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Guerrillas Are Nuisance to Mexican Government

Mexican security forces scored a major success against terrorists this weekend, but they are still a long way from eliminating the guerrillas' capability to embarrass the government.

Senator Ruben Figueroa, who had been held captive since May, was rescued on Sunday after a gun battle in which soldiers wounded a number of members of Lucio Cabanas' guerrilla group and arrested several others. The previous day, another group of terrorists freed President Echeverria's father-in-law, Jose Guadalupe Zuno, who had been kidnaped on August 28. The government had refused to talk with the kidnapers about terms for the freedom of either, but it is possible that Zuno's family secretly met certain of the ransom demands.

Ringleaders Undeterred

Ringleaders of both terrorist groups are still at large, and are unlikely to be deterred in their campaign against the government.

Security officials believe that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of the People, a group that claimed credit for kidnaping former US consul general Leonhardy in May 1973, was responsible for Zuno's abduction. Three of its members have been arrested. Little is known of this group, but it may be associated with the 23rd of September Communist League, another extremist group that has kidnaped Mexican notables in the recent past, and with a radical student organization based in Guadalajara.

Figueroa had been a prisoner of Lucio Cabanas' group for three and a half months, despite a massive search to locate him.

Until Echeverria became President in 1970, politically motivated violence of this sort had been absent from Mexico since the late 1920s. But shortly after his inauguration, Mexico began to experience the same kind of urban and rural guerrilla crime that is common in some other Latin American countries. In 1971 the government uncovered a group that had received training in North Korea.

A Real Nuisance

About 15 guerrilla groups have sprung up since 1971, but only a handful are now active. The groups are small and are not waging a well-organized, sustained, or coordinated conflict with the government.

They do not threaten the stability of the Echeverria administration. They do, however, have the capability to carry out spectacular acts of violence and terrorism,

and they are a real nuisance.

Sporadic violence is likely to continue for some time, inasmuch as the government's response to the problem—increased security efforts, public spending to improve social and economic conditions, and political rhetoric—have to date been largely ineffective.

Lucio Cabanas

The most active groups are the Lucio Cabanas band and the 23rd of September Communist League. Cabanas, Mexico's best known guerrilla, operates mostly in the mountains not far from Acapulco in the southwestern state of Guerrero. He enjoys widespread support and sympathy among the peasants.

His group has staged numerous robberies, kidnappings, and at least three daring and professional attacks on isolated army units. He has perhaps 50 to 75 hard-core followers, but can probably assemble up to 150 for a particular operation.

The 23rd of September group, unlike most of the others, operates in several parts of Mexico and absorbs guerrillas from other groups in the country. Founded in 1973, it is urban-based and is organized in small cells in which each member knows only a few others. Its members have a mixed background—from political opposition to criminal activity. A number are students or former students, some with degrees in law and medicine. Its strength is reported to be roughly 500, but it could be larger.

All of these groups espouse some form of Marxist socialism. All are dedicated to changing the Mexican government and social system by violent means. All lash out at "imperialism" and "capitalism" and claim to speak for the "poor and oppressed" in Mexico.

Except for the North Korean involvement in 1971, there is no solid evidence of foreign support for any of the groups.

Army Deficient

In recent months the government has dealt serious blows to some of the groups, especially to the 23rd of September Communist League. Still, Mexican security agencies have revealed operational deficiencies.

The operation to free Senator Ruben Figueroa, the governing party's candidate for governor of Guerrero, began on June 25, over three weeks after Figueroa disappeared. In all, the government used upward of 10,000 army troops—nearly one seventh of the army's total strength—in the search for Cabanas and incurred such

heavy expenses that it had had to divert funds from other government agencies.

Perhaps more ominous for Mexico's security situation was the attempt in January 1974 by the 23rd of September group and radical students at the University of Sinaloa to stage something approaching an armed uprising in the streets of Culiacan, capital of the western state of Sinaloa. The government considered the situation serious enough to send in paratroopers from the capital to ensure that order was restored.

The Culiacan violence is the kind of mass action that the 23rd of September group advocates. The government's success at quelling it indicates that it may be some time before this group or any other guerrilla organization is again in a position to try something on the scale of Culiacan, but there seems little reason to doubt that the intent exists and that the same type of action will be attempted again. In the unlikely event that attempts at armed uprisings are made in several areas at the same time, the government could be hard pressed to handle them.

The Government Response

The cumulative weight of terrorist incidents in the past year or so has produced a climate of anxiety, particularly among businessmen and the wealthy, who consider themselves possible targets of kidnap attempts. Businessmen were extremely bitter at the Echeverria administration last fall after an influential industrialist was murdered by terrorists in the northern city of Monterrey.

The government's policy of not negotiating with kidnapers, announced in October 1973, is not stopping the political abductions.

A large part of the government's response to political violence consists of intensive police work and, as in the Cabanas case, the massive application of military manpower. The rest of the response is a mixture of public spending—and political rhetoric. The Figueroa kidnaping, for example, brought forth a huge public effort to demonstrate how much the Echeverria government has done for Guerrero.

Although the security forces may improve, none of the other measures holds much hope for success any time soon. The government's social and economic programs cannot be expected in the near term to ameliorate the conditions that give rise to the terrorist and the guerrilla. And the latter are too busy listening to their own rhetoric to listen to the government's.

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