

PUBLIC

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Fear for safety

22 February 2005

MEXICO

49 detainees

Residents of Tila, State of Chiapas, who have fled their homes

Police detained at least 49 people on 15 February, beating many of them severely, while evicting supporters of a local opposition party who had occupied a town hall in southern Mexico following a disputed election. The detainees are held in a police *casa de seguridad*, a semi-official pre-trial detention premise, where they may be at risk of torture, and most do not have access to medical treatment or legal advice. Many families from the town have since fled their homes, for fear of being detained or to escape the political violence.

Victory in the election for mayor (*Presidente Municipal*) in the town of Tila, Chiapas state, was initially claimed by an alliance of two parties, the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* and the *Partido de Trabajo* (PRD-PT). However, after a series of appeals to the Federal Electoral Council (*Tribunal Federal Electoral*), victory was awarded to the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). The electoral dispute reportedly springs from a power struggle within the community rather than the ideologies of the political parties involved. According to local human rights organizations, the present conflict is due to the authorities' failure to hold to account the state-sponsored paramilitary group *Paz y Justicia* (Peace and Justice).

Protesting supporters of the PRD-PT occupied the town hall (*Palacio Municipal*) in early January, when local PRI officials were to take office, and refused to leave. The 15 February police operation was intended simply to end the occupation of the building, according to state authorities. The police apparently used excessive force, which was evident in the TV coverage of the action. A number of witnesses have alleged that armed civilians were with the police, pointing out who should be arrested. Some families of those detained have denied any involvement in the occupation of the town hall.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

During the 1990s Tila was the base of the paramilitary group *Paz y Justicia*, which committed widespread human rights violations against civilians who were perceived to sympathise with the armed opposition group Zapatista National Liberation Army (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*), which emerged in 1994. While *Paz y Justicia* has been less active in recent years, and the authorities took some actions against its members, the majority of its leaders were never brought to justice, nor was the group dismantled. Recent renewed attention at the impunity enjoyed by some leaders of the group has led the state authorities to detain one of them.

Conflicts in many communities in Chiapas continue to simmer, with political parties often serving as vehicles for powerful groups within communities to maintain power and exert control over the population. The state authorities have consistently failed to effectively hold those responsible for human rights abuses to account, creating a climate of fear and impunity. All too often the intervention of state authorities favours one group over another and fuels community violence. Amnesty International receives regular reports of police torture or ill-treatment of detainees in Chiapas, with little or no official action to prevent or punish these abuses.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Spanish or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of the people detained in the disturbances in Tila on 15 February, and those who have been forced to flee their community by the violence;
- calling on the authorities to make public the identity of those in detention;
- calling on the authorities to ensure that those in detention have unrestricted access to their families, lawyers and any medical attention they may require, and that they are held in a legally recognised detention facility;
- calling for the detainees be charged with a recognisably criminal offence or else released;

- calling for an immediate, full and impartial investigation into the police operation in Tila on 15 February which reportedly involved use of excessive force and arbitrary detentions and resulted in many members of the community fleeing their homes;
- calling for full and impartial investigation of the activities of the group *Paz y Justicia* and any other armed civilian groups operating in the municipality, for these groups to be dismantled and for their members to be held to account for human rights violations committed since 1994.

APPEALS TO:

Attorney General of Chiapas

Mariano Herrán Salvatti
Procurador General de Justicia del Estado de Chiapas
Libramiento Norte s/n
Infonavit el Rosario
Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, México
Fax: + 52 961 616 5724
Salutation: Dear Attorney General / Señor Procurador

Governor of Chiapas

Pablo Salazar Mendiguchia
Gobernador del Estado de Chiapas
Palacio de Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas
Av. Central y Primera Oriente
Colonia Centro, C.P. 29009
Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, México
Fax: + 52 961 612 0917
Salutation: Dear Governor / Señor Gobernador

Minister of the Interior

Lic. Santiago Creel
Secretario de Gobernación, Secretaría de Gobernación
Bucareli 99, 1er. piso, Col. Juárez
Delegación Cuauhtémoc, México D.F., C.P.06600, México
Fax: +525 55 093 3414
Salutation: Señor Secretario / Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Human Rights NGO

Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas
Brasil# 14 Barrio Mexicanos
CP 29240, San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México
Fax: +52 967 6783551 (ask for "tono de fax, por favor")

and to diplomatic representatives of Mexico accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 6 March 2005.