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Documents Confirm Government Role in Tlatelolco Massacre in 1968

by LADB Staff

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Government documents released on the 35th anniversary of the student massacre in Tlatelolco confirm that the violence was incited by members of the government of former President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz (1964-1970) and his interior secretary Luis Echeverria Alvarez. The documents were previously not available to the public but were released through the openness law promoted by President Vicente Fox and approved by the Congress in May 2002 (see SourceMex, 2002-05-08).

Echeverria, who succeeded Diaz Ordaz as president in 1970-1976, was accused of conducting another violent crackdown against student protestors in 1971. Some student leaders from that second incident have filed legal charges against the ex-president (see SourceMex, 2002-06-19).

The documents released this year regarding the Tlatelolco incident provided further evidence of the complicity of the Echeverria-led Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB). These documents confirm that government troops incited chaos when they fired on the crowd of demonstrators.

Some of these shooters were firing from an apartment rented by Echeverria's sister-in-law Rebeca Zuno de Lima in Tlatelolco. "The politicians were the ones who enabled military personnel to carry out their authoritarian purposes, which led to the massacre in Tlatelolco," said Ignacio Carrillo Prieto, the attorney appointed by Fox to head the Fiscalia Especial para Movimientos Sociales y Politicos del Pasado (FEMOSPP). The office was created to investigate human rights violations during the government's "dirty war" against dissidents in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Echeverria has repeatedly declined to make extensive comments on the Tlatelolco incident, except to deny the existence of any government plots. Prosecutors say the documents prove otherwise. "Undoubtedly [Echeverria] knew what was happening," said FEMOSPP special investigator Maria de Los Angeles Magdaleno. "It was an operation of the state." Ex-interior secretary Echeverria had major role Magdaleno told The Washington Post that documents show that Echeverria was receiving updates from the armed forces "every five minutes" and then passing that information onto President Diaz Ordaz.

Magdaleno said, however, that the documents do not indicate that there was any direct order to shoot at students. Rather, she said, the shooting erupted out of the chaos that resulted from the presence of large numbers of armed government units, such as the army, the police, the presidential security forces, and the snipers. "The decision was not to go out killing students and certainly not with the eyes of the world on Mexico" before the 1968 Olympics, Magdaleno said. "There were so many groups in the operation that the authorities couldn't control them." Still, she said she had no doubt that Echeverria "knew everything" that was occurring.
The FEMOSPP has received mixed reviews in its nearly two years of existence. Critics acknowledge that Carrillo has taken some steps toward investigating human rights violations, but they say he hasn't done enough to overcome obstacles presented by opponents of the investigations. For example, Carrillo has said he has uncovered evidence of only 38 deaths in the Tlatelolco massacre, while human rights organizations put the number closer to several hundred.

Organizations like Human Rights Watch (HRW) have urged Fox and the Mexican Congress to place a higher priority on conducting a deeper investigation of the Tlatelolco incident. "As this thing drags out, I think the frustration has grown considerably," said Daniel Wilkinson, an attorney for HRW. "It will take showing concrete results for that to abate." Carrillo has made some appeals to the supreme court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion, SCJN) to allow him greater latitude in investigations.

Sources close to the SCJN said justices are inclined to grant the special prosecutor special powers to detain Miguel Nazar Haro and Luis de la Barreda Moreno, both of whom served as chiefs of the now-defunct security agency (Direccion Federal de Seguridad, DFS) during the 1968 and 1971 crackdowns (see SourceMex, 2003-06-18).

A final ruling by the SCJN on the matter is due in mid-November. "We all knew that the possibility of criminal prosecution in these cases was very remote, if not impossible," said Carrillo. Some critics, like Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, believe Carrillo's efforts may be in vain because Congress has already approved legislation protecting the principal political and security officials involved in the incident. "The office should be shut down because it does not have sufficient faculties to punish those responsible for the massacre in Tlatelolco," said Lopez Obrador, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD).

Some survivors of the massacre, relatives of the victims, student organizations, and human rights activists commemorated the 35th anniversary with a march through downtown Mexico City. The march turned violent, however, as some participants ransacked shops and banks, fought riot police, and smashed windows at the SEGOB headquarters. Mexico City authorities blamed the incident on "outside agitators" who infiltrated the demonstration to cause trouble. (Sources: La Cronica de Hoy, Associated Press, Reuters, Los Angeles Times, 10/02/03; The Herald, La Jornada, Milenio Diario, El Universal, 10/02/03, 10/03/03; El Sol de Mexico, The Washington Post, 10/03/03)

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