

# **Mexico Expels Foreign Rights Activists; Deportations Stem From Chiapas Troubles**

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## **Body**

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Tom Hansen, a human **rights activist** and social worker from Chicago, was buying supplies in a small town near here two months ago when he was detained by Mexican immigration officials and handed over to four heavily armed men in street clothes.

They ushered Hansen, who had been in the conflict-ridden state of **Chiapas** for two days working with indigenous people, into an old yellow sedan.

"When I asked them for identification, they laughed and told me they could beat me up and put me in a crate," Hansen recounted in a recent interview. "I was pretty well convinced I was going to be killed."

Instead, he spent the next 24 hours being ferried from **Chiapas** to **Mexico** City, to what he described as an immigration prison, and being interrogated by various Mexican officials who refused to allow him to see an attorney, make a telephone call or contact the U.S. Embassy. They finally put him on a plane and **expelled** him from the country for committing a cardinal offense -- meddling in **Mexico**'s internal affairs.

Hansen was one of the first in a wave of foreigners -- including a French priest who served here for 32 years and an American student on spring break -- who recently have been thrown out of **Mexico** for allegedly participating in the long-simmering conflict in **Chiapas**. Masked rebels launched an armed rebellion four years ago in this southern state to demand greater **rights** for Indians.

**Mexico** escalated the crackdown on foreigners on Sunday, **deporting** 12 -- including three Americans -- who were arrested when about 500 state and federal policemen stormed a small community that had recently declared itself autonomous from the local elected government and sympathetic to the rebels, known as the Zapatista National Liberation Army. News services identified the Americans as Jeffrey Conant, Michael Zap and Travis Loller, all of San Francisco.

Police also beat two news photographers who were taking pictures of the foreigners at the airport in Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of **Chiapas**, continuing a recent government campaign to hinder press coverage -- particularly by **foreign** reporters -- in the state.

Mexican officials said the approximately two dozen **foreign** visitors **deported** so far this year were **expelled** for violating their tourist visas by working, which requires a special visa. But the officials acknowledged that the underlying reason for the expulsions was the belief that the foreigners were intervening in Mexican politics, a violation of the country's constitution.

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Many analysts said they believe the true motive was to intimidate human rights workers and stymie international criticism of Mexico's human rights record following the December massacre of 45 unarmed Chiapas peasants by a group aligned with the ruling political party. The matter is particularly sensitive now because Mexico is negotiating a new trade agreement with the European Union, which weighs a country's human rights record when considering trade accords.

"This xenophobia campaign is an attempt to discredit international observation and to lump us with the enemy -- to make it appear that we are engaged in political activity," said a European human rights worker based here who asked not to be identified because he is in Mexico on a tourist visa. He added that many human rights workers are coming to Mexico on tourist visas because the government refused to give them working visas.

"We don't want our people demonstrating in the [town square] or marching or making statements to the Mexican press. Our role is to distribute information outside of Mexico, to put international pressure on the government."

Fernando Solis Camara, a top immigration official in Mexico City, said the government welcomes humanitarian workers and human rights observers with the proper visas, which he said are easy to get. But foreigners engaging in political activities "are simply a factor that complicates [finding] a solution to the Chiapas problem," he said, because they help polarize the politics, spread propaganda and discourage communities from accepting government aid.

The issue has been complicated by many factors: Mexico's long-standing tradition of allowing visitors to participate in a variety of activities on a tourist visa; the isolated communities in rural Chiapas that have always viewed foreigners with suspicion; the Roman Catholic Church, which has encouraged international observation and which the government accuses of siding with the rebels; Mexico's equating any foreign meddling with a threat to its sovereignty; the outpouring of international support enjoyed by the Zapatistas; and the influx of foreigners wanting to visit Chiapas following the December massacre. Many visitors are trained observers, academics and relief workers, but others are more akin to adventure tourists who want to be more deeply involved.

"Some are earnest and good-willed people who do not know what they are getting into and want to be in solidarity with poor people," said Eric Olsen of the Washington Office on Latin America, a private think tank. "Sometimes they don't have the political savvy to know when they've crossed the line."

That was apparently the case during a reporter's recent visit to Oventik, the small community sympathetic to the Zapatistas that has roped itself off and declared itself autonomous from the elected local government. When a military troop transport drove by, a half-dozen Italians raced to the main gate and took pictures as community officials implored them not to bother the army.

A foreign anthropologist who has worked in Chiapas for more than 10 years said that at some point the conflict here became a sort of "phenomenon" that attracted all types, in addition to the academics and social workers who have been visiting for decades. "Those kids coming down to make revolution on spring break are probably particularly irksome" to the government, he said.

Sometimes it is a fine line that separates tourism from observation from activism, as illustrated by Global Exchange, a San Francisco human rights and education group that since 1994 has sent more than 500 Americans on "reality tours" to observe the situation here. Participants meet with community leaders and are encouraged to write up and share their impressions of Chiapas -- with friends, with family, with congressmen -- when they return.

"The fact that they are observing reality in Chiapas is our intention, but they are not working in any sense," said Ted Lewis, head of the organization's Mexico project.

Others, like Hansen, 44, acknowledge working while on a tourist visa but say it was with the obvious knowledge of the government. In fact, Hansen said, his project -- a \$ 35,000 program to provide video cameras to Indian communities "so they can tell their own story in their own words" -- was partially funded by the Mexican government.

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"I think they're trying to scare the foreigners out of Chiapas," he said, "and the people who suffer the most are the indigenous communities, because they are left with less access to technical and humanitarian aid, and they're more vulnerable to human rights abuses."

## Graphic

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Photo, mariana mora for The Washington Post; Map, The Washington Post, Mexican police remove Travis Loller from the immigration office in San Cristobal de las Casas. Loller was one of three Americans arrested when police stormed a small community sympathetic to Chiapas rebels; the three were deported Sunday.

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