



Human rights abuses persist alongside political reform

The July 2000 election of conservative opposition politician Vicente Fox ended the seven-decade presidential stranglehold on Mexican politics by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). While the Fox administration has made some advances in human rights, attacks against human rights defenders have persisted, as has the climate of impunity for most rights violations.

In fact, Mexico's advances in electoral reform since the mid-1990s have received far more attention in the international media than its continuing poor record on issues such as torture, military involvement in rights abuses and serious threats against human rights defenders. Slow progress in developing domestic policies and practices governing human rights translates into little change for most Mexicans, especially those oppressed for reasons of poverty, gender or race.

Work by UUSC program partners and their colleagues with the United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS) has prompted more action and accountability from successive Mexican governments. However, an uphill road remains in building a culture of respect for both human rights generally and execu-



Indigenous women, like this young woman attending a conference and training with her son, are working to promote peace and women's and indigenous rights throughout Mexico.

tive branch policies that are responsive to continuing violations, especially those affecting indigenous people.

Supporting partners

UUSC began its Mexico program with humanitarian assistance to indigenous groups at the time of the Zapatista uprising in 1994. In 1996-97, we expanded this activity through grants and policy advocacy in Chiapas. Our work supported Mexican human rights groups that engaged in conflict resolution in Chiapas and reported rights violations throughout the country. And for the remainder of the 1990s, we supported Mexican partners' struggles to end electoral

fraud, address systematic injustice in Chiapas and other poor southern states, and make government more accountable for rights abuses. Our public policy efforts were shaped by this work during that time and continue with this focus today.

Serious human rights violations continue in Mexico, including torture, impunity for rights violations and death threats against Mexican human rights defenders. Human rights, especially the rights and needs of indigenous women, must be a high priority in U.S.-Mexican bilateral relations.

UUSC currently supports human rights organizations in Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero and Morelos – all southern Mexican states with large indigenous populations, high rates of poverty and oppression, and large numbers of human rights violations. In Chiapas and Guerrero especially, there is also an overwhelming Mexican military presence and paramilitary violence. Indigenous women often face triple discrimination, as they are indigenous, female and poor. Human rights defenders in these states often face harassment and violent attacks for their work, and UUSC supports partners' work to protect the rights of these human rights defenders.

In addition, UUSC partners with the **Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center (PRODH)**, based in Mexico City, which documents and provides legal assistance on cases of human rights violations throughout Mexico. PRODH also takes cases of major human rights violations to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the OAS when the cases are not resolved by the flawed Mexican justice system.

Promoting peace-builders in Chiapas

One UUSC partner, **Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center**, is making a difference for indigenous people throughout Chiapas. The center monitors, documents and publicizes human rights violations; provides legal help to victims; and conducts human rights training



Activist Magali Morales speaks with other women from Chiapas about how violence against women affects them and their children.

What you can do

1. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper about human rights issues in Mexico and send a copy to UUSC. Join our Media Advocacy Network and build awareness of rights abuse in Mexico and other countries through your letters and op-eds. Contact Audubon Dougherty at adougherty@uusc.org or 617 868-6600, ext. 229.
2. Write to Roger Noriega, Acting Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, U.S. Department of State, 21st and C Streets, N.W., Washington, DC 20050. Send copies of your letters to your elected officials and to Kelli Larsen, UUSC, 130 Prospect Street, Cambridge, MA 02139 or klarsen@uusc.org.
3. Sign up for UUSC's monthly e-mail bulletin and visit our Web site, www.uusc.org, for additional information on action alerts, partners and program activities.

and international advocacy. The center also has formed a network of indigenous human rights promoters in many communities around the state in order to better promote and defend human rights.

Another UUSC partner in Chiapas is the emerging grassroots organi-

zation, the **Independent Movement of Women of Chiapas (MIM)**. MIM brings together women leaders, primarily from indigenous communities, to discuss their situation amid the conflict and to strategize ways to improve their lives. The women leaders then bring back informa-

tion, strategies and action plans to their communities to share with other women. This UUSC partner has also publicly condemned the impact of militarization on women, including rape by military members, torture and disappearances, as well as the lack of justice for women whose rights have been violated.

Documenting human rights abuses

The **Chiapas Media Project (CMP)** promotes human rights by providing video and computer equipment and training to indigenous men and women in high conflict areas such as Chiapas and Guerrero. They use these tools to document human rights violations, including increases in paramilitary activity. CMP is also training the Organization of Campesino Environmentalists in documenting the illegal deforestation of the old-growth forests and related human rights abuses.

Helping youth organize

Morelos is a small state known for its police brutality and repression, especially of indigenous communities. In addition, indigenous people often flee to Morelos to escape the Mexican military and paramilitary violence in neighboring Guerrero. The **Independent Commission of Human Rights of Morelos (CIDHM)** provides legal defense in cases of violations of human rights and publishes indigenous and children's rights materials. The commission also promotes human rights in indigenous Nahuatl communities, including children's rights.



Since the mid-1990s, UUSC has supported indigenous groups in Chiapas that work to promote a culture of peace, justice and equality.

Resources

For updates and action alerts on human rights, visit our Web site, www.uusc.org. You may also learn more from:

- **International Service for Peace (SIPAZ)**
See newsletter and action alerts at www.sipaz.org
- **Human Rights Watch**
See annual reports at www.hrw.org
- **Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center**
Some material in English at www.sjsocial.org/PRODH

Currently, CIDHM is organizing meetings of indigenous youth to discuss indigenous rights, human rights and access to justice; rights of indigenous migrants; ethnic discrimination; and rights of indigenous women.

Enabling involvement and impact

UUSC uses a three-pronged approach to its international programs: grants and technical assistance to overseas partners, outreach to supporters on education and

action, and public policy advocacy. Through these three interrelated program components, UUSC supports human rights defenders in select countries, champions their efforts to seek accountability for rights violations, and advocates in Washington, D.C., for U.S. policies that support human rights and address partner concerns.

UUSC prioritizes select public policy issues for concentrated attention. Well-targeted use of our resources increases our efficacy and facilitates

activism on highly visible issues, as well as some deserving issues that, nevertheless, receive meager media focus. The involvement of UUSC members and supporters is crucial for influencing policy-makers and holding government officials accountable for policies carried out in our names as Americans.

Supporting a culture of respect for human rights

Since 1997, when UUSC – working in coalition – arranged the first congressional forum with Mexican human rights leaders, our public policy advocacy has responded to partner priorities, focused on Mexican government impunity for grave rights violations, and sought to make human rights a key element of U.S. foreign policy regarding Mexico.

UUSC policy advocacy has spotlighted the serious harassment faced by partners as they carry out their human rights investigative work. Our policy work has also sought to bring down the roadblocks facing Mexicans, especially indigenous peoples, who seek government accountability and legal remedy for the rights violations they experience.

In early advocacy initiatives, UUSC:

- Worked with sponsors of the first congressional resolution to address Mexican rights violations.
- Worked to end a drug certification



The Independent Movement of Women of Chiapas, a UUSC partner, organized this march to advocate for and promote peace and women's rights.

process that stigmatized Mexico and hurt U.S.-Mexico relations.

- Gave visibility to trips to Mexico by U.N. staff experienced in investigating torture and disappearance.
- Joined the successful campaign for the release of two environmentalists from Guerrero, who were unjustly detained.

UUSC continues to:

- Create awareness among U.S. policy-makers of how decades-long electoral fraud has undermined the exercise of political rights, especially for rural areas, which have been isolated from the benefits of mid-1990s reforms.
- Enable partners to meet and brief U.S. officials engaged in the human rights dialogue with Mexico.
- Call for withdrawal of army units

from southern Mexico under the presidency of Vicente Fox.

- Denounce death threats against partners and push for Mexican government accountability.

Advocacy spotlights continuing rights abuses

While the presidency of Vicente Fox has led to some Mexican advances in human rights, it has also resulted in new challenges for U.S. advocates who seek to counter the widespread impression that Mexican human rights conditions are steadily improving.

Participation by UUSC supporters is all the more important, if we are to keep our commitment to help our program partners make the Mexican government answerable to the people on issues of justice and fundamental human rights.



Unitarian Universalist Service Committee