Guerrillas Are Nuisance to Mexican Government

Mexican security forces scored a major success against terrorists this weekend, but they are still a long way from eliminating the guerrilla threat to the government.

Senator Ruben Figueroa, who has been held captive since May, was rescued on Sunday after a gun battle in which soldiers wounded a number of members of Lucio Cabanas’ guerrilla group. The previous day, another group of terrorists freed President Echevarria’s father-in-law, Jose Guadalupe Zuno, who had been kidnapped on August 30. The government has refused to talk with the kidnappers about terms for the freedom of either, but it is possible that Zuno’s family secretly met certain of the ransom demands.

Several Members Under Observation

Members of both terrorist groups were still at large, and are unlikely to be deterred in their campaign against the government.

Security officials believe that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of the People, a group that claimed responsibility for kidnapping former US consul general in Mexico, is the group responsible for Zuno’s abduction. Three of its members have been arrested. Little is known about this group, but it may be associated with the 23rd of September Communist League, another extremist group that has kidnapped Mexican notables in the recent past, and with a radical student organization based in Guadalajara.

Figueroa had been a prisoner of the Lucio Cabanas’ group for three and a half months, despite a massive search to locate him.

Until Echevarria became President in 1970, politically motivated violence of this sort had been absent from Mexico since the late 1930s. But shortly after his inauguration, Mexico began to experience the same kind of urban and rural guerrilla crime that is common in some other Latin American countries. In 1971 the government uncovered a group that had received training in North Korea.

A Real Nuisance

About 15 guerrilla groups have sprouted up since 1971, but only a handful are now active. The groups are small and are not waging a well-organized, sustained, or coordinated campaign against the government. They do, however, have the capability to carry out spectacular acts of violence and terrorism, and they are a real nuisance.

Sports of violence are likely to continue for some time, it seems, as the government’s response to the problem—increased security efforts, public spending to improve social and economic conditions, and political rhetoric—have to date been largely ineffective.

Lucio Cabanas

The most active groups are the Lucio Cabanas band and the 23rd of September Communist League. Cabanas, Mexico’s best known guerrilla, operates mostly in the mountains not far from Acapulco in the southwestern state of Guerrero. He enjoys widespread support and sympathy among the peasants.

His group has staged numerous robberies, kidnappings, and at least three daring and professional attacks on isolated army units. He has perhaps 50 to 75 hardcore followers, but can probably assemble up to 150 for a particular operation.

The 23rd of September group, unlike the others, operates in several parts of Mexico and absorbs guerrillas from other groups in the country. Founded in 1972, it is urban-based and is organized in small cells in which each member knows only a few others. Members have a mixed background—political opposition and criminal activity. A number are students or former students, some with degrees in law and medicine. Its strength is reported to be roughly 500, but it could be larger. All of these groups pose some form of Marxist socialism. All are dedicated to changing the Mexican government and social system by violent means. All have developed guerilla tactics and have adult leaders.

The government has been criticized for misusing its power to suppress political opponents. The government’s response is a mixture of military spending and political repression. The Figueroa kidnapping, for example, has led to a huge publicity effort to demonstrate how much the government has done for guerrillas.

Although the security forces may improve, some of the other measures hold much hope for success. The government’s social and economic programs cannot be expected in the near term to ameliorate the conditions that give rise to the terrorist and the guerrilla. The latter are too far removed from their own rhetoric to listen to the government’s heavy expenses that it has had to divert funds from other government agencies.

Perhaps more ominous for Mexico’s security situation was the attempt in January 1974 by the 23rd of September group and radical students at the University of Sinaloa to stage something resembling an armed uprising in the streets of Culiacan, capital of the western state of Sinaloa. The government considered the situation serious enough to send in paratroopers from the capital to ensure that order was restored.

The cumulative weight of terrorist incidents in the past year or so has produced a climate of anxiety, particularly among businessmen and the wealthy, who consider themselves possible targets of kidnapping attempts. Businessmen were extremely bitter at the Echevarria administration last fall after an influential industrialist was murdered by terrorists in the northern city of Monterrey.

The government’s policy of not negotiating with kidnappers, announced in October 1973, is not stopping the political abductions.

A large part of the government’s response to political violence consists of intensive police work and, as in the Cabanas case, the mass application of military manpower. The rest of the response is a mixture of police spending and political rhetoric. The Figueroa kidnapping, for example, has led to a huge publicity effort to demonstrate how much the government has done for guerrillas.

Although the security forces may improve, some of the other measures hold much hope for success in the near future. The government’s social and economic programs cannot be expected in the near term to ameliorate the conditions that give rise to the terrorist and the guerrilla. The latter are too far removed from their own rhetoric to listen to the government’s efforts.