

# Intelligence Note - 616

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

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To : The Secretary  
Thru : S/S  
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Subject: Mexican Student Riots Highly Embarrassing But Not a Threat to Stability

The rioting of preparatory students in Mexico City, which has subsided, was highly embarrassing and of serious concern to the government, but never a threat to its stability. Characteristically the government reacted with military force when it decided the situation had reached the critical point. The government will probably attempt to justify its use of military force and its violation of university autonomy as necessary measures dictated by the volatile nature of the situation. As the date of the Olympics approaches, the administration of President Diaz Ordaz will step up its efforts to head-off student demonstrations and the security forces will grow increasingly sensitive to any indication of trouble.

Embarrassment but no threat to stability. The riots were unprecedented in scope and intensity and came at a time when the government of Mexico was most anxious to impress the world as a deserving host for the October Olympics. The government, which has worked hard to prepare for the Olympic games, will not soon forget the damage which the student mobs inflicted on Mexico's reputation abroad. Press accounts of the deployment of tanks and armored cars against student barricades served to picture Mexico as a battleground, not unlike Paris during the May-June civil disturbances. The spectacle of paratroopers smashing students in the face with rifle butts and dragging them from a school building in the heart of downtown Mexico City is without precedent in recent

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years and certainly not in keeping with Mexico's public relations image as the most stable and progressive country in Latin America.

Because of the monolithic nature of the Mexican political system the riots were never a threat to government stability, however difficult they were to control. The student sector by itself is incapable of seriously threatening established authority in Mexico. To do so it would need widespread support from the labor and/or peasant sectors and there have been no indications that either of these groups is sympathetic to student interests. Both are part of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) which has ruled Mexico since the 1910 revolution. Some student leaders apparently sought factory worker support but there is no evidence they were successful.

The vast majority of students did not participate in the mob action and according to a number of reports, students were concerned about the manner in which Mexico's good name was being blackened. A student leader apparently requested police intervention when the July 26 demonstration against alleged police brutality spilled over into violence. About 2,000 or 3,000 students actually took part in the rioting and looting which occurred on 26 and 29 July, whereas about 80,000 marched on August 1 in a protest demonstration that was not marked by any major violence.

Government response. The government, as it has in past, moved quickly with all the force it deemed necessary as soon as it was convinced that the situation was getting out of control. A strategic committee of the Secretariat of Interior the head of which has presidential ambitions, and other high government officials was established immediately after violence erupted July 26. The committee decided to allow the students to effervesce for a time hoping that the situation would not become violent. However, troops were alerted and moved into position. The govern-

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ment apparently considered the period around the 29th crucial and when it acted, it used massive force in an effort to convince the rampaging students that it would not tolerate a breakdown in public order. After the initial crack down, in which paratroopers fired a bazooka shell into the door of a preparatory school, the military seemingly employed limited force to break up student gatherings.

At the same time that force was being applied the government worked quietly with the rector of the National Autonomous University and some student leaders. The strategic committee, acting on instructions from the President, advised the Rector to encourage demonstrations on the university campus and even to criticize the government. The mayor of Mexico City met with the head of the National Federation of Technical Students on the subject of the withdrawal of federal troops to permit student leaders to attempt to restore order in the student community.

Government line. The government has publicly accused the communists of engineering the civil disturbances and the security forces claim they have evidence linking the Communist party to the riots. It seems fairly certain that communist youth members celebrating the anniversary of Fidel Castro's revolution managed to take over the July 26 demonstration which had been authorized by the government. The role which communist agitators were able to play from this point on is not clear, however, and there is little doubt that many of the rampaging students were not under communist control. But for face-saving reasons the government will probably continue to stress the communist role and attempt to play down the degree of non-communist participation.

University autonomy is still a major issue in Latin America. Nevertheless, the question is probably less volatile now than it was several years ago. Two democratic governments (Colombia and Venezuela) have violated university autonomy with relative impunity. The Mexican government has taken the position that autonomy is not the same

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as extra-territoriality and that it does not mean that a school and its students are free from law enforcement. This position could strike a responsive cord in public opinion because it is opposed to the destruction of property. The government will probably also seek to show that its use of force was the only action the mob could understand and that it was the major deterrent in preventing the disorders from spreading.

Outlook. As the October date of the Olympic games draws near, the government will probably become increasingly sensitive to any degree of unrest and will make some efforts to pacify the student community. Student disorders are endemic to Mexico and violence is almost always possible. But usually the government is able to head-off trouble before it begins through its many contacts and controls within the student community. Apparently this monitoring system broke down in the case of the July 26 riot. Certainly the government would never have authorized the demonstration if it had believed there was any possibility of violence developing. For this reason connections and controls within the student groups and academic faculties will almost surely be increased.

The security forces will remain alert and ready to react at the first sign of trouble. Student agitators who were clearly involved in the rioting can expect to remain in jail for many months. Most of the other students will probably be released. Undesirable foreign elements, including five French students who may have been involved in the demonstrations, may be deported. Apparently radical students feel that their efforts have been stymied by the government for the present, but they plan to reorganize and build for new agitation to culminate some time within the next three months. Such activities will be watched closely by the police and agitators not already in jail can expect to be arrested at the slightest provocation.

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The combination of 80,000 students marching on August 1 and the lack of significant violence on that day would seem to indicate that the situation has definitely shifted from a state of violence to one of peaceful protests. But it also shows that the student community is agitated and willing to demonstrate publicly its opposition to the government. The government's tactic of working quietly with some student leaders and the university rector, as well as other academic officials, could be paying dividends. However, the situation has not yet stabilized and an incident could spark into violence without warning.

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