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Government Assigns Military Personnel to Civilian Police Force

by LADB Staff

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In a controversial move, President Ernesto Zedillo assigned 5,000 members of the military to the recently created anti-crime police force (Policia Federal Preventiva, PFP). Zedillo formed the PFP in November 1998 to supplement the administration's anti-crime campaign, the Cruzada Nacional contra el Crimen y la Delincuencia. However, the PFP has remained seriously understaffed, preventing the unit's full operation.

Speaking to reporters in early July, Defense Secretary Enrique Cervantes and Interior Secretary Diodoro Carrasco said assigning army and air force personnel to the PFP is the first step to ensure a more efficient operation of the unit. "If we succeed in approaching this efficiently, and with social commitment, we can guarantee a favorable environment for progress and the well-being of society," said Carrasco. Sources at the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB) said the government has hired law-enforcement agencies from the US, Britain, France, and Spain to help train the military members assigned to the PFP.

Outcry from human rights groups, opposition parties

The decision to assign soldiers and air force personnel to a civilian police unit created an uproar among human rights organizations and drew criticism from the two major opposition parties. Using statistics compiled by the government-affiliated Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), opponents referred to 21 complaints that military personnel and some members of the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) engaged in torture during 1998.

"There are bound to be excesses," said attorney Salvador Tinajero of the Comision de Defensa y Promocion de Derechos Humanos. "Soldiers have not been trained to fight crime but to fight against the enemy." Coincidentally, the decision to assign military personnel to PFP was announced only days before an 11-day visit by UN special envoy Asma Jahangir to examine human rights violations in Mexico during July. Among other things, Jahangir was sent to investigate complaints that members of the military have been involved in torture, executions, and other violations in Chiapas and Guerrero states. Felipe Bonilla, a division director with the Secretaria de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA), said the Mexican military had nothing to hide and would be willing to present Jahangir with any information she requested.

Legislators from the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) said the incorporation of military personnel into the PFP was a possible violation of the Mexican Constitution. "The armed forces as an institution was established to guarantee our country's sovereignty and defend our national territory," said PRD interim president Pablo Gomez. "Therefore, it is completely illegal that the institution engage in any activities that differ from those spelled out in the Constitution." Government says reinforcements needed in fight against crime Beyond the question of constitutionality, the Zedillo administration

has defended the decision to assign military personnel to the PFP as necessary to stem the soaring crime rate.

The federal government and state and municipal authorities have been unable to make much headway against the wave of robberies, assaults, kidnappings, and murders that escalated after the 1995 devaluation of the Mexican peso and the ensuing economic crisis. The increase in crime has been particularly visible in Mexico City, where some experts say an average of 700 crimes are committed daily. In an interview with Reuters news agency, criminologist Rafael Ruiz said the crime rate in Mexico City soared by 36% in 1995 alone. "Statistics have no relevance for people," Ruiz said. "The feeling of insecurity will continue because we grew very fast to unaccustomed levels for residents of the capital."

But Ruiz noted that the crime rate in the Mexican capital is not much different than in many of the world's largest cities. For example, he said, the number of crimes reported in Mexico City annually is about 3,000 for 100,000 residents. In Miami, the ratio is 13,000 crimes per 100,000 residents. Still, Ruiz acknowledged the frustration among residents of the capital because a corrupt and often inefficient police force has been unable to reduce the crime rate. A recent public-opinion poll conducted by the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma found that eight of every 10 respondents had no confidence in the city's police force. And, three of every 10 respondents said they were convinced that police officers were committing some of the crimes.

Crime has also escalated in the states of Baja California and Sinaloa, where drug-related murders are on the increase. A Mexican institute that monitors activities of organized crime found that the two states each reported close to 300 drug-related killings in 1999. The rapid growth in Mexico's crime rate has not escaped the scrutiny of international organizations. In a survey published in mid-July, the Geneva-based World Economic Forum ranked Mexico among the worst for lawlessness and crime among the world's 59 largest economies. Specifically, the forum ranked Mexico 58 in public safety, 52 in lawlessness, and 55 in how costly organized crime is to legitimate business.

Many political observers expect crime to become a major focus of the presidential campaigns ahead of the 2000 presidential election. The issue is bound to come up both in the presidential primary scheduled by the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) for November of this year and in the general election scheduled for July 2000. "There is no doubt the question of social violence and personal security will be an issue in the next election," said Kevin Middlebrook, director of the Center for US-Mexican Studies at the University of California-San Diego. (Sources: La Cronica, Novedades, The News, 07/09/99; Spanish news service EFE, 07/10/99; Reuters, 06/08/99, 06/09/99, 07/08/99, 07/12/99; Associated Press, 07/12/99; Notimex, 07/13/99, 07/14/99; Agence France-Presse, 07/14/99; The Dallas Morning News, El Diario de Yucatan, 07/15/99; Excelsior, 06/09/99, 07/09/99, 07/13/99, 07/16/99; La Jornada, 07/09/99, 07/16/99; El Universal, 07/09/99, 07/15/99, 07/16/99, 07/21/99)

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