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## Mexico slow to confront racial issues, experts say

**Lennox Samuels**

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MEXICO CITY - The man visiting from the south of Spain was having a revelation as he walked along Michoacan Street in the city's fashionable Condesa section.

"There are an awful lot of brown people on the street," he exclaimed. "You don't get that at all from the TV and advertising."

Foreigners in Mexico City who look at Mexican television - or movies or magazines or anything with human faces on it - could be excused for thinking they had landed in a European city.

Officially, Mexico's population is mestizaje - a mixture of White and Indian, or mestizos. But the country's political, business, social and cultural elite is dominated by White descendants of Spanish conquistadors, while mixed-race, indigenous and Black people generally are relegated to supporting roles in society.

Mexico has taken major steps toward democracy but lags significantly on civil rights, analysts say. The nation, they say, harbors racism and is years away from addressing it because few in positions of power understand or even acknowledge the situation, and many of those affected by it have long accepted the status quo.

"Mestizaje is a great idea, and it is seductive," said Ben Vinson, associate professor of Latin American history at Pennsylvania State University. "It's also a convenient tool for government elites because they can run a treadmill where they tell people things are better, when they're not quite there."

President Vicente Fox said two months ago that Mexicans in the United States take jobs "even Blacks" wouldn't do. In late June, the postal service released a series of stamps commemorating a 1950s cartoon character, Memin Pinguin, who looks more like a chimpanzee in clothes than the "beloved" Black boy enthusiasts insist he is.

Both incidents were condemned as insulting and racist by Americans, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson, officials with La Raza and the White House. But in Mexico, the uproar was greeted with a mixture of bafflement, indifference, nationalism and even anger.

That response underscores Mexico's lack of understanding about matters of race.

"In Mexico, the problem of discrimination is not explicit," said Maria Elisa Velasquez of the National Institute of Anthropology and History. "We Mexicans don't recognize ourselves as a society that's racist or discriminatory, but we nevertheless have prejudices in that sense.

"If racism is understood as discrimination against one race, there isn't that in

Mexico," said Velasquez, a researcher of ethnology and social anthropology. "But there's discrimination against certain groups, which in this case would be the indigenous people and Afro-Mexicans."

Race in Mexico is a highly complex matter.

Rejecting the Spaniards' rigid caste structure, nationalist Mexican governments stressed the importance of both Europeans and Indians and their contributions to the nation. No mention was made of Black people, hundreds of thousands of whom were brought to the country as slaves.

The nation's census authority, the National Institute of Geography and Statistics, or INEGI, still does not maintain population statistics by racial categories, except for indigenous people, or Indians. The government estimates there are 12.7 million indigenous people in Mexico.

Those Indians slowly have been receiving more attention from the federal government, especially since the uprising of indigenous people in Chiapas state 11 years ago. The government has a Cabinet-level office of indigenous affairs.

But Indian activist Abel Barrera said indigenous people have long been at the bottom of society.

"They are considered second-class persons," said Barrera, director of the Human Rights Center in Tlapa, Guerrero. "Throughout history, they have been stigmatized for their languages, religious expressions and culture."

In a speech recently, Fox sought to embrace the Indians.

"Cultural diversity of the indigenous people is an essential part of our national being and enriches us as a nation," he said. "The indigenous people in Mexico are not part of the past; they belong in the present, and together we are building the future."

Neither he nor any other top official has made such a statement about Black people. No one even has a firm idea how many Blacks there are in the country, although the government estimates 500,000 Afro-Mexicans live along the Costa Chica, which covers the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca.

Most history textbooks have little if any reference to Mexican Blacks, who were brought into the country by the Spanish. *Sintesis de la Historia de Mexico* (*Synthesis of Mexico's History*), a textbook used in junior high school, devotes less than one of its 405 pages to Black Mexicans.

It was not until the 1980s that the so-called *tercera raiz*, or "third-root," movement sought to show that Black people also were part of Mexico's culture.

"They (Black Mexicans) are not recognized yet as a specific ethnic group," said Jose Luis Gutierrez, education director of the National Council to Prevent Discrimination. "In Mexico just a few years ago, talk began of a third root. Not only the Spanish root and indigenous but also the Black root. But evidently, Afro-Mexicans get little recognition culturally."

The council was created only in April 2004 under an anti-discrimination law pushed by Fox and passed by Mexico's Congress in July 2003.

"There's a situation of evident discrimination that translates into poverty and inequality, lack of access to even the most basic services," Gutierrez said.

But many Mexicans insist there is no discrimination in the country. Some of the most vociferous are Black.

"No, absolutely not," said popular singer Johnny Laboriel when asked whether he considers Mexico racist. "I was born in Mexico, and I have never been discriminated against because of my color. They discriminate more because of one's economic standing."

Laboriel is one of only a handful of well-known Black entertainers in Mexico, including the young pop singer Kalimba and the comedian Zamorita. Asked to name other prominent Blacks, Laboriel could only say "a guy named Newman and the Marichan family who are the parents of Kalimba."

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