicilia has been received with open arms in San Diego. Perhaps this is the beginning of a dialogue President Barack Obama cannot afford to seclude himself from in September.