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MEXICO: RANSOM PAYOFFS WILL ENCOURAGE MORE POLITICAL KIDNAPPING

fol 23-8 Mex

The Mexican Government's payment again of ransom demands, in response to a second terrorist kidnapping of a government official, will probably encourage further kidnap attempts. Foreign diplomats could be targeted, but Mexican officials appear to be in the most danger. Eventually the government will probably stop paying off abductors; meanwhile, it can be counted on to clamp down as hard as possible on terrorist elements.

Kidnapping as a terrorist tactic in the hemisphere. Revolutionary terrorist groups throughout the hemisphere have resorted in recent years to kidnapping as a means of obtaining funds and effecting the release of political prisoners. Abducting foreign diplomats offered several advantages to the terrorists in that political prisoners were ransomed, governments were subject to intense international pressure, and the terrorists obtained world-wide publicity. The wave reached its peak in 1970 when 14 foreign officials, seven of them American, suffered acts of violence, and as many as 70 prisoners were released as ransom for a single ambassadorial hostage. Diplomatic kidnappings have fallen off significantly in 1971, partly because governments have

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gradually been coming around to the conviction that ransom demands must not be met.

Will diplomats be targeted in Mexico? Mexico, heretofore free of political kidnappings, has now experienced two such actions in 1971, and ransom has been paid in both instances. These payoffs will encourage the terrorists to attempt additional abductions, particularly since the considerable number of imprisoned terrorists provides tempting ransom opportunities. The list of potential victims may include foreign diplomats; indeed, captured terrorists in March and September either admitted having planned diplomatic kidnappings or boasted that they would be freed as part of a ransom deal. However, the successful kidnapping of prominent Mexicans could lessen the likelihood that foreign diplomats will be targeted. The perpetrators of both deeds exhibited a very good understanding of the personal nature of Mexico's political system. Both victims were close friends of President Luis Echeverria, and this fact could easily have outweighed all other considerations for the government as to whether ransom should be paid. The people who are apparently in the greatest danger, therefore, are high Mexican officials who are personally friendly with Echeverria.

How will Echeverria react? Successful terrorist activity in general, and the kidnappings in particular, are extremely embarrassing to President Echeverria and to the government as a whole. There is evidence that Echeverria is taking a direct interest in security force operations. He cannot be pleased with the army's efforts to track down Genaro Vazquez Rojas and his National Revolutionary Civic Association (ACNR), the group responsible for the latest abduction; and in situations of extreme tension and pressure Echeverria tends to find scapegoats. For one reason

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or another, Echeverria's first year in office has seen the resignations of a state governor, the Mayor of Mexico City, the Mexico City police chief, and the Attorney General. Since Defense Minister Cuenca Diaz did little to enhance his reputation by his recent public declaration that there are no guerrillas in Mexico, his days may be limited. Cuenca's replacement could be heralded as part of a new program of effective counter-guerrilla operation.

Possible change in Mexican policy toward kidnappers. The Mexican government takes a pragmatic rather than a doctrinaire approach to most problems. If a policy proves to be counterproductive it is usually altered. The payment of ransom will probably continue for a time, but further incidents will likely force a rethinking of this policy. While such a decision would be an agonizing one, as it may mean death for at least one kidnap victim, such a tragedy could help to marshal public opinion behind the government if it decided on a massive crackdown on dissenters. In comparison with most other Latin American countries, Mexico has good police and security forces. While many Mexicans are cynical about the "democratic" nature of their essentially one-party system of government, they are not generally disposed to turn against it in a violent way or to look with favor on groups resorting to such action. The problem of urban terrorism which is just emerging in Mexico is likely to be approached cautiously at first by the government and then, characteristically, with repression and violence when judged appropriate.

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