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The death of an American filmmaker in Oaxaca remains unsolved

By Jay Root
McClatchy Newspapers

OAXACA, Mexico - Filmmaker Brad Will always was attracted to fiery protests and popular rebellion. So he had high hopes when he went to southern Mexico to document violent clashes between angry leftists and a state government known for repression and abuse.

Instead, he unwittingly chronicled his own death in a last chaotic film, an edited version of which is circulating on the Internet. Now, as lawyers and law enforcement officials try to determine who killed him and why, Will's death has become another bloody flashpoint in an increasingly restive nation.

In a land divided between rich and poor, between leftists and conservatives, between political dissenters and those battling to preserve the status quo, startling, grisly images have become commonplace: Passenger buses burned in Oaxaca. Five human heads rolled onto a dance floor by



Brad Will went to Mexico to document the clashes between leftists and the government of the Oaxaca state. His most famous images are not the well-edited documentary he hoped to produce, but a tape he unwittingly made of his own death at the hands of unknown gunmen. (Courtesy the Will Family/MCT)

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What happened in Oaxaca on Oct. 27 isn't clear. The portions of Will's video posted on a Google Web site offer few clues. Most of the edited 16-minute video shows protesters gathering in the streets, throwing projectiles at police, running and regrouping.

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No obvious gunfire is audible when the fatal bullet enters Will's abdomen. There's just a sickening thud and then a high-pitched scream, the final sound the 36-year-old filmmaker recorded of himself as he stumbled, then collapsed. The last several seconds of the video are clearly taken with the camera on its side, motionless.

Today a tense uncertain calm reigns in Oaxaca. Within days of the Dec. 1 inauguration of Mexico's new conservative President Felipe Calderon, the leftists who'd been leading protests in Oaxaca were arrested. They've been charged with sedition, among other crimes. Efforts to bring Will's killers to justice may tell much about whether Calderon, after a divisive election, can take control of this troubled state and nation.

Six months of unrest have taken a heavy toll on Oaxaca, a place famed for its archaeological sites and beaches, but it remains among Mexico's poorest states, with high rates of illiteracy, poverty and disease. About a dozen people have died in the unrest, most of them protesters. Hundreds more have been arrested, detained or, in a handful of international cases, deported.

Protesters have set scores of buildings ablaze, including the state court building, which was gutted, and the popular Camino Real Hotel, a state tourism facility, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs building and the Juarez Theatre, all damaged to varying degrees.

The economy is in tatters. The tourists who once flocked to the capital's picturesque town square have all but vanished, leaving behind shuttered businesses, empty hotel rooms and nearly half a billion dollars in lost revenue.

"We're in bankruptcy," said Olivia Guzman, a widow who quit a waitressing job two years ago and launched her own cafe, tiny Oly's Coffee and Waffle Shop. Her sales have dropped to about \$300 a month since the troubles began. Her rent alone is \$800.

She blames both sides for the mess. "They keep saying they're for the people. Always the people. But it's the people of Oaxaca who are being destroyed by this crisis."

On one side of the current dispute is the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO), which seeks the resignation of Oaxaca's governor. On the other are the armed sympathizers of that governor, Ulisis Ruiz, a member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (the PRI), which ruled Mexico for more than 70 years, until 2000, and which still controls Oaxaca.

The trouble started in May, when a teachers' union went on strike to demand better pay, benefits and working conditions. A few weeks later, Ruiz sent state police into the central square to forcibly remove thousands of educators camping there. That led to the creation of APPO, a loose coalition of leftist groups, including many of the striking teachers, who made Ruiz's immediate resignation their chief demand.

By August, the city was under siege. APPO set up barricades around the city, set fire to passenger buses, seized government buildings, and took over several radio and TV stations. Armed gangs, said to be working at Ruiz' behest, responded with beatings and

sometimes lethal gunfire, witnesses said.

It was into this vortex that Bradley Roland Will, an Illinois native drawn to struggles of the downtrodden, stepped in with a video camera and a burning desire to be on the ground floor of a popular uprising.

Will was no stranger to urban conflict. His father, Howard Will, who lives in East Troy, Wis., recalled that his son was arrested in the Seattle World Trade Organization riots of 1999 and was beaten up while filming peasant clashes with the military in Brazil in 2003. But Oaxaca, where Will camped alongside and befriended the protesters he filmed, seemed to offer the revolution he longed to witness.

"What can you say about this movement - this revolutionary moment - you know it is building, growing, shaping - you can feel it," Will wrote on Oct. 16 in his last communication to Indymedia, the leftist media outlet he worked for. "It is a genuine people's revolt."

Media reports and U.S. officials said Will apparently was caught in a crossfire between leftist protesters and gunmen wearing civilian clothes - some of them later identified as local police officers with ties to the PRI.

APPO allies dispute the term "crossfire," saying the protesters were defending themselves only with sticks, stones and homemade rockets, though APPO members were photographed carrying guns.

State Attorney General Lizbeth Cana, appointed by Ruiz, initially claimed that the evidence showed that Will was shot twice at very close range and suggested that APPO members themselves killed him in an attempt to internationalize the crisis. But the state coroner contradicted that assertion, saying the two shots came from farther way and were fired by the same gun, a 9 mm.

Two municipal police officers were arrested, but a state judge ordered them released last week, saying that witnesses said they only fired shots in the air and were too far away to hit Will. Critics cried whitewash.

Further confusing the issue is testimony from residents of the street where Will died. The video shows protesters directing their battle with the gunmen toward the top of a house on the street. At one point, a large red dump truck can be seen ramming into the door to force it open.

But Jorge Gamino, 24, said that his mother, Claudia Garcia, was alone in the house at the time and has no idea why she was targeted. He said that Garcia, who'd locked herself inside the bathroom, was so terrorized that she's now undergoing psychological therapy. Gamino also said the protesters returned to rob and vandalize the house.

"They got everything they could carry off," he said outside the home last week.

The owner of a store across the street said the gunmen who were firing at the protesters had taken up residence in an adjacent house, empty at the time, just to the north. A woman who answered the door there said she was at work during the riot and had no other comment.

"After they took the journalist away, that's when the ransacking began," said the storeowner, who didn't want his name used. "They got the wrong house."

Adding to the confusion are allegations, first published by the Village Voice, that Will's videotape was edited to remove scenes of protesters carrying guns.

Will's sister, Christy, who lives in San Diego, acknowledges that the version of the video posted on the Google Web site has been edited down from an hour of tape Will shot. But she said nothing significant had been deleted. She declined to allow McClatchy to review the original tape because, she said, she's fearful that authorities in Oaxaca may harass people who appear in it.

On the original, hour-long version, a gunshot is audible just before Will screamed when the bullet struck him, Christy Will said. She said the family plans to obtain an independent, professional analysis of the tape.

The widely divergent accounts leave plenty of room for doubt, which is why Will's family and U.S. diplomats are pushing for an independent probe by Mexico's federal government.

In the meantime, Mexican officials are hoping that restored calm will once again lure American tourists, Oaxaca's lifeblood. Luis Efrén García, a Mexican diplomat who works in the recently torched office housing the local office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said that Americans should feel welcome in the colonial city - as long as they don't get involved in Mexican political disputes.

"(Will) had been around in the movement as I have heard, so he was taking some risks. It's most unfortunate he's dead," Bauza García said. "Tourists ... should not get involved in local political situations."

Brad Will's final video is available online at: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-3664350201077731285&q=brad+will&hl=en>

Root reports for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram.



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