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Mexico Charges Ex-President in '68 Massacre

By JAMES C. McKINLEY Jr.

MEXICO CITY, June 30 — Just two days before a tight national election, a judge has ordered the arrest of former President Luis Echeverría on genocide charges in connection with his role during the massacre of student protesters here in 1968, overturning a lower court ruling.

The arrest of Mr. Echeverría, who is 84 and in poor health, came after two failed attempts by a special prosecutor to charge him with the deaths and disappearances of dozens of students and leftist dissidents in the late 1960's and early 1970's, a period known here as the dirty war.

The ruling was a major victory for President Vicente Fox, who staked much of his political legacy on holding government officials legally responsible for past atrocities rather than forming a truth commission that had no legal teeth.

Mr. Fox's inability thus far to obtain any convictions in connection with the massacres has been widely seen as a major failure. So the arrest of Mr. Echeverría is likely to boost the chances of Felipe Calderón, the presidential candidate of Mr. Fox's National Action Party, at the polls on Sunday.

But the special prosecutor, Ignacio Carrillo Prieto, denied that the judge's decision had anything to do with politics. The timing was a coincidence, he said.

"This is a victory for my colleagues, for me, for President Fox, who decided to use the state's institutions and not to invent round tables and symposiums and conferences that don't make sense, when the state has the institutions to find out the truth and punish those responsible," Mr. Carrillo Prieto said.

Having been hospitalized in recent months with lung ailments, Mr. Echeverría was placed under house arrest at his residence in the San Jerónimo neighborhood in the south of the capital while the court decides his guilt or innocence. Federal agents were dispatched to watch him, Mr. Carrillo Prieto said.

Mr. Echeverría was president from 1970 to 1976 at the height of Mexico's crackdown on leftists, in which more than 500 dissidents disappeared.

Before that he was the interior minister, in charge of national security, when troops opened fire at a student rally in Mexico City on October 2, 1968, just before the Olympics opened here. The government has always claimed that only 30 people died in that massacre, at the Tlatelolco housing complex, but witnesses and human rights advocates say as many as 300 were killed.

Mr. Echeverría has always denied any responsibility for the massacre, arguing that he was not in a position to control the soldiers who carried out the attack, his lawyer, Juan Velázquez, has said.

Last year a lower court judge threw out genocide charges against Mr. Echeverría, ruling that Mexico's 30-year statute of limitations for mass murder had run out. The court also ruled that the student protesters could not be defined as a unified political group under the Mexican genocide law.

But on Friday an appeals court judge, José Ángel Mattar Oliva, disagreed. He said the years when Mr. Echeverría served as a cabinet minister and as president did not count against the 30-year limit, since he had immunity from prosecution while in office. He also said the students, who were at a pro-democracy rally, were clearly a political group.

Advocates for the victims of the repression said the ruling had come too late, given Mr. Echeverría's age and poor health. Still, some said they were gratified that the prosecutor had managed to indict him.

"Many of us expected nothing would ever come of it," said Jesús Martín del Campo, whose brother, Edmundo, was killed in a 1971 attack on students by pro-government thugs.

Other family members of those who disappeared or were murdered said they suspected that the Fox administration was using the indictment to help its candidate. Throughout the campaign, Mr. Fox's party has tried to liken the leftist candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, to Mr. Echeverría.

"It seems to me to be a very cloudy thing to do this at this moment, two days before the election," said Rosario Ibarra, whose son disappeared in the 1970's. "I think that it has to do with the fear campaign that Fox continues to wage, a campaign to revive memories of the atrocities that Echeverría committed and put in people's head the idea that Andrés Manuel will be like him."

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