

THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN MEXICO

ISSUE

Against a background of profound political change and economic turmoil, Mexico appears committed to improving its human rights record, but grave abuses continue to come to light and impunity remains a serious problem.

BACKGROUND

In spite of the severe economic crisis of early 1995, the effects of which continue to be felt at every level of Mexican society, the fledgling government of President Zedillo has continued the political and electoral reforms initiated by the previous administration. With the tacit support of Zedillo, Congress is asserting itself to an unprecedented degree and cleanly-run elections at the state level are now the rule rather than the exception (with the result that the opposition PAN controls four states and many urban centres). In the electoral field, important questions that still need to be addressed are fair political coverage by the media (especially television), party funding and the independence of the Federal Electoral Institute.

The principal single incident in 1994 that gave rise to serious human rights abuses was the January indigenous uprising in Chiapas. Peace talks are now under way; they are proceeding at a slow pace, but both sides appear committed to achieving a lasting and fair peace in the region, and the government has indicated it will address many of the inequities that contributed to the revolt. The talks are being supplemented by round-table consultations on indigenous issues. However, the most serious abuses of January 1994 — notably a number of extra-judicial executions for which the Army was alleged to have been responsible — have not been addressed by the authorities in a satisfactory manner. Recommendations by the National Human Rights Commission to the effect that the Army should conduct investigations into the killings have been effectively ignored. The Commission continues to receive sporadic complaints of harassment of the civilian population by army troops now stationed in Chiapas. A number of foreign priests (including one Canadian priest) have been expelled from or prohibited from returning to Chiapas, on the basis of technical violations of their visas. In Chiapas and elsewhere in rural Mexico, land-related disputes continue to give rise to violence and sometimes to excessive repression by the authorities.

President Zedillo acted imaginatively by giving the portfolio of Solicitor General (Procurador General de la República) to a well-respected member of an opposition party, Antonio Lozano. This is a first for Mexico. Lozano has struggled diligently to reform the Federal Police, for which he is responsible, but his efforts have yet to meet substantial success. Incidents of torture are now relatively few but still occur to a disquieting degree; corruption is rampant; none of the three major assassination investigations with which Lozano has been entrusted have been solved to the satisfaction of the Mexican public. The only top-ranking official to have been prosecuted for any crime over the past year is Raúl Salinas, brother of the former President. Lozano's task has been greatly complicated by the increasing presence of narcotrafficking and associated crime in Mexico, and the meagre resources at his disposal in the wake of the economic crisis.