

Two hundred thousand commemorate 1968 Mexico City massacre

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The largest march ever to protest the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre assembled last Friday in Mexico City's Plaza de las Tres Culturas to demand a full accounting of the killing and disappearance of hundreds of students on October 2, 1968. Tens of thousands overflowed this huge and historic plaza at Tlatelolco, carrying red carnations and chanting political slogans.

On October 2, 1968, 5,000 students and workers rallied at this same plaza, demanding democratic reforms, including autonomy for the country's universities, the freeing of political prisoners and social justice. Besides middle class students from UNAM, Mexico's prestigious public university, there were working class students from Mexico's Polytechnic Institute, university employees and workers from dissident unions, including railroad workers. Many demonstrators had brought their spouses and children.

At 6 p.m., as the sun set, two green flares lit the plaza. That was the sign for a combined military and police assault on the protesters. Over 2,000 army troops sealed off all the exits from the plaza and proceeded to mow down the students. Witnesses described how the students ran from one end of the plaza to the other, only to be met by more machine gun fire.

The killing was indiscriminate and included people who were at the plaza for unrelated reasons. As the operation proceeded, bodies were loaded onto army trucks and carted away. Initially, ambulances were prohibited from coming to the aid of the dying demonstrators. Those who were allowed to live, like current President Zedillo, then a 16-year-old student, were made to run a gauntlet of soldiers who beat them with rifle butts. Some apartment dwellers in the area, at great personal risk, opened their doors to individual protesters, saving their lives.

A survivor who found refuge in an apartment said:

'We will never forget that night. Through a corner of the window we saw how the soldiers threatened students with their weapons and arrested everybody they came upon. A little later many cargo trucks arrived, for the hundreds of bodies that were all over the ground. It was a night of engines, lights, and sirens everywhere, the longest and saddest in my life' (*La Opinion*, Los Angeles, October 3, 1998, page 6A).

Hundreds more were arrested. The whereabouts of many of those are still unknown. The government has never officially admitted more than 30 dead. International press agencies gave an estimate 10 times higher. An Italian journalist put the figure at more than 500 dead.

Initially the story was that the army had been fired upon by heavily armed elements, from the third floor and roof of one building. It turns out that this firing came from the army's Olympic Battalion, which had been planted in civilian clothing as *agents provocateurs*, a fifth column, to seal off the rally and attack the protesters from above.

In October 1997 an opposition-dominated Congress reopened the case and established a committee to investigate. The committee talked to 18 participants, including ex-president Echeverria. In 1968, as Minister of Government, he directed the operation. Echeverria admitted to the investigators that the students had not been armed, and that the operation had been planned in advance.

'These kids were not provocateurs,' he said. 'The majority were the sons and daughters of workers, farmers and unemployed people.'

The massacre at Tlatelolco was carefully planned. According to Echeverria, the object of the military operation was to destroy the leadership of the student movement. The army had already occupied the

Polytechnic Institute and UNAM. Nearby jails were emptied in the days previous to October 2, and the Olympic battalion was sent into the crowd in civilian dress.

So far the congressional committee has been denied access to official documents of the period. Under Mexican law, these can only be sealed for 30 years. However, the government recently announced that most of the files are under army control, and those are not covered by the legislation. The army has refused to release any documents, on grounds of national security. Those documents supposedly contain the exact number of dead and disappeared, and the manner in which the massacre was organized, including a description of the role that the American CIA played in the operation.

In 1970 Echeverria was selected as Diaz Ordaz's successor to the presidency. Many consider this to be his reward for cracking down on the student movement. As president he conducted a dirty war against left-wing guerrilla groups and was responsible for the disappearance of 148 persons.

What is now known about the massacre was collected by journalists who painstakingly reconstructed the event from eyewitness accounts, and from foreign intelligence sources, mostly from US State Department files.

Who was responsible? On September 21, 1998 Mexico City Mayor Cuauhtemoc Cardenas exonerated the army. In a speech at the Universidad Iberoamerica, entitled 'Thirty Years After,' Cardenas said the army was simply following orders from President Diaz Ordaz: 'It's unjust that the army be made responsible for the massacre. It is unjust that all the members of the army to this day are charged with the responsibility for the deaths and jailing and for the repression that denied the rights, laws and the most basic principles of humanity. It is, I repeat, unjust.'

Cardenas had declared a day of mourning for October 2 and ordered all city flags lowered to half-mast.

During the same speech Cardenas sought to trace the emergence of his party, the PRD (Partido de la Revolucion Democratica--Party of Democratic Revolution), to the student protest. In fact, in 1968 he was a prominent member of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which said nothing about the massacre.

Cardenas has officially supported the demands for

accountability and punishment of those involved, while assuring the army that it has nothing to fear. The PRD leader has sought to use the demonstration to build up his political fortunes and at the same time signal Mexico's ruling class that he will not challenge their institutions.

Cardenas's demagoguery aside, a transformation is going on in the minds of many Mexicans, under the impact of policies that enrich a handful and rob the vast majority of a decent future. Many who insist that this historic crime be remembered are being moved by the same conditions that moved the students in 1968.

The tens of thousands of demonstrators last Friday were led by some of the survivors of the original massacre. Protesters called for all secret files be opened to the public and for those responsible to be brought to justice. Other demands were similar to those of 30 years ago, including the freeing of political prisoners. Smaller demonstrations also took place in other Mexican cities.



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