

# MEXICO

## Murder case against Mexican soldiers dropped

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MEXICO CITY --

Veracruz state prosecutors now say that a 73-year-old grandmother wasn't raped or beaten by soldiers but died of natural causes -- capping a bizarre two-month saga that has roiled the nation's political circles and called into question President Felipe Calderón's commitment to human rights.

The prosecutor's office, which initially claimed that soldiers had murdered the woman, released its revised findings in a news conference late Monday in the state capital, Xalapa.

Juan Alatríste Gómez, a special prosecutor who'd been assigned to review the case, said there were no witnesses to the alleged crime and that an anal tear originally cited as evidence of an assault could have come from any number of "diverse reasons."

State prosecutor Emetrio López, who lodged the original charges against the soldiers, said he agreed with Alatríste's findings.

How the initial investigation into the case was botched is still under investigation. The original investigators in the case have been suspended temporarily.

The office's findings backed a controversial investigation by Mexico's independent National Human Rights Commission, which found that Ernestina Ascencio had died of internal bleeding.

That conclusion fueled weeks of news stories and opinion columns that raised questions about Calderón's commitment to human rights, his close ties to the army, and the military's presence in the mountainous Zongolica region, where Ascencio's home village of Soledad Atzompa is located.

Based on an initial autopsy and Ascencio's reported deathbed declaration, Veracruz authorities initially said in late February that Ascencio was sodomized and beaten to death by four soldiers from a nearby army encampment.

Amid the region's outcry, the outpost and two others were quickly dismantled, and the Defense Ministry promised to track down her killers through semen samples.

But the storyline took a different twist after the human rights commission, which often sides with indigenous groups against the military, exhumed her body and embarked on a second investigation.

Calderón stepped into the controversy by revealing the commission's conclusion that Ascencio had died of natural causes days before the commission formally announced that the woman had succumbed to acute anemia caused by internal bleeding in her digestive tract.

That conclusion surprised human rights advocates, who accused commission President José Luis Soberanes of covering up for Calderón and the military. But Soberanes has remained firm, repeating before a congressional committee last week that his group had found that no rape had been committed, semen samples didn't exist, and the state's investigation was flawed.

The commission even devoted a portion of its website to the case, posting Soberanes' statements, press releases and a 13-page document titled "Thirty Questions about the Case of Ernestina Ascencio."