

5-17-2006

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Police Accused of Overreacting to Protests in Mexico State

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2006-05-17

For the second time in less than a month, a confrontation between police and protestors turned fatal, raising some concerns that state and federal anti-riot units are overreacting in difficult situations. The latest incident occurred in early May in the communities of San Salvador Atenco and Texcoco in Mexico state, where thousands of riot police clashed with local residents, who were armed with machetes. The riot units, comprising members of the Mexico state police and the federal law-enforcement agency (Policia Federal Preventiva, PFP), were called after a mob assaulted two municipal police officers and beat them into unconsciousness.

Human rights advocates questioned the police treatment of individuals arrested in the riot more than the performance of officers during the incident. The violence began when municipal authorities in Texcoco told flower vendors that they could no longer sell their goods on sidewalks outside the local market. Rather than accept the directive, the vendors called on the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra (FPDT), which proceeded to block a local highway and assaulted the police officers attempting to enforce the ordinance.

The FPDT has a reputation for using violence to attain its goals, which contributed to the tensions. A mob was dragging the unconscious police officers to nearby San Salvador Atenco when the state and federal riot police confronted them. "We're supporting the vendors, and we just wanted them to be able to sell their flowers," FPDT leader Ulises del Valle said in a telephone interview broadcast by Televisa. "They tried to kick them out, so in support we blocked the highway." Del Valle said protesters beat the officers because "the town is so angry it is difficult to control."

Authorities confronted a similar situation in November 2004, when residents of a poor neighborhood outside Mexico City tried to lynch three undercover police officers (see SourceMex, 2004-12-01). The riot police managed to subdue the crowd and arrested 217 people for inciting a riot, but the confrontations claimed one life and left another person in critical condition. A teenager from Atenco was killed by an explosive device that landed near him.

A second victim, a student at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), was hit by a rubber bullet and was "brain dead," said doctors at a local hospital. During the clashes, dozens of other protestors and police were injured. The violence in Mexico state came about two weeks after state police and the PFP engaged in violent clashes with striking workers at the Sicartsa steel mill in Lazaro Cardenas-Las Truchas in Michoacan state. Two people died and dozens were injured in that incident (see SourceMex, 2006-05-03).

Multiple complaints filed against police

As in Michoacan, human rights advocates in Mexico state accused state and federal authorities of responding to the unrest with excessive violence. The Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), an independent agency created by the federal government, said multiple complaints

were filed against police, including rape, sexual abuse, excessive force, arbitrary detention, looting of homes, inhumane treatment of prisoners, and a number of other violations. At least 16 women claimed to have been sexually assaulted. "We have received 182 complaints ranging from illegal detention to damage to personal property," said CNDH official Raul Plascencia Villanueva. Dozens of human rights organizations, led by the Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro (PRODH), also condemned what they considered an overly violent reaction by the police to the protestors.

The PRODH, which showed videos from police who said too much force was used during the confrontation, called for the resignation of Mexico state's police commissioner Wilfrido Robledo Madrid, state attorney general Abel Villicana, and federal Public Safety Secretary Eduardo Medina Mora.

The international organization Human Rights Watch (HRW) also issued a statement condemning the excessive use of force by the police but also criticizing the "great acts of violence" by several residents of Atenco who participated in the demonstrations. "These incidents should be investigated and clarified, and the responsible officers and the residents who participated in these acts of violence should be sanctioned," said the HRW statement.

Mexico state Gov. Enrique Peña Nieto, a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), later acknowledged that state police committed "excessive" violence against some of the 217 individuals who were detained. He promised that his office would conduct a full investigation. The arrestees were taken to the La Palma maximum-security prison in Mexico state. Only 28 of those arrested were kept in prison, with 172 others released on bail.

Another 18 individuals were set free after authorities determined they had nothing to do with the riots. Community has history of violence State and federal officials suggest the FPDT, which has a history of confrontation with local authorities, used the controversy regarding the flower sales to foment violence. "It's no coincidence," said Peña Nieto. "It was a planned and intended action."

The FPDT was successful in mobilizing local residents to oppose a plan by President Vicente Fox to construct a new Mexico City airport near Texcoco (see SourceMex, 2001-10-31 and 2002-07-17). The local resistance, along with strong opposition from environmental advocates, prompted the Fox government to abandon the plan (2003-06-04).

The FPDT has also taken other actions that have angered state and federal authorities. In 2002, the organization declared San Salvador Atenco an autonomous community, following the example set by the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas (see SourceMex, 2004-0218). The FPDT proceeded to expel police, the mayor, and all government officials. Rather than confront the FPDT, the federal and state governments let San Salvador Atenco remain an autonomous community but did not provide any services or support.

In July 2003, several hundred residents, angry about being abandoned by the official government, staged a protest in front of several federal agencies in Mexico City. They complained of assaults,

petty crime, and drug trafficking under the government set up by the FPDT. This prompted the government to begin negotiations with the FPDT. In August 2003, FPDT leaders agreed to relinquish control of municipal offices in exchange for amnesty. Some FPDT members, however, tried to block the installation of a newly elected mayor that December, starting a riot that injured about 20 people.

Many San Salvador Atenco residents, while sympathetic to the issues raised by the FPDT, do not agree with the group's heavy-handed tactics. "The only law was the law of the machete," local resident Teodoro Martinez told the Los Angeles Times. Zapatista influence alleged The FPDT's relationship with the EZLN led some Mexico state officials to suggest that Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos might have had a hand in planning the latest uprising. Marcos happened to be in nearby Mexico City for a series of rallies as part of his "Other Campaign," an alternative to the mainstream presidential campaigns (see SourceMex, 2006-01-18).

One of those rallies took place on International Labor Day in front of the US Embassy in Mexico City and later in the Zocalo (see SourceMex, 2006-05-03). "From all the information I have, I believe this event [in San Salvador Atenco] was orchestrated by Marcos," Robledo Madrid said in an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario. Federal officials were more cautious, saying they had no evidence to link the Zapatista leader to the incidents at San Salvador Atenco. Public Safety Secretary Medina Mora downplayed any connection to Marcos, saying a small local group planned the incident.

President's Fox's spokesperson Ruben Aguilar made similar statements. "The federal government has no evidence [that Marcos had a role in the incidents]. Still, some analysts do not discard the possibility that Marcos may have had some contact with FPDT leader del Valle before the incident. Octavio Rodriguez Araujo, a political analyst at UNAM, suggested that the EZLN leader might have been using the incident to energize his floundering campaign. "The Other Campaign has been a failure, and now he is going to marginalize it further," Rodriguez Araujo told the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior.

The Zapatista leader, who is using the moniker Delegado Zero during his Other Campaign rallies, maintained a low profile in the aftermath of the San Salvador Atenco incident, but issued a statement expressing solidarity with the residents of that community. "The repression of the people of San Salvador Atenco is a repression of all similar communities in Mexico," said the EZLN leader. "Their struggle is our struggle." Marcos later resurfaced in San Salvador Atenco, where he said he planned to stay and lead more protests until the detained protestors were released.

Presidential candidates condemn incident

The San Salvador Atenco incident has made its way into the presidential campaigns. Presidential candidates Felipe Calderon of the governing conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and Roberto Madrazo of the PRI both praised authorities for taking a strong stance against protestors who had ignored the rule of law.

Madrazo in particular praised Gov. Pena Nieto. Both the PRI and PAN campaigns also attempted to link the incident to the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and its candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. "Behind the ski mask [worn by the Zapatistas] is the same face of

intolerance and authoritarianism that describes the 'violent left' represented by Lopez Obrador," Calderon said during one of his campaign rallies.

At a rally for Madrazo, Pena also accused Lopez Obrador of encouraging the Atenco residents to riot. The PRD candidate responded angrily to the accusations, calling Calderon, Pena, and Madrazo "supreme liars." "We had nothing to do with that situation or that conflict," said Lopez Obrador. "The residents of the [San Salvador Atenco] ejido have even said they do not agree with our policies."

Some analysts agreed with the PRD candidate, pointing out that the EZLN leader has gone out of his way to criticize Lopez Obrador, especially his connections to Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim Helu (see SourceMex, 2005-06-29 and 2006-01-18). "If I didn't know better, I would say that Calderon or [PAN president] Manuel Espino was bribing Marcos to make those comments," said Rodriguez Araujo.

Marcos repeated his criticisms of Lopez Obrador when he disparaged the three major candidates in a nationally televised interview carried by the Televisa network. When asked who was going to win, he predicted that the "lesser of the evils," Lopez Obrador, would win the presidential race. Marcos' prediction could damage the PRD candidate if it is viewed as an endorsement, some observers said.

"It's the vampire's kiss," said George Grayson, a Mexico scholar at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, and author of a new book on Lopez Obrador. "How do you deal with your enemy? You endorse him." All the public-opinion polls released in the last few days show Lopez Obrador falling behind Calderon by a few percentage points, although the margin is low enough to keep the two candidates in a statistical tie (see SourceMex, 2006-05-03).

Furthermore, some analysts said Marcos' continuing presence in the headlines could damage Lopez Obrador's chances of making a recovery in the final weeks of the campaign. "It is bad news for Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador that Subcomandante Marcos...now has a reason to park himself in Mexico City and return to the front pages and prime time radio and television," said Milenio Diario columnist Ciro Gomez. (Sources: Notimex, 05/05/06; Reuters, 05/04/06, 05/06/06; Los Angeles Times, 05/05/06, 05/06/06; The Chicago Tribune, 05/07/06; Associated Press, 05/04/06, 05/09/06; El Economista, 05/04/06, 05/05/06, 05/08/06, 05/10/06, 05/11/06; El Financiero, 05/04/06, 05/05/06, 05/08/06, 05/09/06, 05/11/06; Copley News Service, 05/13/06; The Herald-Mexico City, 05/04/06, 05/11/06, 05/14/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 05/03/06, 05/04/06, 05/08-10/06, 05/15/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 05/04/06, 05/05/06, 05/08/06, 05/10/06, 05/16/06; La Crisis, 05/16/06; Reforma, 05/04/06, 05/05/06, 05/08/06, 05/11/06, 05/12/06, 05/15-17/06; El Universal, 05/04/06, 05/05/06, 05/08/06, 05/09/06, 05/11/06, 05/12/06, 05/15-17/06; Milenio Diario, La Jornada, Excelsior, 05/04/06, 05/05/06, 05/08/12/06, 05/14-17/06)

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