Behind the Chiapas Revolt:
An Army Allowed to Operate Outside the Law

By Andrew Reding

WASHINGTON

Reports of executions and torture of captives in Chiapas are but the latest examples of abuses carried out by the Mexican armed forces. Compounding the problem is the imprisonment of a brigadier general who dared suggest the military should respect human rights.

The army’s abuses highlight the danger of allowing any institution to operate outside the law. The continuation of these abuses in Mexico, and elsewhere in Latin America, requires the United States to reappraise its hemispheric human-rights policy as it prepares for economic integration with the region.

Armies are supposed to protect the peace—not the Mexican army. It has instigated rebellion through two decades of repression in Chiapas. Significantly, one of the first acts of the Zapatista rebels was to kidnap Absalón Castellanos, a retired general. As commander of the 31st military zone in Chiapas in the early 1980s, Castellanos was notorious for repressing the Mayan population.

Among their memories is the Golonchán massacre of June, 1980. Tiring of interminable delays, Tzeltal Mayans, who had already been granted titles, took possession of their lands. The state’s powerful land barons called on the government to dislodge them. Through the mediation of a priest, the governor of Chiapas agreed to expedite the land transfers and meet with the Tzeltals. But it was not the governor who showed up on June 15; it was Castellanos’ troops, who slaughtered the Tzeltals, including women and children. Two years later, Mexico’s ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) rewarded Castellanos with the governorship of Chiapas.

Castellanos was succeeded, in 1988, by Patrocinio González Garrido, who continued the repressive policies of his predecessor. Last January, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari named González secretary of government, the second most powerful post in the Mexican
hierarchy. The appointment was widely interpreted as heralding a harder line toward discontent in rural Mexico. As it turns out, there has been a disturbing increase in the deployment of troops in the Mayan Highlands of Chiapas during the past year.

In a report published last August, a team of investigators from Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights described a pattern of abuses by the military in precisely the area that has become the focal point of today’s insurrection. Following the disappearance of two army officers last spring, troops occupied several villages, detaining, beating and torturing civilians. The report also documented similar abuses against the populations of villages in the state of Chihuahua, on the U.S. border.

Despite national and international exposure, none of the officers responsible have been disciplined. Instead, the army’s high command has imprisoned Brig. Gen. Francisco Gallardo for his human-rights advocacy. Citing mistreatment of civilians in rural Mexico, among other offenses, Gallardo proposed creation of a human-rights ombudsman for the armed forces. The proposal has gone nowhere.

In the absence of reform, the Mexican army is responding to the uprising in Chiapas in the exact manner that helped provoke the insurrection there. Villages are being bombed, rebels executed after capture and suspected sympathizers tortured to extract confessions. What happened after the army seized the village of Oxchuc, in the Mayan Highlands, epitomizes the dangers of military involvement in civilian affairs. Accompanied by officers, the mayor toured the town, fingerling supporters of opposition parties. The soldiers took the civilians away, accusing them of subversion. Such collusion between the army and the ruling party leaves dissidents few options but insurrection.

The need for a re-evaluation of the role of the armed forces in Mexico, and, by extension, in other Latin American societies, is clear. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the United States no longer faces any credible military threat in the Americas. Nor does Mexico. That reduces the Mexican army to the role of a police force engaged in combatting drug smuggling and maintaining domestic order.

Therein lies a problem. Armies are trained to fight, invading enemies. When used as domestic police forces, they have an unfortunate tendency to treat their fellow citizens as “the enemy.” In 1968, the Mexican army turned tanks and automatic weapons on a peaceful gathering of student protesters in Mexico City, killing hundreds. During the following years, hundreds of suspected dissidents were kidnapped by the army’s white brigades and executed at a military base on the outskirts of the capital. In rural Guerrero, the army made little distinction between civilians and combatants in suppressing a small insurgency.

Such brutalization has political consequences. The urban repression has created an underground intelligentsia; the repression in the countryside, widespread discontent. These two forces have come together to form a guerrilla movement that is attracting support from Indians and peasants across southern Mexico. If reports of recent guerrilla mobilizations in Guerrero prove accurate, the challenge to the Mexican government could be far more serious than first suspected.

Economic integration cannot succeed in an atmosphere of corruption, repression and conflict. If the nations of the hemisphere are to inaugurate a successful economic
partnership, it will have to be on the basis of a common foundation of democracy, public accountability and respect for human rights.

The Clinton Administration thus needs to follow through on its pledge to make democracy and human rights the “cornerstone” of its foreign policy. It can begin by asking the U.S. Senate to ratify the American Convention on Human Rights, which has already been ratified by every Latin American country, except Cuba. Ratification would enable Washington to insist on enforcement of the convention’s provisions as a condition for aid and for access to the regime created by the North American Free Trade Agreement. For its part, the Mexican government should signal its seriousness in pursuing reform and reconciliation by withdrawing its troops from Chiapas and by disciplining its officers who violate human rights.

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