

# MEXICO - Mexico Under Scrutiny by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission

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Thursday 12 April 2007, posted by [Manuela Garza Ascencio](#)

*IPS - The delegates of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) who began a visit to Mexico Monday will leave at the end of the week with their suitcases full of files and complaints by civil society groups, which say the human rights situation in the country remains serious and that the government is attempting to criminalise social protest.*

Among the cases that the visitors will study is the alleged rape and subsequent death of an elderly indigenous woman at the hands of soldiers, the dismantling of a special prosecutor's office that was investigating the abuses committed in the "dirty war" against opponents of the government in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and sexual harassment of women taken into custody by the police after a protest in the town of San Salvador Atenco.

The IACHR delegates will also receive detailed reports on the arrests of young demonstrators ordered by a governor who now sits on the ministerial cabinet, and on the harsh crackdown on a months-long social uprising in the southern state of Oaxaca.

Only the case of the indigenous woman, which occurred in February, and the closure of the special prosecutor's office correspond to the administration of conservative President Felipe Calderón, who took office in early December.

Nevertheless, human rights groups see the way these cases were handled as clearly indicative of the new government's approach to human rights questions.

The delegation will be headed by the president of the IACHR himself, Florentín Meléndez, who is rapporteur for Mexico; IACHR executive secretary Santiago Cantón; and human rights expert Daniela Salazar.

The representatives, who will be in Mexico until Apr. 14 on the seventh IACHR mission to the country, were invited by the government itself. But activists say the team has come to Mexico in response to repeated requests by human rights groups.

"We have been asking for this visit since last year, which was a very bad year for Mexico in terms of human rights, just as 2007 has started off to be," Edgar Cortez, head of the All Rights for All Human Rights Network, told IPS.

The 54 local organisations that make up the Network have spent months preparing the reports that they will present to the IACHR, an Organisation of American States (OAS) body. So has the government, whose officials will meet with the delegates, as will legislators and members of the judiciary.

Although the majority of denunciations by human rights groups involve incidents and events that occurred between 2004 and 2006, activists also complain that the current government has not taken any steps to clarify them and that it has not made it clear what its human rights policy will be.

Activists have repeatedly urged the Calderón administration to clarify its stance on human rights — something that may occur this week, since the government has stated that the IACHR delegation will be

informed of its official priorities in that area.

According to Cortez, the Calderón administration "has been guilty of omission with regard to human rights, and has also shown signs that it is really not very interested in the question."

Human rights groups have been concerned about the deployment of army troops to different parts of the country, ordered by the president on the argument that they would be fighting drug trafficking. In their view, it is a strategy aimed at militarising the country and criminalising social protest.

They also complain that the government has done nothing to clarify cases like the violent repression of protesters in the state of Oaxaca during the social uprising staged in the second half of 2006 to demand the removal of corrupt, abusive local authorities.

A total of 23 demonstrators and others — including an independent U.S. journalist — were killed, hundreds were arrested, an unspecified number of people went missing, and there was abundant testimony of abuses of power, all of which ended in total impunity.

Another issue of concern to activists was the disbanding of the Office of the Special Prosecutor for Social and Political Movements of the Past, created by former president Vicente Fox (2000-2006).

The special prosecutor's office was charged with investigating the repression against opponents of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) regimes that ruled Mexico from 1929 to 2000. A total of 532 people were "disappeared" during the "dirty war" and thousands were tortured. But the office met with little success in its attempts to take legal action against those responsible for the abuses, such as former president Luis Echeverría (1970-1976).

Calderón allowed the special prosecutor's office to die a quiet death, and so far has given no indication of whether he plans to do anything to clarify human rights crimes committed by the security forces in the past.

"Hopefully, after the IACHR visit, the measures to be taken by the government in terms of human rights will be made clear; we really need to know what it plans to do," said Cortez.

One of the steps taken by Calderón that put human rights defenders on the alert was his decision to name Francisco Ramírez, former governor of the west-central state of Jalisco, as interior minister.

As governor, Ramírez ordered a harsh clampdown in May 2004 on hundreds of young demonstrators who had gathered in the western city of Guadalajara to protest against the Latin America/Caribbean-European Union summit.

The police illegally detained 73 protesters, tortured at least 19, and submitted 55 others to degrading treatment, according to an exhaustive report by the National Human Rights Commission, a government body.

At the time, Ramírez downplayed the accusations and said the police acted appropriately. He even decorated police officers implicated in illegal acts.

"Leaving internal policy and part of the official security strategies in the hands of Ramírez is simply appalling," said Cortez.

Activists say that under Ramírez, the government is adopting strategies to cover up for soldiers accused of committing abuses and crimes while on duty.

They argue, for instance, that the government is concealing the guilt of soldiers in the death of 73-year-old Ernestina Ascensio. On Feb. 25, the elderly shepherd, who belonged to the Nahuatl indigenous community, was reportedly brutally raped by troops in the rural district of Soledad Atzompa in the eastern state of Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico.

The initial forensic reports and testimony pointed to the involvement of soldiers. However, the Calderón administration denied that the woman had been raped, and claimed that she died of intestinal bleeding and severe malnutrition.

Human rights groups also argue that the government has been tolerant of abuses committed in May 2006 by the security forces in the case of San Salvador Atenco, 15 km east of the capital. During an operation to evict street vendors from an unauthorised area of the town, female protesters were purportedly subjected to humiliating sexual abuse, according to several reports.

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