

Priests excessive force by police

MEXICO CITY - A group of priests from the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca denounced what they say was excessive force by police to keep protesters away from an annual culture fair.

"That battle and its outcome leave a taste of personal vengeance with the aim of intimidating people, teaching them a lesson and halting any attempt to protest against the unhealthy way Oaxaca is governed," said the 45 priests in a statement released July 27.

The priests said the government response represented "an attitude of war against its own people."

The event, known as "Guelaguetza," celebrates Oaxaca's indigenous crafts, dance and cuisine, and is an important tourist draw. It was canceled last year after a large protest movement seized control of much of the city of Oaxaca.

This year's Guelaguetza event in late July was reinforced by riot police who clashed with thousands of marching protesters, resulting in dozens of injuries and arrests.

Oaxaca law enforcement officials said the clash was a reaction to demonstrators who attacked officers with stones, sticks and bottle rockets.

Another march was staged July 30 to coincide with the close of the fair, but confrontations were avoided.

In the statement, the priests also criticized the lack of arrests and investigations into the death of protesters from last year. The unrest lasted five months, left a dozen dead and devastated the state's tourism industry.

The protest movement, a loose coalition of a unionized teachers, left-leaning activists, rural farmers and indigenous groups, has been demanding the resignation of Gov. Ulysses Ruiz, whom they accuse of crooked politics and authoritarian repression.

While the church's official position in the conflict is neutral, a number of priests are sympathetic with the movement, known as the People's Popular Assembly of Oaxaca. Ruiz's government says the movement, which was dislodged from the city center last November by federal riot police, has been infiltrated by subversive groups that hope to destabilize the state.

The results of Oaxaca's municipal and legislative elections Aug. 5 could affect the status of Ruiz's Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, which has dominated the

state assembly for decades.