

feature

Tragic anniversary raises human rights concern

by Angel Figueroa

Twenty-five years ago this month, in an area of Mexico City known as Tlatelolco, a large group of university students gathered for a peaceful demonstration. With placards, chants, and speeches, their grievances were aimed against the government in its preparations to host the 1968 Olympics that were to open on October 12. Disgusted by the millions of pesos which had been spent in preparation for the Games, while millions who lived in abject poverty were ignored and the abuses of human rights were frequent, the 6,000-strong gathering of students, parents and children had united to protest against what they viewed as a corrupt, mismanaged, and self-serving political system.

On that rainy October afternoon, none of the activists in the crowd was to know just how historical an event their demonstration was to be.

At exactly 6:10 pm, a Mexican army helicopter circling overhead dropped two green flares into the crowd. At that prearranged signal, a heavy barrage of gunfire erupted from the 10,000 soldiers that had surrounded the area. Chaos ensued, as soldiers shot their way into the plaza, firing indiscriminately as the panic-stricken crowd dashed for cover. Armoured vehicles blocked all escape routes, and many were immediately mowed down while those who tried to surrender were shot on the spot. Heavy gunfire continued without interruption for an hour, and by nightfall hundreds of students and bystanders lay dead.

Thousands remained injured and were carried away by ambulances who weren't allowed on the scene until 11 pm. By then the security forces had weeded out the student leaders, stripped them naked and had them executed. Another two thousand survivors were rounded up and shipped to prisoner camps, where bonfires were set to dispose of the dead. In the hospitals, police were stationed to prevent any inquiries by the families of the victims and the 'disappeared', while the media was given a communiqué that a revolt led by downtown Mexico had been crushed in the area.

Needless to say, the 1968 Olympics went by without a hitch.

That this month is the 25th anniversary of the Tlatelolco massacre is not the only reason to recall the tragedy. Rather, it is perhaps the most classic case in a long list of human rights abuses that the Mexican government has amassed since the constitution of 1917. As January 1, 1994 approaches, and with it the immutable union of three countries into the North American Free Trade Agreement, the disappearance of national frontiers prompts a better look at our strange bedfellows.

The events of 1968 offer a dynamic, lucid model for examining the Mexican system. Shockingly, it not only underlines the horrid state of human rights in Mexico, but also brings rise to what is lacking in NAFTA — the very issue of human rights.

The student movement of 1968, which began in July and ended with the massacre on October 2, was focused against the mechanism of repression used by those in power, while expressing anger over the painful hypocrisies in Mexican politics. The Olympics were staged to eagerly prove to the world that Mexico was a nation high on Olympic ideals — those of progress, democracy, and modernity. But just as the movement was an outcry to condemn the powers-that-be, so too was its aftermath — the massacre — a firm abrogation of those very ideals.



In a nation of extreme social injustices, the role of the army is a dubious one.

Fittingly, the Tlatelolco massacre is considered by historians as "the dividing line of a new era." The protest that preceded it uncovered the mask of democratic Mexico, only to find defeat and its destruction by revealing the totalitarian head. The new era, however, has been one with the same old mask: political assassinations, disappearances, journalistic blackmail, arbitrary imprisonment, torture and inhuman treatment in jails, repression of trade unions, child labour, graft, corruption, and a disregard for Indian rights. All have been common features in the Mexico of the '70s, '80s, and '90s.

The era has also been marked by a growing number of unemployed, while wages have not kept pace with a steady rise in the cost of living, leaving half the nation gripped in hopeless poverty. These are the popular traits of the past twenty-five years, as recorded by Amnesty International, Americas Watch, and other human rights groups.

Popular in Mexico is the rite of masks, of hidden personalities and meanings. But Mexico is one giant mask in the area of politics — the mask of a 'perfect dictatorship'. The media, from newspapers to TV stations, is widely known to be controlled by the government, either as tacit supporters

or as an organ so often bribed it is practically a branch of the federal payroll. Its power is so broad, and its methods of co-optation so thorough, that the same is said about judges and union leaders.

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In addition, every six years, the party in power extends its tenure in government, as it invariably wins a landslide election at the polls. This rite of election-rigging has been faithfully followed by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) ever since 1917, when a revolution that killed one million Mexicans finally ended. That the revolution was ironically for the premise of political and social reform adds more than just colour to the mask that is Mexico, however. The cruel irony has been played out over and over again, and its newest form is in the shape of NAFTA.

PHOTO: ANGEL FIGUEROA MEXICO, 1993

NAFTA aims not at bettering the low labour and living standards in Mexico; rather, it will take advantage of it. Moreover, the trade agreement seems poised to take full advantage of Mexico's grim human rights scenario, if not even to exacerbate it in the early years of economic restructuring. What remains debatable is whether human rights issues will eventually surface, or whether the situation will improve on its own as a natural result of Mexican measures taken to accommodate NAFTA (namely a curb in graft and corruption).

The possibility is there. However, what is likely to remain unchanged is the harrowing statistics of poverty, malnutrition, and illiteracy that are the bane of millions of Mexicans across the country. (It must be noted that education, nutrition and health care are available to the many who can afford them, but those who can are still part of a privileged class that is distinct from the lower strata by virtue of birth and upbringing.) These are the issues at stake; it is they that become just as relevant as human rights concerns, embodying half the issues in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

But NAFTA is lacking in any social charter, and this only demonstrates

the priorities of its proponents. Brian Mulroney, George Bush, and Carlos Salinas all ardently rejected proposals in their countries to include a bill of social rights similar to the European Community, where there is a commitment to raising the living standards of its poorest member states. NAFTA has no social charter because its very agenda (pro-business) relies on the lack of one. Any social contract, labour code, or green plan would only be self-defeating, as the low standards of industry regulations and an abundance of cheap, unskilled labour are the inviting variables for corporate investment to keep costs down.

The hopelessness of workers in the Philippines, Taiwan, and South Korea has already been replicated in the isolated experiment of the *maquiladoras*. But the power of NAFTA may only multiply it many times over, irreversibly and with many spiraling effects: it may push to the brink an already exhausted class of the underprivileged and impoverished, while precipitating the perfect scenario for rising tensions between activists and the elite who cannot afford any reforms or any dissent.

Hundreds of cases of *desaparecidos* — that haunting term coined in Guatemala and Argentina, but not usually identified with Mexico — were reported in the '70s and '80s by Amnesty International. This in addition to those who disappeared after Tlatelolco. Under the pressures of NAFTA, how many more will join the ranks of 'the vanished and the unknown'?

That there lacks a social charter in NAFTA is one issue. That it can even further the abuses of human rights is the more important one, yet it seems to be hidden under the mask of two industrialized nations forging a benevolent link with a developing country. Again, the rhetoric of progress, democracy, and modernity are ideals which will kill.

The students who demonstrated in 1968 did so to protest against the model of hypocrisy and repression in Mexican politics. As non-conformists to the principles of PRI, they were disenchanted by what little their futures had in store for them. They stood on that outrage, courageously, to stand up for their beliefs. Cut down and swept aside in one of the greatest political cover-ups the world has ever seen, their beliefs should never be forgotten.

In memory of the students.

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