

III. MEXICO: BACKGROUND

A. GEOGRAPHY

Mexico, the third largest country in Latin America (after Brazil and Argentina) is one-fifth the size of Canada. The extremely varied topography of the country ranges from low desert plains and jungle-like coastal strips to high plateaus and rugged mountains. From a low desert in the north, the plateau rises to 2,400 metres above sea level near Mexico City.

Mexico climate is generally more closely related to altitude than to latitude. Most of Mexico is dry; only about 12% of the total area receives adequate rainfall in all seasons. Temperatures range from tropical in the coastal lowlands to cool in the higher elevations.

Mineral resources are plentiful, especially silver, gold, copper, lead, zinc, molybdenum and coal. Mexico is a major producer of oil and natural gas.

B. PEOPLE

Mexico is the world's largest Spanish speaking country. It is also distinguished within the Latin American region by being largely (79%) of "mestizo" or of mixed Indian-Spanish origin; 11% of the population is Indian.

Although Mexico has been successful in reducing its rate of population growth in the last 15 years, 53% of Mexicans are less than 20 years old. Both education and health care are theoretically free and universal, but in reality these services are either not available or beyond the financial reach of one-quarter to one-third of the population.

The majority of Mexicans remain outside the economic mainstream, and the gap between the wealthiest and the poorest is widening. The standard of living of the middle class has been declining rapidly.

Mexico is a centralized country with a quarter of the population living in the capital. This creates a number of serious problems: pollution (the federal district is the most polluted urban area in the world), overpopulation, lack of proper public services, delinquency, inadequate housing, etc.

C. HISTORY

An advanced indigenous civilization existed in Mexico prior to the Spanish