

Mexico remembers 1997 Indian massacre

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MEXICO CITY --

It's been nearly a decade since pro-government villagers armed with guns and machetes slaughtered 45 men, women and children in the neighboring hamlet of Acteal - a massacre that remains emblematic of Mexico's human rights failures.

At the time - Dec. 22, 1997 - Chiapas was the battleground where Zapatista rebels were trying to build support for their armed insurrection against the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, which had ruled Mexico for seven decades. The army and the ruling party's local governor were determined to hold them back.

Authorities said the killings were motivated by a land dispute between residents of the two Tzotzil Indian communities. Victims' families say the killings were motivated by politics, with state officials providing weapons and paramilitary training for the more conservative village in a bid to crush the Zapatistas.

As Saturday's dark anniversary approaches, rights groups have renewed their plea for a Supreme Court investigation into what they believe is a cover-up that has protected the true authors of the crime. A special prosecutor also is on the case, taking the rare step of summoning the former governor, Julio Cesar Ruiz Ferro, to testify behind closed doors on Sunday.

Almost everyone agrees that justice has been slow in coming. It wasn't until this October that courts sentenced 34 men, mostly farmers from Los Chorrros, to 26 years each for the killings. Several other men had been convicted in the case in 2002.

But many say they fear the real masterminds, the people who ordered and abetted the attack, won't be punished.

"We haven't seen any real justice," said Vazquez Gomez. "Ten years have passed, but justice still hasn't arrived."

In the intervening decade, a modest brick church has been built near the spot where many of the victims were cut down as they prayed in a wooden hut. A few more solid houses also have gone up.

The lack of more violence since the attack is notable, given how little faith the villagers have in Mexico's justice system. While survivors still gather each year to mourn their dead and demand prosecutions, many say nothing could bring them to seek revenge.

"I thought of ways I could seek a solution by my own hand, me against them, but then I thought 'that is not right,'" said Maria Vazquez Gomez, a Tzotzil Indian who lost almost her entire family in the attack - her mother, father, a brother and her sister-in-law.

One key factor is that the villagers are members of a Christian base community organized by lay workers of the Roman Catholic Church. While they sympathized with

leftist Zapatista rebels at the time, they rejected the path of armed uprising, and they still do.

"I have a friend who has guns, and he said to me once, 'If you want to go get some revenge for what they did to your family, then let's go,'" said Manuel Vazquez Luna, who was just 10 years old when the gunmen slaughtered his father, mother and 5 sisters; he survived by running and hiding.

"And I thought about it, and I went back to him and said, 'No, I can't do that.'"

And so they have carried on in the decade since, with villagers from the killers' town living just a few miles from the families of the victims, passing each other on the rural roads several times a week.