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INTELLIGENCE NOTE  
BUREAU OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

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MEXICO: GOVERNMENT REPRESSION OF STUDENTS CAUSES CRISIS

The violent repression of the June 10 student demonstrations by the Halcones (Falcons), a bully-boy group almost certainly organized by the government, seriously undercuts President Echeverria's recent efforts to establish improved relations with students and Mexican youth in general. He now can expect increasing trouble from this sector, and this in turn could create problems in relations with the US.

Genesis of the problem. Echeverria's difficulties with students date back to 1968 when as Interior Minister he was closely associated with the actions taken to repress the student disturbances which began in July and culminated with the infamous "Tlateloco massacre" on October 2. Since becoming President, he has labored to overcome his former image and recast himself as one whose objectives were closely attuned to those of the younger generation. In this he was greatly helped by his dynamism and obvious desire to work dramatic changes. The biggest immediate source of tension between Echeverria and the students was the numbers of political prisoners being held as a result of the 1968 riots. He soon released the great majority, including some who had

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received long jail sentences. While a few continue to be held, the issue of political prisoners has successfully been diverted from the center of the spotlight of student attention.

Trouble in Nuevo Leon. The cause of the current student difficulties was a change in the bylaws of the University of Nuevo Leon (UANL) in Monterrey by the State Legislature which reduced student-faculty control of the institution. Student opposition and demonstrations were great enough to keep the university closed since May 1. Students throughout the republic and most importantly in Mexico City were preparing to launch a series of sympathy demonstrations. Faced with a deteriorating situation, Echeverria delivered an address affirming his support for the concept of university autonomy and he sent Education Minister Bravo Ahuja to Monterrey to resolve the problem. Minister Bravo went a long way to meet the students' demands on repealing the objectionable law but deeply antagonized those conservative elements who were backing the Governor's program to reduce the autonomy of the university. The Governor was so embarrassed by the situation that he resigned.

The demonstration and riot. Echeverria probably felt that although he had incurred the displeasure of conservative elements, his action was justified because it had won him the respect and esteem of the students. He was no doubt surprised to see that agitation did not cease immediately, and that groups at the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN) in Mexico City planned to demonstrate against the settlement in Nuevo Leon. It is indeed difficult to see what the demonstration in Mexico City was supposed to be about, although the probable reason is

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that the demonstration had already been planned and the sudden removal of much of its cause was not deemed sufficient reason to cancel it. In any case, the students did not need much of an excuse to manifest feelings of opposition to the government. Intelligence and Embassy reporting generally confirm the news account of how the Halcones attacked the students. The result was the bloodiest incident involving students since 1968, resulting in at least ten deaths, 100 injuries and about 160 arrests (most of whom were subsequently released). Many people have identified the Halcones with the government and were highly incensed by the incident. The press coverage was hostile, an attitude that was no doubt accentuated by the fact that several newsmen were assaulted and injured by Halcones. This in turn gave rise to the charge that the group and, indirectly, the government was attempting to suppress news coverage of the activities.

Who are the Halcones? The government has been asserting that there is no connection between the Halcones and any government agency and that they are simply a manifestation of right-wing dissent and equally as repugnant as the leftist student "struggle groups." A clandestine report, however, indicates that the Halcones membership is recruited from university age students who are sons of people friendly with PRI officials enjoying the personal confidence of President Echeverria. The recruits are given a free university education plus some pay and the assurance of a bright future in the PRI. They are trained by army personnel and have been supplied with close to \$200,000 worth of weapons and equipment, including 100 M-1 carbines.

Who is to blame? There has been much press speculation that the

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Halcones were unleashed by conservative high-level government officials who were displeased by Echeverria's kowtowing to student demands and who wished to force a confrontation with the students and bring about Echeverria's eventual overthrow. There is also speculation that Echeverria was seeking to dismiss Martinez Dominguez, mayor of Mexico City, and therefore engineered the atrocity in order to have an excuse to dump him. Neither of these theories appears to be very convincing. A more probable explanation is that Echeverria was playing a double game by meeting student demands at the same time he was supporting the Halcones as a counterfoil to the activist left-wing "struggle groups." Possibly out of anger over the fact that the students insisted on demonstrating even after he had gone to great lengths to meet their aspirations, Echeverria may well have given his blessing to the use of the group against the IPN demonstration. For reasons not yet clear, the operation got out of hand. What is clear, however, is that Echeverria's serious efforts to establish an improved rapport with university students have suffered a significant setback, and he can anticipate further trouble from this sector.

Implications for the US. If the students place themselves in a position of strong opposition to the Mexican government, Echeverria will probably take increasingly repressive measures to keep the situation under control. Should these measures evoke substantial criticism in the US, (e.g. in US media or Congress) continued friendly relations with the Mexican government could be made more difficult. On the other hand, if the Mexican government decides it has to go further toward meeting the demands of students and youth, then some of the highly nationalistic

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policies which these groups advocate may receive closer official attention. For example, the PRI Youth has adopted a resolution calling for the nationalization of the banking industry. If the government decides that it must respond to the recommendations of these groups, then some US economic interests could suffer. However, Echeverria would seek to minimize the impact of whatever harmful effects these developments might have on US-Mexico relations.

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