By Militarizing, Zedillo Only Increases Instability

By Andrew Reding

Morelia, Mexico

The slaughter of 45 unarmed Tzotzil Indians—most of them women and children—in the remote hamlet of Acteal was not, as the Mexican government has insisted, an aberration. Since César Ruiz Ferro became governor of Chiapas in February 1995, more than 1,500 Indians have been killed in political violence, many by paramilitary groups linked to the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

Nor are the killings confined to Chiapas. Political murders are not unusual in the neighboring states of Oaxaca and Guerrero, which also have large impoverished indigenous populations. The opposition Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) lists more than 250 members killed since January 1995, most of them in these three southern states. In less acute form, the problem extends nationwide. The Mexican army has recently been implicated in two high-profile cases involving the torture and execution of civilians in central Mexico.

Though President Ernesto Zedillo expressed indignation at the Acteal massacre, and moved quickly to arrest local leaders of his party, the wider pattern of violence is a logical outgrowth of his own policies. As a technocrat with no previous political experience, Zedillo has held doggedly to economic policies that have cut wages to one-third what they were in 1980, and ended land reform. The resulting desperation has led to crime waves in the cities, and fostered insurgencies and land seizures in the countryside.

Rather than try to address the underlying issues of poverty and racial discrimination, Zedillo’s answer has been to turn to the military. He has placed generals in charge of the war on drugs, placed military officers in command of urban police, and deployed troops throughout the countryside to confront the threat of insurgency.

For the first time since the Revolution, civil society is being militarized. That change was palpable even at an academic conference in this Spanish colonial state capital 130 miles west of Mexico City. To the astonishment of Mexican and foreign guests, a column of Mexican infantry in helmets and full battle gear entered the auditorium brandishing...
automatic weapons. They lined the sides of the large hall, as a military band struck up a martial air, and a soldier unfurled the Mexican flag.

Until fairly recently, such scenes were unheard of outside the barracks or Mexico City’s central square. Mexico stood out among Latin American countries because its military kept out of civil affairs. Article 129 of the constitution stipulates, “in times of peace, no military authority may exercise more powers than those directly related to military discipline.” As long as this provision was observed, it helped make Mexico one of the hemisphere’s most stable and insurrection-proof countries.

All that has now changed. Troops and paramilitary groups patrol the countryside, backed by helicopters, tanks, and armored personnel carriers. In major cities, soldiers patrol the streets in police uniforms. Though technically “on leave” from the military, they continue to be commanded by military officers.

Though intended to boost security, the outcome has been the opposite. The drug cartels are more powerful than ever. General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, whom Zedillo chose to lead the war on drugs, turned out to be on the payroll of Juárez cartel kingpin, Amado Carrillo Fuentes. Crime rates continue to soar in the cities, as dramatized by the kidnapping last month of former interior minister Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios. And insurgencies are multiplying in rural areas, with army intelligence now identifying more than a half-dozen groups operating in 17 of Mexico’s 31 states.

Worse yet, the soldiers seem to have become part of the problem. Trained to kill enemies rather than respect the rights of fellow-citizens, they have repeatedly treated suspects as enemies. In September, elite police units commanded by military officers carried out an “operation” in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Mexico City. They detained six young men, three of whom were taken to a police station, then driven to a sand pit and executed. In December, an elite army unit broke into homes in the indigenous community of San Juan de Ocotán, Jalisco, seizing and torturing 18 young men, one of whom they killed.

By far the dirtiest work, though, is that of paramilitary groups in Mexico’s mostly rural southern states. Shortly after taking office, President Zedillo ordered the army to seize zapatista rebel leaders and charge them as common criminals. The effort failed, as have efforts to apprehend the leaders of another insurrectionary group, the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR). Instead, federal and state governments have quietly fostered the formation of local paramilitary organizations intended to spread fear among civilian sympathizers of the insurgents.

Though federal and state officials are quick to deny such ties, there is no mistaking the trail of complicity. As pointed out by Human Rights Watch in Implausible Deniability: State Responsibility for Rural Violence in Mexico, “impunity remains the norm for human rights violators and supporters of the government.” The Chiapas state government has provided funds to Paz y Justicia (Peace and Justice), a paramilitary group. In November, that group was linked to the ambush of a church convoy and, reportedly, to an attempt to assassinate Catholic bishop Samuel Ruiz, an outspoken advocate of indigenous rights. Several members of the bishop’s entourage were wounded and, as yet, no one has been charged.
A similar pattern has prevailed with other paramilitary groups that have behaved as death squads, some with names that evoke their true purpose, such as Los Degolladores (“The Throat-Slitters”).

The federal government fares no better. Foreigners, including priests and human rights observers, who have tried to call attention to the human-rights problems in southern Mexico have been expelled from the country by Interior Minister Emilio Chuayffet. Earlier this year, Zedillo declined a request to meet with the head of Amnesty International, to discuss these concerns.

Further undermining the credibility of President Zedillo’s commitment to prosecute those responsible for the Acteal massacre is the outcome of the investigation into the June 1995 Aguas Blancas massacre in the state of Guerrero. In that instance, state police ambushed and shot to death 17 unarmed peasants belonging to an opposition group. Though the incident was videotaped, and though the Supreme Court found evidence that the police had acted on orders from Governor Rubén Figueroa Alcocer, Figueroa was never charged.

Zedillo has also ignored two recommendations by the Organization of American States’ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, both of which could help keep Mexico from drifting further into civil conflict. One is to reopen the case of the 1994 execution of civilians from the Ejido Morelia in Chiapas. An independent inquiry would put the Mexican army on notice that improper treatment of civilians will no longer go unpunished.

The other is a recommendation that Zedillo free General José Francisco Gallardo. Citing the very sorts of abuses that have since come to haunt the country, Gallardo proposed the creation of a human-rights ombudsman for the armed forces. The army high command responded by throwing him in prison, where he has languished for more than four years. Though federal courts, and more recently the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, have ruled in the general’s favor, President Zedillo continues to keep him incarcerated, calling into question the administration’s oft-professed commitments to reform and the rule of law.

Andrew Reding, an associate editor at Pacific News Service, directs the Americas Project of the World Policy Institute.