

THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN MEXICO

ISSUE

The January 1994 uprising in Chiapas, as well as giving rise to alleged human rights abuses by the Mexican military, focussed attention on institutional injustices suffered by Mexico's indigenous population and indirectly led to an acceleration of the political and electoral reform process. The 1994 Presidential elections were relatively fraud-free and represent a major step forward for democracy in Mexico.

BACKGROUND

The opening days of the Chiapas conflict gave rise to grave incidents of alleged human rights abuses by the Mexican armed forces, notably in the town of Ocosingo where a number of extra-judicial executions occurred. Although the National Human Rights Commission is still investigating these incidents, it is disappointing to note that no concrete recommendations have yet emerged. A later incident involving the alleged rape of three indigenous women by members of the Mexican armed forces is similarly unresolved.

In spite of the above, the Mexican authorities can be applauded for having rapidly declared a unilateral ceasefire in Chiapas, a ceasefire that has been rigorously observed by both sides in the conflict. The government subsequently negotiated a package of proposed reforms and compensatory measures that was rejected by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) as insufficiently far-reaching. In mid-December, through the Minister of the Interior, the new administration of President Zedillo was seeking to revive negotiations.

Chiapas has focussed attention on the plight of Mexico's indigenous people in general, but it is clear that major changes in policy affecting these groups are unlikely to occur until the immediate crisis is resolved.

In the wake of Chiapas and the departure of hardline Interior Minister Patrocinio Gonzalez Garrido, the pace of electoral and political reform in Mexico accelerated. Mexico's electoral legislation is now among the most comprehensive in the world and the mechanisms for administering fraud-free elections among the most elaborate. Most significantly, six "Citizen Councillors", apolitical figures chosen by Congress through a consensus process, will have a controlling majority on the council of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE). For the first time, both national and international electoral observers were permitted and for the first time a televised debate between the principal presidential contenders occurred.

The \$2 billion investment of the Mexican government in the design of a new electoral process paid off when it became evident, on election day, that 78 per cent of the Mexican population was prepared to take a leap of faith and vote. The election was marred by a number of irregularities at the local level, notably in Chiapas, but there is no evidence of a systematic attempt at a high level to subvert the election. Mexicans were given the government they voted for.