

AI INDEX: AMR 41/30/98
12 JUNE 1998

Mexico: Spiralling violence in Chiapas and Guerrero could degenerate into human rights disaster

The escalating political violence over the past month in the States of Chiapas and Guerrero -- which has left at least 18 dead and 79 detained in the past three days -- could degenerate into a human rights catastrophe, Amnesty International warned today.

“A disturbing pattern appears to be emerging, with the perpetrators of the massacres getting away with their crimes while the Mexican authorities are arbitrarily detaining peasants in areas considered to be opposed to the government,” the organization said.

“While some of the dead may have been armed insurgents, we suspect that others are civilians who have been killed by government soldiers.”

In the State of Chiapas, Amnesty International has observed an increasing tendency to use the issue of ‘autonomous municipalities’ as a pretext for widespread arbitrary detentions. This has fuelled a feeling of insecurity within areas which oppose the government party and where there are already a thousand displaced indigenous people displaced who fled for fear for their safety. Villagers in regions where so-called paramilitary groups operate are fearful of further attacks.

“Six months after the massacre at Acteal, and there still has been no serious attempt to deal with the numerous paramilitary groups active in Chiapas,” Amnesty International said. “This indicates lack of impartiality in the application of the law.”

In Guerrero, meanwhile, tension has risen as the third anniversary of the June 1995 Aguas Blancas massacre approaches and groups prepare to commemorate the death of 17 peasant activists at the hands of the state security forces. Amnesty International is particularly concerned by reports of possible killings by the army in El Charco on 7 June. Eleven alleged *Ejército Popular Revolucionario*, EPR, guerrillas were killed in what the army describes as a shoot-out but which early witness testimony suggests could have been a deliberate ambush.

If the government is to avoid accusations of partiality, there is an urgent need for the state authorities to be properly investigated. They were accused by the Supreme Court in 1996, supported by the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights, of being responsible for the massacre in Aguas Blancas. In respect of the incidents in El Charco, it is essential that independent and rigorous autopsies be carried out to establish clearly the circumstances in which the killings occurred.

“The army claimed initially that the shooting happened after a routine anti-narcotics patrol stumbled by accident upon a guerrilla meeting. This looks increasingly implausible as the full extent of the army presence emerges,” Amnesty International said. “It is crucial that the authorities allow

appropriate legal and medical professionals and human rights bodies to visit the site of the incident and to properly protect the evidence at the scene to avoid accusations of a cover-up.”

The human rights organization is reminding the government that anti-narcotic or anti-insurgent operations must be carried out with due respect for human rights and international standards. Such operations must not be used as a pretext for the indiscriminate detention of civilians. This only serve to heighten tensions and increase the risks of further loss of lives.

Amnesty International is calling on the Mexican government to take all necessary measures to guarantee the integrity and security of the civilian population, to insist that its security forces respect the international standards on the use of force and to investigate and bring to trial those agents of the state involved in human rights violations.
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