The Risk of Using the Army for Too Much

By Andrew Reding

Sanibel, Florida

Before dawn on June 7, several hundred soldiers surrounded a schoolhouse in the mountain community of El Charco, in the state of Guerrero. Inside, 42 persons, almost all poor Mixtec Indians, were sleeping on the floor. Earlier, left-wing guerrillas had told them that armed resistance was their only hope for a better life. Suddenly, an army officer ordered them out of the schoolhouse, then troops, assisted by helicopter gunships, riddled the building with bullets. When the occupants surrendered, 11 of them were summarily executed because they were thought to be rebels; others were beaten and forced to sign confessions.

The increasing frequency of such atrocities is corroding Mexicans’ traditional respect for their military. For most of this century, the Mexican army had taken pride in its populist and nationalist heritage. With few exceptions, it had remained in the barracks, helping make Mexico an oasis of stability in Latin America. Today, the army is deployed throughout rural Mexico, especially in the impoverished southern states, and on the streets of many major cities, including Mexico City. Its higher profile not only creates more corruption opportunities, it also risks more violations of human and civil rights. Regrettably, the United States shares some responsibility for these growing risks, since the Pentagon is expanding military aid to Mexico without any effective controls on its use.

The army’s more visible role in Mexico’s affairs stems from a variety of factors. Although economic liberalization has created a record number of Mexican billionaires, it also has swelled the ranks of Mexico’s poor, particularly among the country’s large Indian populations. Racism and the termination of land reform are alienating indigenous communities that were formerly bulwarks of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). This has turned the southern Mexican states of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Guerrero into fertile ground for guerrilla groups such as the Zapatistas (EZLN) and the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR).

Zedillo’s hesitancy to tackle corruption head-on in the government, the PRI and the federal police has left him with no option but to turn to the army. Faced with powerful
drug cartels and an unprecedented crime wave in the country’s major cities, Zedillo has placed military officers in charge of the police and the war on drugs. Yet, by giving vast new powers to the least accountable institution in Mexico, he may be indirectly fostering corruption. Indeed, a recent U.S. intelligence report suggests that some Mexican generals are colluding with the drug cartels.

In something of an embarrassment, this is happening at a time when the Pentagon is strengthening its ties with the Mexican military. Under cover of the war on drugs, more and more Mexican soldiers are being trained in the United States. Mexicans now make up one-third of the student body at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Ga., whose alumni include a rogues gallery of Latin American dictators. At Fort Bragg, N.C., Army Special Forces are training instructors for the newly formed Mexican Airborne Special Forces. Clearly, it is not the Pentagon’s intention to train future torturers and murderers. Yet, without reform of the Mexican military, it is inevitable that martial skills acquired in the United States will be inappropriately used in Mexico.

The problem is twofold. First, it is counterproductive to use military force to deal with domestic social issues. Soldiers are trained to kill enemies, not restrain citizens with a minimum of force. No one believes, moreover, that Mexico’s ragtag insurgencies are supported by outside powers. They are, by and large, an act of desperation by poor Indian peasants. By turning to the army to control them, Zedillo is fueling the flames of alienation and violence. According to military intelligence, guerrillas, who were once confined to Chiapas, are now active in 17 of Mexico’s 31 states.

Second, Zedillo has been reluctant to reform the army. In the past year, he has twice ignored rulings, from the Organization of American States’ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, that the Mexican army has violated fundamental human rights.

Zedillo’s failure to act has three consequences: it undercuts his pledge to turn Mexico into a “nation of law”; it raises questions about Mexico’s willingness to honor international obligations under the American Convention on Human Rights, and it suggests to the generals that atrocities and corruption may be condoned.

Documents recently leaked from the Ministry of Defense to the Mexican weekly PROCESO disclosed that the army planned a campaign of terror targeting Zapatista supporters in Chiapas. Military intelligence, according to the documents, was to “secretly organize certain sectors of the civilian population, among them cattle ranchers, small landholders and patriotic individuals” to carry out the campaign. Army instructors would then “train and support” the self-defense forces or other paramilitary organizations.

The army, assisted by state police and local sympathizers of the PRI, did help build a network of paramilitary organizations with names like Peace and Justice, Red Mask, Antizapatista Revolutionary Insurgent Movement and Throat-Slitters. In its latest annual report on human rights, the State Department said such groups were responsible for more than 500 politically motivated killings between 1994 and 1997. Zedillo has done little to correct this state of affairs.

Militarization of the police, rather than bolster law and order, has helped undermine it. More than half the country’s police forces are now commanded by military officers. In Mexico City and other large metropolitan areas, troops patrol the streets in police
uniforms. Unschooled in the finer points of due process, their tactics have stirred outrage. In Mexico City’s Buenos Aires neighborhood, for example, police under military command detained three youths, then tortured and executed them in a sand pit.

The militarization of the drug war has proved similarly disastrous. Shortly after naming Gen. Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo to head the federal antinarcotics agency last year, Zedillo had to fire him following disclosures that the general was living in an apartment formerly inhabited by the head of the Juarez cartel. Subsequently, a Justice Department report submitted to Atty. Gen. Janet Reno in February described a pattern of negotiations between top Mexican generals and intermediaries of drug cartels, followed by a string of murders of some of the go-betweens.

Washington has contributed to the problem. By pressuring Mexico to do more to stop drug traffickers, it has sanctioned a greater role for the Mexican military, then complained about the army’s susceptibility to corruption. Such a situation hardly promotes cooperation. But Washington can support stability and reform in three ways. First, it should encourage Zedillo to implement the San Andres agreements, which would give indigenous peoples greater control over local affairs. Second, Washington should offer Mexico assistance in building a professional police force. Finally, it should tie further military aid to Mexico’s acceptance of the verdicts of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and to the appointment of an ombudsman to clean out corruption and human rights abuses in the armed forces.

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