

MEXICO

Members of the Mexican army rape three Tzeltal women

María Teresa Méndez Santiz, aged 20, Cristina Méndez Santiz, 18 and María Méndez Santiz, 16, members of the Tzeltal indigenous group, were reportedly raped by soldiers at a roadblock near Altamirano in the south-eastern state of Chiapas, Mexico.

*The incident occurred during the afternoon of the 4 June 1994 as the three women and their mother were returning from the town of Altamirano to their community of Santa Rosita Sibaquil. According to their testimony, soldiers detained them at a roadblock and took them to a nearby building. The soldiers accused the women of participating in the attack on Altamirano, one of the towns taken by the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN, Zapatista National Liberation Army, at the beginning of the year, and of hiding their uniforms and weapons. The soldiers beat the women with their weapons and kicked them. They were then raped by about 10 soldiers.*

*Representatives from a local human rights organization later obtained the women's testimonies and on 30 June 1994 submitted a complaint to the Public Ministry (*Ministerio Público*). In the*

complaint, the organization also criticised the way in which representatives from the National Human Rights Commission had dealt with the case. Two members of the commission visited the community, reportedly claiming to represent another local indigenous organization. They obliged the women to sign with a thumbprint a document they could not read and refused to provide them with a translator. Members of human rights groups working on the case have subsequently been threatened and harassed by unidentified men.

The army has denied the accusations of rape. On 1 July 1994 the Ministry of National Defence issued a press release stating, "... the Ministry of National Defence emphatically rejects the false charges made against military personnel and reserves the right to legally proceed against any persons or entities who slander our institution"¹

To Amnesty International's knowledge, the public ministry has been slow to investigate the case. The organization believes the authorities must take immediate steps to investigate the case fully and impartially and bring those responsible to justice.

Background - The uprising in Chiapas

The rape of the three Tzeltal women is one of the latest in a series of reports of human rights violations that have occurred in Chiapas since the uprising by members of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) at the beginning of the year.

¹ "... la Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional rechaza enérgicamente las falsas imputaciones hechas a personal militar, reservándose el derecho a proceder legalmente en contra de las personas o entidades que difamen a nuestra institución".

The EZLN launched its offensive on 1 January 1994 and temporarily took control of four towns in Chiapas: San Cristóbal de las Casas, Altamirano, Ocosingo and Las Margaritas as well as large areas of the Chiapas highlands including the Lacandon rainforest. In a declaration issued on 1 January 1994, the EZLN transmitted a series of demands, stating, "... we have nothing, absolutely nothing, not even a roof over our heads, no land, no work, no health care, no food nor education. Nor are we able to freely and democratically elect our political representatives, nor is there independence from foreigners, nor is there peace for ourselves and our children".²

After an initially low-key response, the government sent in the army with air support and attempted a full-scale military assault. In the following days, Amnesty International began to receive reports of widespread human rights violations including extrajudicial executions, "disappearances", arbitrary arrest and torture. Although the government declared a ceasefire on 12 January, reports of land attacks by the armed forces continued in the days that followed. In mid-January, Amnesty International sent a delegation to Chiapas and confirmed that serious human right violations had been committed by members of the security forces.

² "...no tengamos nada, absolutamente nada, ni un techo digno, ni tierra, ni trabajo, ni salud, ni alimentación, ni educación, sin tener derecho a elegir libre y democráticamente a nuestras autoridades, sin independencia de extranjeros, sin paz para nosotros y nuestros hijos."

The state of Chiapas, one of the poorest in Mexico, is beset by political, social and economic problems. Land disputes involving powerful private landowners (known as *caciques*) and peasants, the majority of them indigenous, are frequently resolved by force. While Amnesty International takes no position on competing land claims, the organization is concerned at reports that as a result of such conflicts, members of indigenous and rural communities have suffered arbitrary arrest, torture and other serious human rights violations at the hands of members of the security forces, in many cases, with the complicity of local *caciques* and their gunmen (*pistoleros*). The failure of local and state level civilian authorities to properly investigate complaints of killings, arbitrary arrest and torture and to bring those responsible to justice, leads Amnesty International to conclude that these violations take place with the acquiescence of these authorities.