

Upheaval predicted in Mexico

A leftist leader of the riots in Oaxaca said the unrest is the beginning of a 'historic transformation' that will grow into a national rebellion.

The Miami Herald
Nov. 14, 2006

OAXACA, Mexico - Flavio Sosa is remarkably relaxed for a wanted man.

As the most visible leader of a leftist movement that has rattled the Vicente Fox administration, chased state police out of this southern Mexican city and challenged hundreds of federal troops -- Sosa faces arrest warrants on riot and conspiracy charges.

He also has received death threats, no small worry in a city where there have been at least nine political killings since August, mostly of Sosa's fellow leftists.

But sitting in a colonial plaza, just two blocks away from an encampment of police clutching rifles and riot shields, the 41-year-old activist couldn't stop smiling.

"It's no use living my life in fear and being scared every time I go out in the street," he said. "This movement is beautiful. I'm proud to be a part of it."

A former migrant worker, Sosa is one of the founders of the Oaxaca People's Assembly, a leftist front trying to oust state Gov. Ulises Ruíz. The assembly formed in June after Ruíz's police violently broke up a protest by striking teachers demanding higher wages.

The assembly accuses Ruíz of rigging the 2004 election to win office and sending gangs of thugs against his opponents.

But Sosa says the fight goes deeper than this.

Ruíz of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, is part of a long line of Mexican politicians who have looked after the rich and ground down the poor, he argues. The Oaxaca unrest, he says, is the beginning of a social upheaval akin to the unrest in Bolivia that culminated in the December election of leftist Evo Morales, the nation's first Indian president.

"Ruíz is just the detonator. We are living through a historic transformation in Latin America," Sosa said.

Sosa's enemies, including Ruíz and Oaxaca's Attorney General Lizbeth Caña, describe the bearded, long-haired activist as a "terrorist" and an "urban guerrilla."

For five months, Sosa and his supporters seized the city center, keeping out state police and driving away tourists from one of Mexico's top destinations. They built barricades, burned buses and took over radio stations to broadcast calls for revolution.

The president on Oct. 29 sent 4,000 federal officers backed by helicopters and water cannons to push the leftists out of the city center.

But the violence persisted elsewhere as federal officers clashed with protesters using gasoline bombs and fireworks packed with glass and nails. Last week, 30 people were injured in the confrontations with police.

Sosa says the fighting is in self-defense.

The portly leftist also says Mexico needs a hard kick to bring about change.

Critics say Sosa is an opportunist who allies with the highest bidder. A profile of him in the Mexican magazine Reporte Indigo paints him as a pistol-packing thug who is using the Oaxacan movement to carve out a fiefdom.

Sosa laughs at the accusation.

"I wouldn't even know how to fire a gun," he said.

He also points out he is only one of many leaders in the assembly of leftist, trade union, student, Indian and neighborhood groups.

"We are all equal. But my big beard and big stomach have made me become the favorite leader of the press and the police," he said.

Interior Undersecretary Arturo Chávez, whom Fox sent to Oaxaca to negotiate with the leftists, acknowledged they have no chief.

"They are a very hard group to bargain with," Chávez said. "We talk to some leaders, but then we are not sure if other leaders agree with them."

The grass-roots nature of the movement empowers its followers, Sosa said, predicting it will grow to a national rebellion.

Three bombs in Mexico City last week, which caused property damage but no injuries, were claimed by guerrilla groups in support of the Oaxaca protest movement. Sosa said the assembly had no connection with the bombings but did not condemn them.

"Fox's ineptitude will bring about a new revolution," he said.