

Ex-Mexican president ordered held for trial

Echeverria faces genocide charge in '68 crackdown

REUTERS

MEXICO CITY — A judge Friday ordered the arrest of former President Luis Echeverria in connection with a 1968 student massacre.

The surprise move came just two days before the presidential election. An appeals court found enough evidence to support the charge of genocide brought against Echeverria, 84, by special prosecutor Ignacio Carrillo and hold the former Mexican president for trial, reversing a lower court decision last year.



In this October 1968 photo, university students in their underwear are held captive during the Tlatelolco, Mexico City, protest. Witnesses and rights activists say that as many as 300 people were killed during the protests. Officials put the number at about 30.

The arrest order, after two failed attempts in recent years to charge Echeverria with genocide, is a breakthrough in outgoing President Vicente Fox's halting drive to punish those responsible for past

government brutality. Fox leaves office in December.

"For the first time in Mexico's history a president will be tried in this way," Carrillo said after receiving Judge Jose Angel Mattar's 1,200-page resolution in the complex case. "This will work against a repetition of abuse of power, to impede it forever."

Echeverria is expected to be held under house arrest due to his age and health concerns, defense attorney Juan Velasquez said. Echeverria was president from 1970 to 1976, at the height of a so-called dirty war against leftists.

He was interior minister in charge of national security when government troops stormed a student rally in the capital Oct. 2, 1968, days before the opening of the Mexico City Olympics in a tragedy that remains an open wound for many Mexicans.

"This is a historic accomplishment after a long struggle by many for justice and truth in the face of a criminal state in the Echeverria era," said Joel Ortega, who witnessed the massacre as a student protester. Voters go to the polls Sunday in the first presidential election since 2000, when Fox ousted the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, which ruled Mexico for seven decades, at times using repression to crush dissent.

It was not clear what impact the arrest order might have on the vote. Leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has a wafer-thin lead in the polls over ruling party candidate Felipe Calderon.

PRI candidate Roberto Madrazo is in third place in opinion polls, and his party has criticized the probe into past rights abuses.

Officials said about 30 people were killed in what came to be known as the Tlatelolco massacre. But witnesses and rights activists put the death toll as high as 300. Echeverria has denied responsibility for the blood bath.

Carrillo, named by Fox to investigate and prosecute dirty-war crimes, says Echeverria oversaw a bloody campaign to stamp out dissidents when he was interior minister and president.

International rights groups question the charge, however, saying that the 1968 massacre and other crimes of the period do not meet international definitions of genocide.

But Carrillo said Judge Mattar's decision Friday upheld the prosecution's argument that genocide had occurred in the Tlatelolco massacre and there was evidence that Echeverria was behind it. Hundreds of leftists were killed or disappeared at the hands of government security forces from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Fox took office pledging to punish former high-ranking officials who planned and carried out state crimes.