

MEXICOISSUE

Although the human rights situation has improved overall under the administration of President Zedillo, an increased military presence in certain parts of Mexico has led to an upswing of abuses since mid-1996. There has also been increased harassment of human rights activists.

BACKGROUND

Over the past few years, notwithstanding black episodes such as abuses by the Army in Chiapas (January 1994) and the massacre by police of seventeen peasants in Guerrero (June 1995), the overall trend on human rights abuses in Mexico has been positive. For example, complaints regarding grave allegations such as torture have declined, the National Human Rights Commission has gained in credibility, and a team from the Interamerican Human Rights Commission was given unlimited access throughout Mexico. The Office of the Attorney General (PGR) has this year made serious attempts to address corruption and other criminal activities within the federal police; in mid-1996 700 police officers were dismissed, bringing to 1200 the total number fired in two years.

However, reports in recent months indicate that some backsliding may be under way. As a result not only of insurgency movements, but of a conscious decision by the authorities to depend on the Army for narcotrafficking interdiction (as opposed to the notoriously corrupt federal police), there is now an increased military presence in large parts of Southern Mexico, in particular the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Guerrero. In more than half of Mexico's 32 states, military officers have been given command of state police forces. The first move of Mexico's new Attorney General, upon taking office in early December 1996, was to name a General as coordinator of the country's entire drug strategy (but there is no suggestion whatsoever that the individual is corrupt or has a record of human rights abuses).

The presence of the army in so many roles formerly held by police has led to a rash of complaints of human rights abuses and to concerns about the long-term implications of the phenomenon. Although historically the Army has a better record on human rights abuses than the Mexican police, most of the more serious allegations of abuses during the Chiapas uprising (e.g. extrajudicial executions) were laid at the army's door. These have not been resolved.

NGO activists themselves are also coming in for renewed harassment. A particularly grave incident was the beating and temporary kidnapping of a member of CONPAZ in San Cristóbal, a crime for which no conviction has yet been obtained. Death threats against activists are increasing and, although there is no suggestion that these threats are inspired by the central government, the authorities seem disinclined to take decisive action.

In Northern Chiapas (away from the Zapatista conflict zone), there exists a state of serious civil conflict, with armed gangs in the pay of wealthy landowners regularly taking on squatters and each other in shootouts that have cost many more lives than the uprising of