Hold Mexican Military Accountable For Human Rights Abuses

By Andrew Reding

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HE’S a former Olympic athlete, has a master’s degree in political science from the National University of Mexico, and, after training at West Point, became the youngest brigadier general in Mexican history. Yet after 30 years of service, Gen. José Francisco Gallardo is a prisoner in Military Camp No. 1 outside Mexico City. The high command considers him so dangerous that he is isolated from other prisoners; requests by the news media and members of the United States Congress for access have been denied.

His crime? To call on the Mexican military to respect human rights. Concerned about military mistreatment of enlisted men and civilians, Mr. Gallardo devoted his master’s dissertation to a proposal to forestall further abuses through creation of a human rights ombudsman. Last October, the Mexico City magazine Forum published excerpts of the thesis. One month later, Defense Minister Gen. Antonio Riviello imprisoned Gallardo for “spreading negative ideas about the Mexican military, with the object of dishonoring, offending, and discrediting the military in the eyes of the public.”

The Gallardo affair is testing the limits of reform in Mexico. In 1990, upon forming the National Human Rights Commission, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari insisted that “we confront new threats to human rights wherever they come from .... Let there be no doubt, the government will defend human rights and punish anyone who violates them.” In cases of the armed forces, however, the Salinas administration has so far sought to punish the most prominent human rights advocate in the high command, while allowing human rights violators to escape serious investigation.

Following the January rebellion in Chiapas, international human rights groups described serious abuses by the military against prisoners and civilians. In a report published in March, Human Rights Watch described summary executions of prisoners, widespread use of torture, the murder of patients removed from a hospital, an attack on a Red Cross vehicle, and the strafing of clearly marked press vehicles, among other offenses. Yet the Mexican government has shown no interest in pursuing such blatant violations of domestic and international law.
Instead, the government’s prosecutorial efforts are being focused on Gallardo. Not content to charge Gallardo with insubordination, the defense minister dredged up old accusations of mishandling government funds. Ironically, those charges point to a related problem afflicting the armed forces: corruption.

Upon inauguration in 1988, Mr. Salinas named General Riviello as minister of defense. Riviello then reassigned Gallardo, whose rapid rise through the ranks had sparked jealousy among senior members of the officer corps, to run an army cattle ranch in the state of Chihuahua. Shortly thereafter, Riviello gave Gallardo money to buy a herd of cattle through Riviello’s nephew, a veterinarian. Fearing an attempt at embezzlement, Gallardo instead made the purchase himself, and returned the balance to the federal Treasury. Typically, Gallardo, not Riviello, was charged with misuse of funds.

As is all too frequently the case, rules designed to combat corruption were applied against the whistleblower rather than the suspected wrongdoer. The result: widespread corruption at the highest levels of the armed forces. Nowhere is this more evident than in the protection the Mexican military affords drug traffickers. Witnesses in the Los Angeles trial of people involved in the murder of US Drug Enforcement Administration agent Enrique Camarena named former defense minister Juan Arévalo Gardoqui among the coconspirators. Salinas’s first secretary of the Navy, Adm. Mauricio Schleske, was forced to resign following disclosures of illicit enrichment acrid the use of sailors at the Matamoros naval base to smuggle drugs into Texas. And in 1991, Army units in Veracruz murdered seven federal agents who were in hot pursuit of Colombian drug traffickers. The traffickers’ plane had just landed and was about to be refueled by the military to resume its journey to the US. The local commander in Veracruz eventually was imprisoned, but neither Admiral Schleske nor General Arévalo has ever been investigated for collusion with drug trafficking, just as Riviello has never been questioned about his attempt to buy cattle through his nephew.

Whether by intention or inattention, the responsibility for this sorry state of affairs ultimately rests with Salinas. Both Riviello and Schleske were Salinas appointees, and so far, Salinas has taken no steps to cleanse the high command of corruption. Nor, given Mexico’s tradition of military subordination to civilian authority, can it be argued that the president needs to be careful about stepping on military toes, as would be the case in parts of Central and South America.

Salinas should dismiss the remaining charge against Gallardo (the other charges have been set aside by Mexican courts). He should embrace Gallardo’s proposal, creating an independent human rights ombudsman to investigate military abuses in Chiapas as well as evidence of corruption in the high command. Mexican society is already suffering serious strains. With the breakdown of talks in Chiapas and the approach of the Aug. 21 presidential election, it is all the more essential that the Army become accountable to civil society.

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