

Mexico massacre sparks outrage and accusations

Clinton, U.N. chief condemn the violence; top rebel claims Zedillo, aide gave 'green light'

By Caroline Brothers

Reuters

ACTEAL, Mexico — The massacre of 45 refugees in southern Mexico sparked world outrage Wednesday as a rebel leader blamed the government and the United Nations condemned the slaughter.

Most people who lived in Acteal, a coffee and banana growing village about 450 miles southeast of Mexico City, fled the area after the killings Monday. Twenty-one of the victims, all Tzotzil Indians, were women and 14 were children.

The rebel leader known as Subcommandante Marcos, who heads the Zapatista rebels in the area where the killings took place, blamed Mexican President "Ernesto Zedillo and the Interior Ministry, who two years ago gave the green light to counterinsurgency by the army."

A local church leader accused the Mexican government of ignoring warnings that paramilitaries tied to Zedillo's ruling party were preparing attacks in the troubled state of Chiapas, scene of a Zapatista-led Indian uprising in 1994 against the government.

While placing no blame for the incident, the White House spokesman Mike McCurry said President Clinton was outraged.

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan "strongly condemns this odious crime," a spokesman said.

Aside from heavy troop and police presence, Acteal looked like a ghost town Wednesday as survivors fled. The village is close to the colonial capital of San Cristobal de las Casas in the state of Chiapas.

"They have fled further into the mountains," said Maria Isabel Lopez Zamorra, a nun from the neighboring town of Pantelho.

In other communities in this wild region of Chiapas, peasants and shoeless children stood along the sides of dirt roads waving makeshift banners demanding justice.

"We are on the verge of a civil war and we don't understand why neither the federal nor the state governments are really doing anything to stop this," Raul Vera, Roman Catholic assistant bishop of the town of San Cristobal, told reporters.

The bodies of the 45 victims were still stacked in a morgue in the Chiapas state capital, Tuxtla Gutierrez, Wednesday morning under heavy police guard. Relatives and reporters were not allowed access.

The handful of Indians who managed to escape from the slaughter recovered in hospitals in San Cristobal.

Zedillo condemned the massacre and ordered federal investigators to Chiapas to hunt for the killers and calm tension between Indians, Zapatistas and paramilitaries backed by local landowners and politicians.

The moves did little to calm local people, whose grief for the dead was mixed with anger at the government for failing to guarantee their safety despite a huge military presence in the state left over from the January 1994 uprising by the Indian Zapatista National Liberation Army.



Janet Schwartz/Associated Press

A girl cries Wednesday during treatment for her wounds in San Cristobal de las Casas, Mexico. She was among those injured by gunmen in this wild region in Monday's attack on Acteal.

THE INSIDE STORY

Child's cries heralded massacre in Mexico that claimed 45 villagers

By Mark Stevenson

Associated Press

ACTEAL, Mexico — It was 11 a.m. when a little girl's scream alerted villagers that death had rumbled into Acteal on three flatbed trucks.

Many of the villagers were in Acteal's clapboard chapel. Some were praying, others were sorting through a newly arrived shipment of donated clothing. When they

heard the scream, they ran outside to help — and into a hail of bullets.

In a flash, the villagers scrambled down Acteal's lush hillsides.

For the next five hours, they huddled in muddy riverbeds or played dead, desperate to escape the attackers whose shots sliced the cold mountain air.

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Morgue workers in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Mexico, handle the coffin Wednesday of a victim of the massacre.