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Mexico:

Limited response to displacement following local and regional conflicts

Mexico's southern states of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Guerrero have witnessed forced internal displacement caused by a number of insurgencies seeking cultural and territorial autonomy and by national security forces using repressive measures to defeat them.

Between 5,000 and 8,000 people are still displaced in Chiapas by the Zapatista uprising and the ongoing campaign to defeat the Zapatistas. A political settlement is needed to solve the situation and to enable durable solutions for the internally displaced people (IDPs). While the scale of displacement in Oaxaca and Guerrero has not been determined, the events which triggered displacement – including human rights violations by the army and local disputes over land and territory – are ongoing, and make solutions unlikely.

In all three states, thousands of people have been displaced by disputes within indigenous communities struggling to adapt to social changes, and by intercommunal disputes fought along religious and political party lines. Some of the victims of these disputes have found refuge and integrated in nearby villages, while others have fled to urban centres with mixed results.

Although the government has the means to address internal displacement effectively, its responses indicate a lack of will to find lasting solutions. An encouraging step was the allocation of a modest budget for the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI) which has provided support to enable some of those displaced by local community clashes buy land and build shelter. Forced displacement is now recognised as a phenomenon that needs to be addressed in order to solve some of Mexico's political conflicts, but a much more systematic approach is needed to provide durable solutions for all of Mexico's IDPs.

Map of Mexico



Source: University of Texas at Austin
More maps are available on <http://www.internal-displacement.org>

Background to conflicts and displacement

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* or PRI) controlled federal Mexico's diverse population for most of the twentieth century. While its rule permitted significant economic growth which placed Mexico solidly in the ranks of high middle-income countries, not everyone was able to share equally in the newly-won wealth, and indigenous populations in the southern states were particularly excluded.

PRI policies, later perpetuated under other governing parties, have been contested by guerrilla movements and civilian groups protesting against political exclusion, corruption and clientelist practices. Liberal economic policies have also been criticised for benefiting a minority and favouring foreign interests over local needs. Governments were not always tolerant of these protest movements, for example using force to crush them during the so-called Dirty War from the 1960s to 1980s, in which an unknown number of people were displaced (NSA, 2006).

In this context, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* or EZLN) rose up in Chiapas State in 1994 against Mexico's entry into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The EZLN resisted the Mexican army for two weeks, and the conflict went on to claim the lives of around 1,500 people (Lopez y Rivas, 2002). The San Andres Peace Accords of 1996 promised political participation, conservation of natural resources, and recognition of the right of indigenous peoples to determine appropriate development avenues (ASS, 1996); however

the government has largely failed to implement those promises. International and national attention has since dissuaded the EZLN and the government from engaging in direct war-making, but the army has made extensive use of paramilitary troops to intimidate EZLN-loyal communities (PLJ, November 2009), providing little hope of solutions for those affected by the conflict or of the realisation of indigenous claims for territorial and cultural autonomy.

In Chiapas, and also in Guerrero and Oaxaca States, inter-communal conflicts have also posed a continuing internal threat to conservative indigenous communities ruled by customary law. Minority groups perceived to threaten the status quo have been forced to flee their communities in order to protect their families. These disputes are often presented as religious or political, but control of power and material wealth is equally important (Cruz Burguete, 2005).

In Guerrero and Oaxaca, the federal government has fought to weaken social protest movements and defeat two armed insurgent groups, the Popular Revolutionary Army (*Ejército Popular Revolucionario* or EPR) and the Revolutionary Popular Insurgent Army (*Ejército Revolucionario Popular Insurgente* or ERPI). Far from public scrutiny and faced with insurgents unable to mobilise public sympathy, the security forces have directly fought the guerrillas and sought to control peasant communities through assassinations, detentions and forced disappearances (Lopez y Rivas, 2002). As of 2009, the two guerrilla groups are now almost inactive militarily, but the areas where they operated are heavily militarised, and frequent human rights viola-

tions generate new displacements as well as barring the return of those who fled in previous years.

In addition, 70 per cent of the 570 municipalities in Oaxaca are governed according to the indigenous “usages and customs” law, which does not follow commonly held democratic norms. Apart from discriminating against women per se (USDoS, 2009), this governing system is susceptible to manipulation by external investors interested in Oaxaca’s hydroelectric power potential, and other natural resources (OMCT, 2009).

Insecurity prevails in Guerrero State, particularly in the Montaña and Costa Chica regions, where the army has perpetrated more than 80 serious human rights violations over the last decade (OMCT, 2009). That number may grow as the supposed link between insurgencies and the drug trade leaves the government with fewer incentives to restrain troop conduct during combined operations against the two, which are considered as anti-terrorist operations by the government’s American ally (USDoS 2009; Celaya Pacheco, 2009). Associated allegations of torture have been reported in 2009 (LAT, April 2009; HRW, July 2009; HRW, August 2009).

Displacement caused by Mexico’s drug war has been considerable since an anti-drug operation in the 1980s, when infighting between criminal groups and repressive tactics used during counter-drug operations caused almost 100,000 people to flee to nearby cities. Such an exodus could be repeated today (EU, Dec 2006). In 2009, 27,000 army troops and federal policemen were fighting drug mafias in joint operations funded by the US\$1.4

billion Merida Initiative; these conflicts killed over 6,000 people in 2008 (USDoS, 2009).

Internal displacement figures and patterns

Thousands of people have been displaced in Mexico, by conflicts and human rights violations, and by clashes between communities identified along religious or political lines in Chiapas, Oaxaca and Guerrero. With limited exceptions, they have never been counted.

The National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI) has reportedly concluded assessments of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Chiapas, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Nayarit and Oaxaca States (CDI, 2009), but it has not made its figures public. In the absence of a national profiling exercise and systematic needs assessments, estimates of the number of IDPs will remain inaccurate, and their protection and assistance needs will remain unknown.

Displacements caused by religious, ethnic or political divisions are difficult to distinguish from those caused by insurgencies and counter-insurgency operations (Cruz Burguete, 2005). What seems clear is that tensions are exacerbated in areas of counter-insurgent activity. As a community leader put it: “I do not know why, but we know for certain that where there are army bases, community divisions fester” (CCIODH, 2008).

Internal displacement in Chiapas State
According to some sources, up to 60,000 people were displaced as a consequence of the *Zapatista* uprising in the Mexican state of Chiapas (UNOHCHR, 2003;

CNDP, 2005; CDI, 2004; Hernandez, 2009). A coalition of local NGOs counted over 17,000 IDPs soon after the uprising, most of whom had fled the EZLN or the army in rural areas and headed to the nearest municipal centres. Another NGO calculation of 12,000 IDPs after the army counter-attack of 1995 is frequently cited (FRAYBA, 2003; Martinez, 2005).

Since 1995, many of those who were initially displaced by the EZLN have returned with the support of state security forces and state-backed paramilitary groups. The returnees have in turn expelled people who had occupied their land in their absence. Members of communities loyal to the EZLN have also been subjected to paramilitary attacks, reportedly fuelled by local political and religious disputes (CCIODH, 2008; FRAYBA, June 2005; FRAYBA, November 2008; UNOHCHR, 2009; LJ, November 2006; Giordano, 2006). The violence has caused new displacements and has also blocked the return of 5,000 to 8,000 people who are still displaced (CCIODH, 2008), for whom a durable solution depends on the implementation of a political agreement between the EZLN and local and federal governments.

The rapid growth in protestant affiliation among the indigenous population of Chiapas since the 1950s has provided a further basis for inter-communal conflict and displacement. Challenging the established political and social order supported by the Catholic church, protestant *evangelicos* were persecuted from the late 1960s, and their land taken over by local indigenous strongmen; the scale of their displacement may be inferred from a report that at least 25,000 fled to the re-

gional capital of San Cristobal between 1970 and 1990 (Martinez, 2005). More recently, threats and attacks on the property of non-Catholics in some municipalities of Chiapas caused displacement during 2008 and 2009 (CP, July 2008; CP, Jan 2009). In other areas Catholics have been disproportionately displaced: 33,000 members of *Chamula* communities, mostly Catholics, were reportedly displaced between 1985 and 2005 from Alto district (Cruz Burguete, 2005).

Internal displacement in Oaxaca and Guerrero States

Only 40 per cent of IDPs are located in Chiapas, with considerable numbers also found in Oaxaca, Guerrero, Jalisco and Hidalgo States (CDI, June 2006; PMM, 2004).

Discrimination against indigenous people in Oaxaca State has long been a potent driver of conflicts, and incidents of forced displacement of communities thought to be assisting armed opposition groups have been relatively frequent (EST, September 2006). In Oaxaca, displacement of the indigenous population goes back as far as the sixteenth century and the arrival of Spanish subjugators (Miranda, 1968). Displacements have also been caused by combat (Rebón, 2001). Political and religious disputes among *Triquis* communities in the wider Mixteca region have forced 12,000 people to leave their homeland over the past 60 years (EU, April 2008; Comanoticias, June 2002).

Community divisions are also common in Oaxaca, often leading to the displacement of *evangelicos* who have been targeted because of their perceived eagerness to

impose their faith on others and because they threaten established community traditions tied up to the Catholic Church (IDMC interviews, December 2009; EI, May 2009; USDoS, 2009;).

The CDI recorded 1,160 indigenous people displaced from nine districts during 2009. Armed conflict and human rights abuses as well as violence fuelled by religious and political differences caused most of these displacements (Vanguardia, November 2007; PA, November 2009; DD, November 2009). For example, confrontations between two local political organisations in the municipality of Santiago Juxtlahuaca resulted in the displacement of 200 people (LJ, April 2009; Excelsior, April 2009); and at least 50 protestant families were forced to flee after being threatened and denied access to basic services by the local authorities (USDoS, 2009; CDDHEO, February 2009; Voces de los Martires, 2009; DEB, April 2009).

Quantifiable data from Guerrero State is not available. But the presence of armed opposition groups, as well as social and religious conflict and heavy-handed responses by government forces have maintained a high level of tension (OMCT, 2009). The CDI revealed in July 2009 that, although the number could be much higher, at least 1,500 people were displaced by more than 50 inter-communal conflicts, mostly in Montaña district. These conflicts followed religious lines but at least some originated in land disputes (LJG, July 2009).

Protection issues facing IDPs and others

The Mexican Human Rights Diagnosis of 2003 concluded that IDPs “are among the most unprotected groups because they generally lack means of subsistence and legal mechanisms to claim and enjoy their rights. Given their invisibility, they face a high risk of abuse, exploitation and threats to their life” (IDMC translation, UNOHCHR, 2003).

In Chiapas State

In Chiapas, troops from the 61 military bases near EZLN-administered villages have perpetrated killings and arbitrary detentions, and used tactics to intimidate and control people including patrols, roadblocks, and firing in the air. A police operation in October 2008 against an organisation which had occupied a Mayan ceremonial site killed six of the occupiers and injured seven more (LJ, October 2008). The security forces have also allegedly trained paramilitary groups that have harassed the population, and in some areas deliberately tried to provoke displacement (UNOHCHR, 2009; CCIODH, 2008).

Internally displaced communities have also been targeted. In September 2008, paramilitaries let off rounds of machine-gun fire to create panic in *Los Altos* IDP community and then, some days later, threatened to attack the IDP camps (FRAYBA, 2009; JBG, October 2008). In April 2009, heavily armed police troops burst into the offices of a community organisation. They harassed 12 women sleeping there and detained a man (FRAYBA, 2009). The counter-insurgents have used “divide and conquer” tactics, in combination with other

measures including the harassment and rape of leaders' female companions, to weaken the social networks (Cruz Burguete, 2005).

Deprivation amongst Chiapas' *Zapatista* IDPs is evident. According to an organisation monitoring the health of indigenous children, 35 per cent of the IDPs are pregnant or breastfeeding women, and 11 per cent of children born in the camps die before the age of five. After ICRC-sponsored aid was halted in 2003, the incidence of undernutrition rose to 57 per cent overall, and 93 per cent for children (FISANIM, 2004).

Internally displaced women from Chiapas have reported experiencing social exclusion after fleeing from communal conflicts (GC, 2004). Some of those who have sought protection in the regional capital have found life easier than in their home villages, and have thrived in an urban environment offering economic opportunities and new social networks. However, many are the single head of their household – some 30 per cent of men migrate from their place of refuge to the federal capital in search of work – and so bear heavy responsibilities (Cimanoticias, February 2004).

Many IDPs are not prepared to rebuild their lives in an urban context. Being poor, indigenous and rural, they lack formal education, and unemployment rates have reached unprecedented heights in 2009 (OECD, 2009). Some internally displaced women in the city, and in particular many single heads of household, have had to resort to exploitative work or prostitution to feed their families (Hernandez, 2008).

In Oaxaca and Guerrero

Oaxaca State is also marked by social exclusion. 67 per cent of the population live below the poverty line, a level three times the national average (EU, August 2005), and many lack basic housing, education, potable water and electricity.

Meanwhile, protests there are criminalised and responses are militarised, illustrated by the massacre in Agua Blanca (ICJ, 2003; CNDH, 2002) and the dire situation of the Triquis in the Mixteca region who, according to the president of their autonomous territorial entity, suffer paramilitary attacks as a result of a violent struggle for political and territorial control (EU, April 2008; LJ, Dec 2009).

In Oaxaca, some displaced *evangelicos* have found refuge and a durable solution to their displacement in nearby villages where they have been received and given land to cultivate. Others have fled into anonymity in larger urban areas, in a pattern similar to economic migrants (IDMC interviews, December 2009).

Meanwhile, the polarisation within such communities often takes its greatest toll on the most vulnerable groups. IDP women have especially complained that they see their children discriminated against at school (UNOHCHR, 2009).

National response

With 110 million people achieving per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$14,000, Mexico's economy is substantial (OECD, 2009). The capacity of government institutions is also significant, as demonstrated by improvements in health and education over the past dec-

ade (UNDP 2008). The Mexican government is thus in a condition to undertake efforts to prevent the drivers of new displacements and enable durable solutions for existing IDPs.

Although thousands of people were displaced from the 1960s to the 1990s, the Mexican government did not recognise the phenomenon until it decided to re-frame its policies on the Chiapas conflict in 2000. In 2002, the Representative of the UN Secretary-General (the RSG) on IDPs was invited to visit Mexico to address the situation of those displaced during and after the Zapatista uprising. The following year, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people issued a report which underlined the dire situation of indigenous IDPs in Chiapas. These events prompted the government's recognition of the specific needs of IDPs (Deng, 2003; Stavenhagen, 2003; PMM, 2004) and that it "... has a legal and moral obligation to provide solutions to human rights concerns derived from forced internal displacement, and above all their security..." (CNDH, 2005).

Local authorities have engaged in successful community mediation efforts, and the Agrarian Accords signed with peasant organisations in the mid-1990s have had a positive impact on reducing land disputes and land invasions (O'Leary and Ferrer, 200X). But the government is also taking steps to facilitate the privatisation of collective indigenous land, and it has become common for state agents to forcefully evict indigenous groups from land which has been sold to a third party (CI, May 2009; FRAYBA 2009). Unless the government reaches a political deal with indigenous peasants on land issues,

new displacements are likely to result from continuing local conflicts and human rights abuses, and IDPs will be unable to return or resettle elsewhere.

Those displaced during the *Zapatista* uprising face a similar scenario. Although IDPs living in camps in Chiapas since the mid-1990s have benefited from some assistance from the local administration as well as churches and NGOs, and local negotiators have facilitated solutions to ongoing problems, these activities have focused on short-term goals of generating income for some families and improving their difficult humanitarian situation (UNOHCHR, 2009). The lack of a wider political settlement has continued to block the IDPs' access to durable solutions.

In other parts of the country, measures to prevent the activities which drive displacement have not been integrated into counter-insurgency and anti-drug efforts, indicating that the government has not assumed its responsibility to avoid forced displacement and protect IDPs during operations (Rivera Hoyos, 2008).

In 2002 the RSG highlighted the need to address the contradictions within indigenous communities and weaknesses in their governance structures. He recommended that the federal government intervene in local political, religious and agrarian conflicts with mechanisms to facilitate reconciliation (Deng, 2003; ED, March 2004). But the need to facilitate solutions for IDPs or those at risk of being displaced through mediation in intra-communal conflicts, poses a challenge for the government which has a responsibility to respect indigenous rights to self-governance. At the same time, traditional practices to resolve disputes are often en-

trenched in the local power hierarchy, and external intervention is needed to find solutions to inter-communal problems (IDMC interview, December 2009). One way the government hopes to address this situation is by evaluating responsibilities for intra-communal disputes through the Interior Ministry, an idea reflected in the 2008-2012 National Programme for Human Rights (DO, August 2008).

Recently, the government has made efforts to improve IDP assistance policies after focusing on IDPs who fled intra-communal conflicts. The 2001-2006 National Education Plan addressed attendance and drop-out rates of IDP children in the public school system (CNDH, 2005). And the CDI has developed a number of activities with local authorities to promote durable solutions for IDPs in Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Jalisco and Hidalgo as part of the Project for Assistance to Indigenous IDPs. Up to US\$6,200 may be provided to enable a displaced family to acquire land and building material and develop livelihoods (CDI, 2006). The CDI invested over US\$5 million in 2006 to assist almost 5,800 indigenous IDPs in this way (CDI, 2008; UNOHCHR, 2009).

As a result of the CDI's joint projects with local institutions, 200 indigenous families displaced by clashes over land

between groups with a religious affiliation received US\$7,000 each to buy land and construction materials to facilitate their resettlement, as well as legal advice to prevent the eruption of new conflicts (DD, November 2009). Another 200 families belonging to opposing political factions each received US\$6,800 to build a home (Excelsior, April 2009; CDI, May 2009), while 13 widows from El Charco, Guerrero received US\$78,000 to launch a company to produce and sell clothes (GP, July 2009; GD, July 2009). However a lack of effective reparation is indicated by the fact that the widows, whose husbands were massacred by the army in 1998, were still seeking justice in 2009 "because the money does not bring back the dead" (LJG, July 2009).

Elections are due in Chiapas and Oaxaca in 2010 and provide incentives to rally popular support. But beyond such political opportunities, the government has not yet met its responsibility to provide durable solutions for its IDPs. Political management of conflicts at local and federal levels is required, as well as a budget which reflects the government's responsibilities towards its internally displaced citizens.

Note: This is a summary of IDMC's new internal displacement profile on Mexico. The full profile is available online [here](#).

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About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org.

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