

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menendez

Heavy fire on the southern border

The biggest army maneuvers since the revolution were intended to make a point in Washington.

The Mexican army and air force mobilized 45,000 troops to fight off an invading army which entered Mexico from Guatemala during the first two weeks of December. The Mexican military units were placed on "red alert" and rapidly transported, along with modern military equipment, into the oil-rich state of Chiapas. Within a few hours, the invaders were contained, and only days were needed to force them to retreat from Mexican soil.

The battle, in reality, was part of the "Cactus-Chicoasén 80" winter maneuvers of the Mexican army. The Mexican government ran the war maneuvers to show the world its determination and ability to defend Mexico's oil fields, located scarcely 100 miles from the border with Guatemala.

As the exercises were in progress, an American expert in the seizure of oil fields by military force—Clyde Mark of the Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division of the U.S. Library of Congress Research Service—was telling a Mexico City press conference that the U.S. might have to occupy Mexico's oil fields. "If the U.S. invades El Salvador, we could suffer an oil supply cutoff from Mexico," Mark explained. "If the U.S. is unable to seize Middle East oil fields, why not take others, such as Venezuela, Canada, and Mexico? The problem is to project a surprise force, which doesn't harm the wells and which can rebuff the Mexican

army and possible saboteurs."

Mexico's maneuvers were the country's biggest military movement since the 1910 Revolution. Although Mexico's army has been known for its small size and relatively poor firepower, in recent years its physical and strategic readiness has vastly improved, through the purchase and production of modern arms. For example, Mexico now makes the G-3 submachine gun on license from West Germany. During the maneuvers, the Mexicans also displayed small land-land missiles, tanks, and Lockheed T-33 light jets.

Significantly, President López Portillo personally oversaw the maneuvers for a day, in his capacity as commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces. Mexican TV showed him in a kakhi uniform, studded with a general's five stars. The Mexican president effusively praised Defense Minister Félix Galván to the press: "I am deeply proud of what my General Galván is doing. He has the army in better shape than ever before. With a small budget, which we are now increasing, he has worked veritable miracles."

Observers here interpret López Portillo's presence and his statements as ratifying the growing importance of the Mexican army in the country's affairs. A month ago, López Portillo publicly roasted Juan Rulfo, winner of the national literary prize and one of Mexico's most reknowned intellectuals, for

insulting the army. Said López Portillo: "As supreme commander of the Mexican Armed Forces, as president of the Republic, as a Mexican citizen, I say that I am proud of our army. I protest against all slanders and facile defamation. . . . Not one soldier of the republic is corrupt. They are all loyal servants of the institutions."

Most analysts viewed López Portillo's remarks as extreme to the point of bringing their literal veracity into doubt—but the Mexican president did make his point.

Perhaps most impressed were the eight Guatemalan generals who were invited by General Galván to personally observe the maneuvers. Galván explained that the President himself had ordered the exercises to be held on the Guatemalan border, to stamp out persistent reports in *Business Week* and other publications that Mexico was providing a "sanctuary" for Guatemalan leftist guerrillas. Mexico has repeatedly reassured Guatemala that this is not the case, and that on the contrary, Mexico wants to maintain friendly relations on the basis of economic cooperation. On this occasion, Mexican authorities gave the Guatemalan generals a helicopter tour of almost 1,000 kilometers of border area. In Galván's own words, the Guatemalans "descended in a location of their choosing, and were able to verify that there weren't even traces of the supposed guerrillas. . . ."

A reliable source with security ties in Mexico City told my bureau that the best way of describing the Guatemalan military chiefs' response to the maneuvers, is that they were "psyched out" by Mexico's show of force.