

InSHORT

statements denying the rumors. On November 7 in the Mexican Congress, military officials reaffirmed their loyalty to the civilian government.

By giving ink to "confused rumors" of a nonexistent military coup, American papers may have been playing Chicken Little. After all, there has not been an attempted military coup in Mexico for more than 50 years. But

one well-informed opposition leader claims the rumors were not so far-fetched and says that military rumblings—especially in Chiapas—could have been a trial balloon for a future coup attempt. Whatever the truth of the rumors, however, the reports clearly speak to fundamental weaknesses that could make the Zedillo administration vul-

nerable to attack.

The president himself is the flash-point for much of the country's instability. No one's first choice for president, Zedillo entered the 1994 race only after the assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio, the initial candidate of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). And since taking office, Zedillo has been unable to assuage public distrust of the PRI, which has held power



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THE RUMOR THAT ROARED

Earlier this month Mexico was shaken by reports of violence on the scale of 1994's Zapatista uprising. Only this time, the reports turned out to be untrue ... or at least premature.

On November 3 the AP-Dow Jones and Reuters wire services reported

"confused rumors that the Mexican Army was planning to assume control of the government" and "had initiated an offensive against the rebels in the southern state of Chiapas." Within hours, the Mexican army, Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo, the U.S. Embassy and the White House issued

An American casualty in Chiapas

WITH REPORTERS FIXATING ON EVERY FLUCTUATION IN the peso, a brutal attack on the U.S. representative of the Zapatistas has gone virtually unnoticed.

On October 26, Cecilia Rodriguez was traveling outside of San Cristóbal de las Casas when she and a male friend were surrounded by four men armed with rifles. While one of the men guarded Rodriguez's companion—leaving him unharmed—Rodriguez was gang-raped by the others. After the assault, one of Rodriguez's assailants shouted, "You already know how things are in Chiapas, right? Shut up, then. ... Or you know what will happen to you."

Rodriguez, profiled in the August 8, 1994 issue of *In*

These Times, has been working in Chiapas since January 1994 to provide assistance to grass-roots groups seeking democratic reforms in Mexico. She was in Chiapas for the latest round of peace talks between the Zapatista rebels and the government.

Rodriguez lodged a complaint with the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, which in turn filed reports with the Mexican police. But the embassy official with whom she spoke explained that "they never prosecute here in Mexico." Rodriguez says she hopes "my experience will illustrate the brutal nature of the war being waged in Chiapas." Meanwhile, she insists that the attack won't deter her work. —Ashley Craddock

APPALL-O-METER

THE IN THESE TIMES INDEX OF INDECENCIES



Little smokers 7.2

A recent study suggests that the venerable *Weekly Reader*—read by generations of captive grade schoolers—may have helped to inspire some youngsters to become pack-a-day smokers. The *Weekly Reader*, whose corporate owner was at one time the largest shareholder in the

tobacco company RJR Nabisco, first came under fire in October 1994 after running an article on "smokers' rights" that conveniently neglected to mention the health dangers posed by cigarettes. Now a study suggests the article was no fluke. From 1989 to 1994, explained University of California researchers at the American Public Health Association's recent annual meeting, the *Weekly Reader* ran 34 articles dealing with smoking. Two-thirds of the articles presented industry views; only a little more than one-third warned of the dangers of tobacco. (In *Scholastic News*, a competing newsletter, researchers found that four out of five smoking-related articles carried warnings.)

Hugging=death 5.3

It might make physics classes a little difficult, but school officials at Matricola Middle School in Merrimack, N.H., have forbidden their students from touching one another. Though school principal Thomas Levesque says that the ban is a safety

measure, the Associated Press reports that some parents are afraid it may reflect the overzealous enforcement of a new school district rule that prohibits schools from "encouraging or supporting homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative." Teachers have apparently been especially harsh on girls hugging girls. One eighth-grader told the Associated Press that she had been warned about her behavior after hugging a friend. "I was having a problem that day in school, and my friend went to hug me," she said. "The teacher said, 'Don't do that. You know the rules.' [But] we're just friends. We're not promoting homosexuality."

Freudian slip-up 6.4

It's a case that reminds us all once again of the profound prescience of Sigmund Freud. As London's *Daily Telegraph* recently reported, a "mix-up" at Vienna's General Hospital led (as a hospital spokesman delicately put it) to "a testicle removal" being "carried out on a patient who was, in fact, due to undergo a circumcision." Hospital staff apparently confused the castrato with a different patient with cancerous testicles and a similar name.

Almost 12,000 businesses have closed over the last year, unemployment hovers between 20 and 30 percent, and since the December 1994 devaluation of the peso, wages have fallen by about one-third. A recent study by Mexico's National Nutrition Institute found that in the last 20 years there has been a 600 percent increase in infant malnutrition in Mexico City's metropolitan area. And one study indicates that two-thirds of the farmers, peasants and day laborers in the Mexican countryside earn less than \$3 a day.

Meanwhile, a broadening right-wing movement led by the Organization of Parents of Families, the Right to Life Movement and conservatives within the Roman Catholic Church is gathering momentum throughout the country. In Chiapas, the rebellion led by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation has sparked a fierce right-wing backlash. Local landlords have armed "white guards," private forces employed to strongarm workers and quell political dissidents.

Foreign investors have grown increasingly alarmed at the continuing unrest. After the peso crashed, investors pulled billions of dollars out of the Mexican economy, precipitating the country's greatest crisis since the Great Depression. And reported rumors of a coup further devalued the new peso, which quickly fell to its lowest level since devaluation—7.7 new pesos to the dollar.

James R. Jones, the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, has called the coup rumors "so bizarre and so definably untrue." Jones told the *New York Times* that the embassy had launched an informal investigation to determine the source of the rumors. But while the rumors may have been false, the specter of a burgeoning right-wing movement is real. As PRD congressman Adolfo Aguilar Zinser says, although the military may have publicly professed its loyalty, "there are those who want to create in this country the climate for a coup d'état."

—Dan LaBotz

since 1929. Long synonymous with corruption, the party has come under increasing suspicion over the past two years, a period in which three prominent Mexican leaders—Colosio, PRI leader José Ruiz Francisco Massieu and Cardinal Juan Jesus Posadas Ocampo—were assassinated.

Even within the PRI, Zedillo has failed to provide cohesion. PRI congressmen have been jumping ship for the conservative National Action

Party, which registered impressive gains in six statewide elections this month. And last month Manuel Camacho Solís, a one-time mayor of Mexico City and former head of the PRI, left the party, promising to lead a new opposition movement. A few days later another PRI leader, Demetrio Sodi de la Tijera, said he would leave the PRI to found a new center-left party.

But the country's problems extend far beyond the failings of just one man.



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