

Another early step of President Zedillo was the replacement of almost all members of the Supreme Court and a change in legislation to the effect that judges will now serve for 15 years rather than for life. The effect of these changes remains to be seen.

Mexico's National Human Rights Commission is slowly but steadily gaining in credibility and has the explicit support of the President. Its recommendations are typically more forthright than before and compliance by both state and federal authorities is improving. In response to the July 1995 killing of 17 peasants in Guerrero State, it issued its toughest condemnation yet. Complaints received by the Commission in 1995 rose by 12% over 1994; this may be due to a greater awareness of the Commission's existence on the part of the population at large, but also to the currently difficult socio-economic climate, in which human rights violations of all kinds appear to have increased. The economic crisis saw unemployment/underemployment rise to around 30% and the purchasing power of wage-earners decline by 14% in 1995.

The rights of members of three sectors of Mexican society are especially prone to abuse: indigenous people, women and children. Racism in Mexico is insidious and widespread, albeit less acceptable socially following the Chiapas uprising. At the Fourth UN World Conference on Women, Mexico made no new commitments toward improving the status of women. In the light of the crisis, children are now being sent out to work at an earlier age; the government is also considering reducing the age at which a person may be tried as an adult.

CANADIAN POSITION

Canada is concerned by ongoing human rights abuses in Mexico and Canadian ministers frequently take advantage of their regular contacts with their Mexican counterparts to discuss human rights and political/democratic reform. We believe that, in spite of the gravity of the problem, Mexico has made significant progress in the observance of human rights over the past several years, and that this progress is best reinforced by encouragement and constructive bilateral activities.

The Canadian Embassy in Mexico maintains close contacts with the Mexican National Human Rights Commission and with many Mexican Human Rights NGOs. On occasion it raises particular cases with the Mexican authorities; in 1995 the cases of NGO activist Jorge Santiago Santiago and of a Canadian priest were raised at a high level.

Through its Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, the Canadian Embassy in 1995 supported 12 human rights-related projects in Mexico, including a series of nine "Human Rights Awareness" workshops with indigenous communities in Chiapas. Canada does not have a bilateral (government-to-government) technical assistance programme for Mexico.

Both Elections Canada and the Canadian Human Rights Commission have established close relationships with their counterparts; in January 1996 Chief Electoral officer J.-P. Kingsley spent two weeks in Mexico advising the Federal Electoral Institute, and in October 1995 Canada's Human Rights Commissioner, Mr. Maxwell Yalden, hosted a substantive visit to Canada by his Mexican counterpart (who also discussed human rights issues with Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs).