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INTELLIGENCE NOTE
BUREAU OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

PARM-30
Pol 23 Mex
XR Pol 13-2 Mex
XR DEF 6 Mex

September 23, 1971

MEXICO: AN EMERGING INTERNAL SECURITY PROBLEM?

Developments over the past several months point to the possible emergence of a growing internal security problem in Mexico. The difficulty lies in President Echeverria's probable inability to meet student demands for a public confession that the government was linked to the bloody suppression of demonstrations in mid-June. The threat potential of the problem is compounded because of the recent discovery of several small guerrilla groups, whose ranks could be swelled by dissatisfied students, and indications of disciplinary problems in the army, to which the regime would have to look to maintain security.

The student problems. A showdown with students did not appear probable when Echeverria took office in December 1970, for he moved to win them over by releasing many of those imprisoned after the 1968 riots. He was also very forthcoming on student demands concerning university autonomy in the State of Nuevo Leon. However, when students in Mexico City staged a sympathy demonstration despite the favorable settlement of the Nuevo Leon problem, Echeverria may have become angry and ordered or

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consented to the use of a government-organized group of toughs known as the Halcones (falcons). The government had formed these clandestine groups after the 1968 riots in order to be able to confront leftist students with other groups, also ostensibly students, thus avoiding the use of uniformed security forces.

This arrangement enjoyed some initial success, but the Halcones' cover was badly blown on June 10 when open police cooperation erased any doubt that the government was linked to the group. The resulting uproar led to the resignation of the mayor and the police chief of Mexico City and prompted Echeverria to promise an investigation of the bloody incident. An interim report submitted by Attorney General Sanchez Vargas was a complete whitewash and led to his sudden resignation on August 19. The new attorney general has met with student leaders who presented him with over 300 pieces of testimony, as well as photographs, tapes, films, and a report by "Student Commissions of Investigation and Information" allegedly proving government complicity in the affair. The resignation of Attorney General Sanchez should buy Echeverria some time, but the student leaders will doubtless continue to press for a public admission of the government's hand in the violence.

The insurgency problem. Insurgency groups are not completely new in Mexico, although the last time an insurgency became a major threat was the 1928 Christero revolt. Groups have operated in the states of Chihuahua, where an army barracks was attacked in 1965, and Guerrero, where general lawlessness has led to the formation of bandit gangs with some political overtones. On March 16 the Mexican government announced the capture of 19

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members of a group known as the Revolutionary Action Movement, comprised of students who had been studying in Moscow and had subsequently received training in North Korea. In retaliation, the Mexican government expelled five Soviet diplomats. Since then, several more members of the group have been killed or captured in widely separated areas of Mexico. While it undoubtedly has been badly hurt by the effective action on the part of the security forces, the group has not been eradicated. Recent intelligence reports reveal the existence of another group known as the Armed Forces of the New Revolution (FANR) whose known activities thus far consist of two robberies. The group is small and is apparently an offshoot of one of the groups operating in Guerrero. There is a report of still another guerrilla group operating in the state of Nuevo Leon, and yet another urban group known as the Armed Commandoes of the People (CAP) has now come to public attention.

None of these groups is a threat to the government, and their capabilities for violence are very limited. At present their importance may lie mostly in the fact that they form discontented nuclei whose ranks could be swelled by disaffected students. Should the guerrilla groups attract significant numbers of students into their ranks, the government would have to rely more heavily on the armed forces than is traditionally the case in Mexico. Because of this contingency, reports of possible signs of tensions developing in the military are of more than usual interest and importance.

The military problem. We do not as yet have enough reporting from reliable sources to be confident as to the exact nature and scope of discontent in the ranks of the military, but almost certainly some does exist. The

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basic issues appear to be poor food and failure of the lower ranks and non-commissioned officers to receive appreciable pay raises at the same time that the higher ranks received substantial increases. There are reports that members of some units have actually staged acts of open rebellion and that arrests and some executions have taken place. If the reports are true, the government can be counted on to take very forceful measures to quell any disturbances and to adopt measures to alleviate the causes of discontent as much as possible. However, if the Mexican government faces civil disturbances of student or guerrilla origin before the situation in the army is ironed out a very serious situation could result. The likelihood of such a happening is admittedly not great; the troops have little love for students and would probably be willing to forget their difficulties temporarily if given the chance to crack a few heads.

Implications for Mexico. President Echeverria has many assets at his command to cope with each of the problems outlined. Nevertheless, the student issue has moved with a certain momentum probably not foreseen by the president. A combination of student or guerrilla sponsored disturbances would require Echeverria to rely more strongly on the armed forces for a crackdown. Such action would not directly threaten the government, but prolonged repression would place severe strains both on discipline within the army and on the viability of the political system. Most importantly, it would greatly reduce the president's ability to work out solutions to Mexico's more fundamental problems of rural and urban poverty, a veritable population explosion, and the growing disillusionment of the younger generation. The situation could also produce adverse effects upon the Mexican economy, not only because there would undoubtedly be some increase in resource allocations to the military

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Authority MM 969041
By SP NARA Date 4-18-02

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which would diminish funds available for other needs, but also because in a time of increased tensions the climate for investment would be less favorable. This would be particularly true in the case of foreign investment because terrorists have tended to target foreign investors as being imperialists.

INR/American Republics
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Drafted date : 9/20/71
Released by : *LEM*

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