

MEXICO - Tense and Only Relative Calm after Police Crackdown

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Wednesday 1 November 2006, posted by [Dial](#)

MEXICO CITY, Oct 30 - [IPS](#) - The Mexican government justified on Monday the violent storming by federal police of social protests in the capital of the southern state of Oaxaca, saying it had restored peace and order. But the evidence tells a different story.

"The situation has got worse. We have been subjected to violent and unacceptable attacks (on Sunday) which left three dead, more than 50 under arrest, several 'disappeared' and some cases of torture," Florentino López, spokesman for the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO), told IPS.

Flavio Sosa, another of the organisation's leaders, said negotiations with the government would be shut down as long as federal police forces — who he described as "criminals and rapists" — remained in Oaxaca.

But President Vicente Fox, whose six-year term is due to finish in December, sees things from a different angle. "Today, social harmony has returned to Oaxaca," he said on Monday.

In Oaxaca "we were able to combine dialogue and the search for agreements with establishing order and respect for the law. Dialogue was essential to restoring peace and calm," he said.

On Sunday afternoon, thousands of police in armoured trucks entered Oaxaca, the state capital. By dint of shoving, truncheon blows, tear gas and water cannon, the police evicted the APPO encampments and barricades that the protesters set up five months ago in the city streets and parks.

The demonstrators, most of whom offered no resistance and instead bunkered down in the buildings of the public Benito Juárez Autonomous University, held protest marches Monday through the city of Oaxaca, demanding withdrawal of the police and the immediate resignation of Governor Ulises Ruiz.

The conflict in Oaxaca began on May 22 when teachers went on strike for higher wages. They were joined by 350 social organisations that came together in APPO in June, after Ruiz called in the police to break up the teachers' protest.

The conflict escalated to the present level amid failed negotiations between the federal government and APPO.

The protesters' main demand is the removal of Ruiz, who they accuse of corruption and authoritarianism. But the governor, who belongs to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), refuses to go, in spite of pressure by his own party and by the Fox administration to do so.

This Monday, legislators of the governing National Action Party (PAN) and the leftwing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) approved, without PRI support, an agreement in which they publicly called on Ruiz to resign.

Meanwhile, Emilio Gamboa, leader of the PRI in the Chamber of Deputies, asked the governor to "examine his conscience" as to whether he should remain in office.

According to APPO activist López, the protesters who are missing may have been taken to military

installations and are probably being subjected to torture. He also said three people were killed.

Government spokespersons have denied these reports. They say 23 people were arrested and that there was one death, a youth hit by a firecracker that he had set off himself.

The governmental but independent National Human Rights Commission, which sent 18 observers to Oaxaca, said that it had recorded one death as a result of the police crackdown, the same young man mentioned by the government. According to the Commission, he died after he was hit by a tear gas canister.

Dialogue with APPO remains open, and the unionised teachers of Oaxaca, who are at the heart of the uprising, will suspend their strike and return to their classrooms Monday, said Rubén Aguilar, Fox's spokesman.

But APPO says it will not resume talks with the government unless the police pull out of Oaxaca, and classes have not started.

Police stood guard on the main streets and parks of Oaxaca Monday, but elsewhere APPO supporters were rebuilding their barricades. Meanwhile, commercial and tourist activity in the city remained low-key.

The minister for Security, Eduardo Medina, explained that the decision to use force in Oaxaca was based on the premise that violence and disorder could not be allowed to continue in the state.

"Use of force is not the way to solve a social and political conflict. But it had to be done, and now there will be dialogue and negotiation through institutional channels," he said.

Medina denied APPO's suggestion that sending the police into Oaxaca was a move in support of the controversial state governor. He insisted that the purpose of the action was solely to restore order.

The police were sent in the day after violent clashes between APPO members and men in civilian dress who have been identified as local police officers and municipal officials linked to the PRI. The violence was the worst since the social and political conflict began in May.

The shootout involved the use of firearms by both sides, as confirmed by film images and photographs. Four people were killed, including Bradley Will, an independent U.S. journalist who was working for the alternative on-line news agency Indymedia. His death drew a protest from the U.S. embassy in Mexico.

Human rights groups have reported that APPO members have been repeatedly attacked by paramilitary groups and hired killers. Most of the 15 people who have died so far in the Oaxaca conflict belonged to APPO.

According to Sergio Aguayo, an academic and political scientist at El Colegio de México, the police raid in Oaxaca did not solve the conflict and, in fact, might make things worse.

Historian Lorenzo Meyer felt much the same way. He believed that the decision to use force in Oaxaca may have been a response to pressure from the U.S. embassy after the death of reporter Bradley Will.