MEXICO - Human Rights in Fox's Administration: Bold First Steps, Little Follow-Through (by Diego Cevallos, IPS)

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IPS - The government of Vicente Fox has marked a radical turning-point with respect to the focus on human rights in Mexico, taking unprecedented steps towards transparency, international scrutiny and public access to government information, according to a Human Rights Watch report released Wednesday.

The New York-based rights watchdog warned, however, that Mexico has yet to "effectively address the human rights problems that this openness and transparency have helped to expose."

"In particular, the country has yet to establish accountability for past atrocities, or to make serious progress in curbing the abuses that continue to be committed on a regular basis today," says the 150ûpage report, 'Lost in Transition: Bold Ambitions, Limited Results for Human Rights Under Fox'.

"President Fox's efforts in these areas, while ambitious on paper, have largely failed to achieve their principal goals," it adds.

The Fox administration, which ends in December, marked "a major difference from the governments of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party, which ruled Mexico for 71 years)," Tamara Taraciuk, one of the authors of the report, told IPS.

"The change is dramatic, because 'national sovereignty' is no longer invoked to avoid scrutiny in human rights or to hide information, as occurred under the PRI," she said.

Since Fox took office in December 2000, Mexico has thrown itself open to scrutiny by the United Nations and human rights groups.

As a result, it was elected as a member of the new U.N. Human Rights Council and may even be chosen on Jun. 9 as the new body's first chair.

The Human Rights Watch report states that pending issues include measures to tackle the poor administration of justice, the impunity surrounding the human rights violations against dissidents committed under PRI governments, the persistence of police brutality and torture in prisons, and the unclarified murders of women in Ciudad Juárez, along the U.S. border.

The Special Prosecutor's Office set up to investigate the continuing Ciudad Juárez killings has documented the murders of 379 women, many of whom were the victims of sexual violence before they were slain.

The Human Rights Watch report's findings are based on interviews with Mexican officials from all three major political parties and from the federal as well as state governments, human rights activists, lawyers, journalists, academics, prominent representatives of civil society, and victims and family members of victims of human rights abuses.

The group says the country still has a long way to go to consolidate its transition to democracy from an authoritarian past, and to achieve respect for human rights. "Mexican democracy remains shackled by the

laws and institutions it inherited from the old regime," it states.

"To meet this challenge, the next administration will need to pursue an aggressive human rights agenda - building upon the strengths of Fox's agenda, while avoiding its significant shortcomings," says the report.

According to Taraciuk, "the aim of the report was to place the issue of human rights in the presidential campaign."

"We believe this is not a political or party issue, and that all of the candidates, who are not talking much about the issue, must take a stance on this," she added.

For the past few months Mexico has been immersed in a heated campaign for the Jul. 2 presidential elections. The winner will take over from Fox, the first non-PRI president since 1929.

Felipe Calderón, the candidate of the conservative governing National Action Party (PAN), who represents continuity, recently overtook Andrés López Obrador of the leftist Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) in the polls, which the latter had led for two years.

López Obrador has promised "major surgery" of the country's economic structures, and says he would revive the "doctrine of sovereignty and non-intervention" on the foreign policy front.

The other candidates are the PRI's Roberto Madrazo, who is at least 10 points behind his main rivals in the polls, and Patricia Mercado of the social democratic Alternative party and Roberto Campa of the New Alliance, who together have ratings of less than five percent.

There is a risk that after the elections "the country will slide backwards in terms of openness to international scrutiny of its human rights record, under arguments invoking national sovereignty, because transparency has not been institutionalised," said Taraciuk.

Two specific recommendations by Human Rights Watch for the winner of the July elections are "for a permanent U.N. office to be established in Mexico and for openness to international scrutiny to be maintained, without arguing that national sovereignty is more important than human rights," she added.

The rights group, whose board of directors includes Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda, praised the Fox administration for what "may prove to be the most important step Mexico has taken in its transition to democracy since the 2000 elections."

The report was talking about a "transparency law" approved by Congress in 2002 under pressure from civil society groups. The law gave the public new access to government information, dealing "a potentially decisive blow to the longstanding culture of secrecy in government affairs."

But "While the transparency law has transformed Mexico's approach to managing information, there is still serious danger that the culture of secrecy will reassert itself in the future," warns the report, which took a year to prepare.

"The progress made in promoting transparency within the executive branch has not yet been matched in the other branches of government, nor in autonomous state institutions such as the National Human Rights Commission - and the transparency law does not even cover political parties, which employ large quantities of public funds", it adds.

One of the areas in which Human Rights Watch criticises the Fox administration is for its failure to clarify the crimes of the "dirty war" waged by the PRI governments in the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, which involved massacres of student protesters in 1968 and 1971, and the torture, execution, and forced disappearance of 532 activists and other civilians.

Although the government set up a Special Prosecutor's Office to investigate and prosecute those responsible for the political violence, "the results after four years have been deeply disappointing,"

because "the office has not obtained a single conviction," says the report.

"The Fox administration failed to ensure that the office possessed the credibility, technical expertise, and powers it needed to succeed," Human Rights Watch adds. "It also failed to ensure active collaboration from other institutions, including the federal investigative policeàand, most importantly, the Mexican military, which has refused to cooperate in a serious fashion with the investigation and prosecution of these cases."

"To reinforce and complement efforts to prosecute these cases, the president should promote the creation of a truth commission with the resources, expertise, and independence necessary to advance the investigation begun by the Special Prosecutor’s Office," it states.

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