

MEXICO - Killings in Oaxaca Prompt Fox to Send in Federal Forces

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MEXICO CITY, Oct 28 - [IPS](#) - The Mexican government announced Saturday that it was sending federal police to the capital of the southern state of Oaxaca to restore law and order, after four people were killed and 23 injured there Friday.

Striking teachers and hundreds of local residents living in camps have occupied downtown Oaxaca City for five months to demand the resignation of Governor Ulises Ruiz. Ten protesters had been killed so far, but Friday was the most violent day since the conflict began, bringing the total number of victims to 14.

President Vicente Fox decided to send in federal forces after holding an emergency meeting with his top security officials into the wee hours of Saturday.

According to radio reports from Oaxaca City, hundreds of federal police officers had arrived to the state capital by air on Saturday.

The Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO), which is demanding the removal of Governor Ruiz, who they accuse of corruption and authoritarianism, declared itself on maximum alert and called on its members to put up resistance to any violent actions of which they are the target.

APPO, made up of 350 Oaxaca social organisations, emerged in June after Ruiz sent police to break up a protest by teachers who went on strike in May for better salaries.

On Friday, heavily armed men in civilian dress, who witnesses identified as police officers and municipal authorities, reportedly opened fire on members of APPO, who were defending barricades they have set up to block streets in the city centre.

The protesters, whose blockades have frequently been the targets of drive-by shootings, have armed themselves with sticks and Molotov cocktails for protection.

The men who were fatally shot Friday included a teacher, a resident of a poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of Oaxaca, and a freelance U.S. journalist and cameraman. A fourth victim is still unidentified.

The U.S. reporter, Bradley Will, 36, was working for Indymedia, an Internet-based alternative news agency. He was killed by two shots to the abdomen while attempting to film interviews for a documentary he was preparing.

Osvaldo Ramírez, a photographer with the Mexican daily Milenio, was among the injured.

The U.S. embassy in Mexico lamented Will's death, which, according to Ambassador Antonio Garza, "underscores the critical need for a return to lawfulness and order in Oaxaca."

The embassy also said the men who shot at the protesters may have been local police.

APPO blames the 14 deaths on paramilitary groups made up of police officers and hired killers allegedly contracted by Ruiz.

On Friday, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights urged the Fox administration to get involved in a more decisive manner in the Oaxaca conflict.

Meanwhile, the International Federation for Human Rights expressed its concern for the growing disrespect of human rights in Oaxaca.

APPO said several of its members had been arrested Friday, and that no one knows where they are being held.

Although Ruiz, a member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), has been urged by the Fox administration, the ruling National Action Party (PAN), and a number of PRI leaders to step down or take a leave of absence, he has consistently refused.

The conflict in Oaxaca, one of Mexico's poorest states, broke out in May when the local teachers' union went on strike. As a result, some 1.3 million public school students were unable to start the school year in September.

This week, the teachers voted in assemblies to return to the classrooms.

But after Friday's violence, and because of the decision to send in federal police, that decision could be revoked, APPO said.

Since it emerged in June, APPO has occupied public offices and several local private radio stations, while setting up barricades cutting off streets in central Oaxaca City.

For the past few months, Ruiz has governed from a luxury hotel in the Mexican capital.

Human rights organisations say the security forces in Oaxaca work against social movements in the state through repression, bribes or threats.

Ruiz, who blames the crisis in Oaxaca on APPO, belongs to the most conservative wing of the PRI. While the party, which governed Mexico from 1929 to 2000, has lost its hold over most of the states and at a national level, it remains all-powerful in Oaxaca.

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