



Catholic Courier

DIocese of Rochester, New York ■ VOL. 105 NO. 20 ■ THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 1994 ■ 75¢ ■ 20 PAGES

Violence overshadows attempts to resolve rebellion in Chiapas

By Catholic News Service

Negotiations between the Mexican government and rebels in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas began earlier this week.

But attempts to resolve the rebellion that began Jan. 1, 1994, have been overshadowed by the discovery of the mutilated remains of three Indian elders allegedly tortured in a rectory by Mexican soldiers.

The deaths only help to reinforce charges that ongoing mistreatment — ranging from economic exploitation to torture and death — of Indians in Chiapas helped lead to the rebellion by the Zapatista National Liberation Army.

Father Pablo Romo, a Dominican priest and director of the San Cristobal Diocese's Fray Bartolome de las Casas Human Rights Center, said in a telephone interview with Catholic News Service that Mexican rights activists and observers from the U.S.-based rights-monitoring organization Americas Watch found the dismembered skeletons of the three men outside the village of Morelia in a ditch some 300 yards from the dirt road leading to Altamirano.

Father Romo said that, according to the testimony of villagers, the army entered the village, which has no parish priest, on Jan. 7 and forced the inhabitants to assemble in the town square.

Father Romo said that villagers told the diocesan human-rights center that three village elders were taken by soldiers into the rectory beside the local church and tortured. Mexican

news accounts of the incident quote villagers as saying the screams of the men could be heard in the town square.

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AP/Wide World Photos
Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia (in robes) embraces government mediator Manuel Camacho Solis following a Mass last month in San Cristobal de Las Casas in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Bishop Ruiz had just announced President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's offer of a general amnesty covering the rebellion in Chiapas.

Uprising in Mexico hits close to home for diocesan priest

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

For Father Paul J. Ryan, the rebellion in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas is not taking place in a "foreign" land.

Father Ryan, pastor of the Cayuga Team Ministry Cluster, knows Chiapas from spending five years as part of the diocesan mission team in the bordering state of Tabasco. Although no permanent missionary team has been stationed in Tabasco since Father Ryan left in 1990, Rochester still has a sister-diocese relationship with Tabasco dating back to 1983.

Father Ryan, however, was in Tabasco in January even as a cease fire took hold following approximately two weeks of fighting that began New Year's Day.

The diocesan priest said he had planned his Jan. 9-21 trip to Tabasco long before the fighting began. He even took two nieces with him. But the possibility of rebellion had been real to

him for quite some time.

"As far back as 10 years ago, a person in the government told me that there was going to be a problem at some point," the priest said.

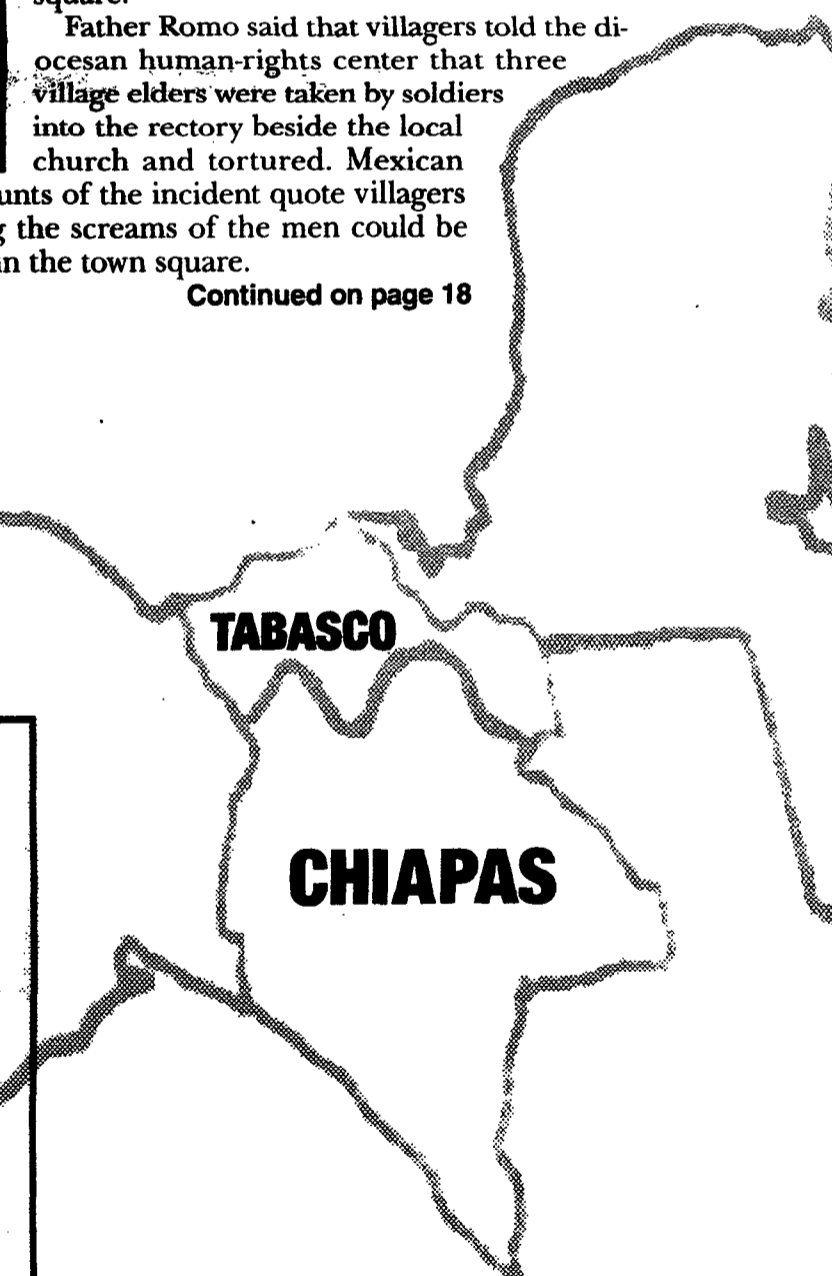
And, he warned, "Unless a peaceful solution is made and the government opens its eyes to the plight of the indigenous people, the fighting could spread" to other parts of southern Mexico.

Father Ryan traced the region's problems to the fact that the region's indigenous people — primarily Mayan Indians — "have been put upon" for centuries.

The diocesan priest noted that wealthy land owners control large areas of land and, due to oil exploration, many poor people had been forced off what land they did possess.

This second development, Father Ryan said, stems in part to a provision of the Mexican constitution that says "anything below the ground belongs to the government." Thus, when oil is

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