

Mother told the army murdered her son

By Guy Adams

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A relentless campaign by a grieving mother has forced the Mexican Government to admit that its troops shot an innocent United States citizen at a military checkpoint outside Acapulco, and then put an assault rifle in the dead man's hands to try to fool investigators into thinking he had opened fire on them.

After Donna Proctor spent weeks pressing American officials for their help in the case, she finally received confirmation, via the US Embassy, that three soldiers have been charged with killing her son Joseph, a 32-year-old New Yorker, in the early hours of August 22.

Two more are being prosecuted for planting an AR-15 rifle at the scene during the alleged cover-up, and then giving false evidence to military prosecutors.

Proctor's death is one of three high-profile incidents this year when innocent bystanders have been shot deliberately or caught in the crossfire between the Army and drug gangs, then publicly accused of being criminals.

According to documents held by the US Defence Department, and made public by his mother yesterday, Proctor was driving to a shop from the house of his girlfriend, Liliana Gil Vargas, when he came across a checkpoint manned by soldiers.

The troops tried to stop him and inspect the vehicle, but claim he fled, prompting one of them to open fire. They pursued the van and fired again, "wounding the driver who nonetheless continued to drive away, fleeing, crashing the car 3km down that road", according to investigators' evidence.

Proctor was found dead at the scene. When it emerged that he was unarmed, the battalion commander told an officer to place the AR-15 in his vehicle "using the hands of the deceased to try to simulate an attack against military personnel", a witness said. The media was later told that Proctor attacked a military convoy.

Like all alleged abuses by Mexican soldiers, Proctor's death is being dealt with by an opaque military court system, which has convicted just one officer in the past four years. Until the case is heard, both the US and Mexican defence departments are refusing to comment on it publicly.

That isn't good enough for Donna Proctor. She has cast doubt on every detail of the Army's story, saying her son, who had lived in Mexico for a year and was trying to open a restaurant, had repeatedly complained about being forced to pay bribes to local troops.

"He loved life," she told the Associated Press.

"I hate the fact that he died alone and in pain in such an unjust way ... I want him to be remembered as a hard-working person. He would never pick up a gun and shoot someone."

Mexican officials recently visited Donna Proctor at home in Long Island, she said, and compensated her for the cost of returning his body to the US. "I told them I had no intention of this being the end of it," she said.

Proctor's murder, as he drove his van in the beach town of Barra de Coyuca, is unlikely to affect Washington's unswerving support for Mexico's ongoing "war on drugs". But it will increase public scepticism in both countries about methods being used to pursue it.

Mexican President Felipe Calderon has largely devolved responsibility for cracking down on the highly lucrative cross-border cocaine trade to his Army.

The tactic has resulted in significant victories, including the arrest of a slew of the country's most feared cartel leaders.

But there is growing criticism of the "wild west" mentality of some soldiers. The Army has been accused of roughly 4000 acts of abuse since 2006.

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