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Mexico rights chief blames govt for Oaxaca abuses

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MEXICO CITY, March 15 (Reuters) - The Mexican government was an accomplice in the killing of 20 people in last year's conflict in the tourist city of Oaxaca and permitted torture and illegal arrests, a rights watchdog said on Thursday.

In a report on the conflict in which leftist activists tried to bring down Oaxaca's governor, Mexico's National Human Rights Commission said federal, state and municipal officials were responsible for human rights violations.

"Authorities and public officials ... either by action or omission caused rights violations," including the right to life of 20 people, Jose Luis Soberanes, head of the autonomous state agency, said on presenting the report to the Senate's rights commission.

During the six-month conflict in the city, famed for its colonial architecture, exotic food and indigenous culture, protesters set up hundreds of barricades and chased police from the downtown area to try to oust state Gov. Ulises Ruiz.

In response, death squad-style groups, including men identified by local media as police officers, toured the city at night shooting at protesters.

The clashes escalated, leading to the fatal shooting of a U.S activist journalist and the occupation of the city by federal riot police. Police finally regained control of the city after fierce street battles and massive arrests.

Soberanes, Mexico's highest rights official, said police used excessive force, threats, illegal arrests and torture to take back the city from protesters, and blamed the government for badly managing the crisis.

Sen. Alejandro Gonzalez, a member of President Felipe Calderon's National Action Party (PAN), told Reuters lawmakers were awaiting the results of the government's own internal investigation, which he hoped to see before the end of 2007.

"If the investigation reflects the issues raised in the National Human Rights Commission's report, we must take action. We don't want more impunity," Gonzalez said.

The watchdog recognized that the protesters, who accuse Gov. Ruiz of stealing an election, corruption and heavy-handedness, had also exceeded their right to legitimate protest in some cases.

Soberanes warned the conflict had not been resolved and could flare up again if social, economic and political issues were not resolved in the state, one of the

poorest in Mexico.

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