

Storm victims demand help from Zedillo

By William Claiborne=(c) 1997, The Washington Post

ACAPULCO, Mexico - Angry hurricane victims in Mexico's best-known tourist resort confronted President Ernesto Zedillo Saturday, demanding food and water as beleaguered authorities tried to explain chaotic relief efforts and conflicting fatality reports.

Zedillo cut short an official visit to Germany and flew here Saturday - three days after Pauline, the strongest hurricane to hit Mexico's Pacific Coast in decades struck - to meet with disaster relief officials and tour damaged areas.

When victims from the poorest neighborhoods in the hills overlooking the prosperous tourist area on the beach begged for water and food, Zedillo told them, "I want to ask you for a little patience. We're taking this step by step."

Government food subsidy officials said they were running out of food, but noted that 30,000 more boxes were due to arrive later Saturday. Officials also promised 12 portable purification plants would be delivered Saturday, but residents at shelters said that shortages were still acute.

After touring the coastline in a presidential helicopter and meeting with senior officials at Acapulco's Municipal Building, Zedillo said the government was doing everything within its power to help victims.

However, about 200 protesters gathered outside the building and demanded drinking water, food, blankets and other supplies. They held a large banner saying, "Please,

"I want to ask you for a little patience. We're taking this step by step."

-Ernesto Zedillo
President of Mexico

we need drinking water and food." The demonstrators tried to press forward to speak with Zedillo, but security guards roughly pushed them back as he left the building.

Zedillo's meeting was briefly interrupted when an opposition federal deputy from Acapulco, Alberto Lopez Rosas, tried to talk with the president about what he said was the government's failure to anticipate the effects of Hurricane Pauline and warn residents as it approached the city. Zedillo would not talk with Lopez, who then departed.

As the sun shone brightly Saturday, the authorities' attempts to assess the death toll remained imprecise. Officials said accurate casualty figures in rural areas may not be known for weeks, if ever.

Mexico's Red Cross backed away from its estimate of 400 dead in Acapulco and coastal areas south of the city, which was more than double the figure originally announced by officials of Guerrero state, of which Acapulco is a part.

Nonetheless, disaster officials said that in some remote villages victims may have been buried without state agencies being notified, or entire families could have been lost.

But even taking unreported fatalities into account, a spokesman for Mexico's Civil Protection Agency said the Red Cross estimates were a "mistake."

Youthful crime up in Japan

By Sonni Efron=(c) 1997, Los Angeles Times

SOKA, Japan - The attacker buzzes down these peaceful suburban streets on a bicycle, and when he sees a child, he slashes.

In the past three weeks, the cyclist, described as a young man with dyed hair who is perhaps of high school age, has descended on seven children in Soka, a pleasant bedroom town about 10 miles north of Tokyo. Three elementary school pupils were stabbed with a knife-like object, and a fourth girl was punched in the face. Three children escaped unharmed.

Soka's parents are in panic over the random slash-and-run attacks, which some term "American-style" crime. "I've always felt that Japan was a safe place," Rina Kawasaki, the mother of a second-grader, said recently. "I'm scared now."

Her son and all his classmates were being met at school by their parents or escorted home in groups by their teachers, while watchful PTA members patrolled the streets. "Nothing like this has ever happened here before," a school official said.

Japan's minuscule crime rate remains the envy of the industrialized world. Young women walk alone at night, and unescorted children often are seen on the Tokyo subways. Japan's murder rate is only one-ninth that of the United States.

But this year, this nation has been shaken deeply by a wave of heinous and bizarre crimes and especially a surge in violent offenses by youth. In the first six months of 1997, the number of minors arrested for murder, rape, arson or robbery soared 59

percent, the National Police Agency reports. That follows a 16 percent rise in 1996. Almost half of all people arrested in Japan are under 20.

While sociologists debate whether dysfunctional families or Japan's rigid educational system are to blame for the trend of youthful criminality, public calls for a tougher juvenile justice system are increasing.

In the wake of a shocking child-beheading case in Kobe, politicians are taking heed and a parliamentary committee of Liberal Democratic Party members is considering the issue.

Still, despite the recent surge, juvenile crime is much lower than it was in the 1960s. But it is the nature of the crimes, not the number, that has so unnerved the public.

Japan was stunned in June by the arrest of a 14-year-old Kobe boy, who confessed in court last week to beheading an 11-year-old boy and leaving the head at his school gates with a note in the mouth daring police to "catch me if you can." The boy also admitted killing a 10-year-old girl and wounding a 9-year-old.

Meanwhile, newspaper headlines continue to pound readers with tales of the kind of carnage and mayhem that Japanese have associated with the United States: a pregnant woman stabbed in the belly on the street; a shootout between "yakuza" gangsters in broad daylight; a man's body found encased in concrete; a housewife charged with dismembering her husband and leaving him to rot in a bathtub - although she did telephone a laundry to ask how to remove stubborn bloodstains.

Then there are the weird crimes,

peculiar to Japan, which are seen as disturbing indicators of an unraveling of Japanese values and the communitarian social structure.

These include a steady increase in "oyaji-gari" or "uncle-hunting" attacks in which bands of teen-age boys pounce on drunken, middle-aged "salary men" on their way home and relieve the businessmen of their wallets.

The name for this crime was supplied to police last year by seven teens nabbed in the act; within weeks, the phenomenon was being reported across Japan, perhaps due in part to media-driven copycats.

An old Japanese rhyme used to place "uncles," meaning neighborhood men who would scold errant youngsters, on the list of things that scared children, along with earthquakes, lightning and fires. Then neighbors began to mind their own business. That "uncles" are now targets indicates the gulf between Japan's Confucian values and its new realities. (End optional trim)

"The Japanese are losing their ethical moorings," declared psychiatrist Masaaki Noda.

Officials in Soka said they do not know whether the seven attacks on children there are copycats of 37 assaults on women. Nor do they know whether more than one person is responsible, said Koichiro Yamamoto, vice principal of Takasago Elementary School.

"These kinds of unprovoked attacks seem very American, don't they?" Yamamoto said. "We take it extremely seriously, because we have never had this kind of thing before." Some legal experts argue that Japan's

juvenile justice system - shaped by the American occupation - coddles young criminals and excludes their victims. "Society must be protected not only from adult crime but also from juvenile crime," argued former prosecutor Kazuo Kawakami, who supports a change in the basic juvenile law.

The law does not specify sentences for juvenile offenders, but Justice Ministry guidelines in effect until last month stated that minors had to be released within two years, with a one-year extension for special cases. Critics say authorities had to release even youths deemed still to pose a danger to society.

Last month, the Justice Ministry amended the rules and did away with the limit on the length of juvenile incarceration. Those deemed to have "uncorrected criminal tendencies" may now be held until age 23, and those with mentally disturbances may be held until age 26. (The age of majority is 20 in Japan.)

But the new guidelines will do nothing to stem serious juvenile crime, because in practice, even minors who commit violent crimes average just 1.2 years in detention, said Yoshiro Ito, a lawyer who defends youth offenders. Moreover, the juvenile halls are so short-staffed that troubled youths receive little counseling or treatment before release, said Ito, who believes that family therapy is the best defense against recidivism.

Victims and their families, who are

becoming more vocal than in the past, also complain that the system set up to protect the privacy of minor offenders shuts them out. A Mainichi newspaper series on the debate over juvenile justice highlighted the rage and sorrow of several such families.

"Those boys whose faces I don't even know are returning to their daily lives somewhere in this town, but neither they nor their families have ever spoken a word of apology," said Aiko Fujimoto, whose 15-year-old son was skateboarding in Saitama prefecture two years ago when a group of teen-agers beat him to death. Because juvenile court sessions are private, his family has never learned why he died - or what punishment was meted out to his killers, the paper said.

What scares Japanese most is that the youths committing the crimes often appear to be ordinary children from "good" families with a moral screw loose, in contrast to the impoverished, orphaned or abused young who were seen as primarily responsible for the larger number of crimes committed in the difficult decades that followed World War II.

"That's why it's become harder to apprehend criminals," Noda argued in a discussion in Bungei Shunju magazine on whether the Kobe killer is "an abnormal person or a child of his times."

"It's always assumed that the perpetrator must be some loner who's manifestly abnormal, but very often that isn't the case."

Gates gives Russia a taste of high-tech

By Carol J. Williams=(c) 1997, Los Angeles Times

MOSCOW - To the thump of computer-generated rock music and the piercing light of lasers, 4,000 Russian techno-nerds invaded the Kremlin on Friday in what looked more like a video game come to life than a pondering of the future in the inner sanctum of the old "evil empire."

The young and the geeky came to hear Microsoft chairman Bill Gates' hopeful vision of the world just ahead as Russia explodes out of the information vacuum that characterized the Communist era.

The packed State Kremlin Palace, where four Communist bureaucrats once gathered for stultifyingly dense congresses to chart the future, and the live broadcast of the seminar to tens of millions of television viewers testified to the soaring interest among Russians in learning about the tools and toys available on the World Wide Web.

And thanks to a different kind of light being shined into long-dark corners of Russia by another American magnate, financier-philanthropist George Soros, access to the Internet is expanding exponentially and narrowing the gap between this country and the technologically revolutionized West.

"I think in a decade from now, most people will use the Web many times each day. They will take it for granted, like we use the telephone today," Gates told his rapt audience from the nascent computer industries and university technology centers.

His message to the predominantly youthful audience, mostly bespectacled males in turtle-necks and running shoes, was that software programming offers a mother lode of new jobs for Russia's well-educated population.

And in Russia, still scared by long isolation from Western contemporaries, people can contribute their knowledge and expertise and tap into that of others throughout the global community without leaving home, Gates noted.

"People don't have to move. They don't have to change where they are

in order to make their skills available to customers on a global basis," the 41-year-old software czar told reporters earlier in the day. "This is 'brain retention,' along with incredible opportunity for people with strong educational backgrounds, which you know this country has a great deal of."

Business is the first user of advanced technology and with Russia on the verge of transforming everything from banking to public transport to the electronic era, Gates said he could foresee "phenomenal growth" in computer and software development.

Skilled programmers are especially in demand, he said, noting that 600,000 programming jobs have been created in the United States.

The main stumbling block to rapid development of information technologies in Russia, he said, is the country's notorious predilection for pirating software.

"Software companies are very dependent on people paying to license their software," Gates said. "It's the key to developing local industries. Developers can't fund their work, governments lose taxes, retailers can't stay in business and there is no incentive to provide high quality support."

Russia is reputed to be the world leader in software piracy, with 91 percent of the programs in operation here today believed to have been illegally copied and distributed, said Olga Dergunova, Microsoft's general manager for Russia and other former Soviet republics.

With 1.5 million personal computers sold in Russia last year alone and sales rising sharply this year, drawing Russians into the global business and information channels linked by the Web is just a matter of time and pace, Gates said.

Extension of Internet access to Russians throughout the country is the current priority project of Soros, whose 10-year-after inspection tour of his projects aimed at developing democratic institutions coincided with Gates' lightning visit. The Open Society Foundation through which the Hungarian-born philanthropist has funneled more than \$100 million into

Russia is embarked on an ambitious plan to set up 30 Internet training centers across the far-flung regions of Russia over the next year.

"The future of Russia lies in the provinces," Soros told a news conference in St. Petersburg, complaining that development has been too concentrated in the glitzy, go-go capital of Moscow. But he said he was observing on this visit a fundamental change in direction in Russia, from "robber capitalism" to the roots of a more equitable and stable society.

Gates used his two days here to stump for clients and stroke partners producing the hardware needed to use his Microsoft products. He visited the Vist company that assembles personal computers and controls about 15 percent of the Russian market, expecting to turn out 350,000 units this year.

At his meeting with Vahit Alekperov, president of the powerful Lukoil company, Microsoft entered into an agreement to jointly develop software for prospecting and developing oil fields. And his talks with the chairmen of Russia's Central Bank and its biggest network of savings institutions, Sberbank, produced a \$1.65 million contract to resolve a licensing issue for use of Microsoft tools in the automation of banking in Russia.

The fortunate 4,000 who visited a high-tech trade fair set up at the Kremlin conference before Gates' presentation also got a glimpse of the considerable inroads technology has already made in their lives. One local software producer partnered with Microsoft displayed the sleek new computerized pass system for Moscow's Metro subway system, and locally produced automatic teller machines were also on show.

Russian-language copies of Gates' "The Road to the Future," Doroga v Budushchi - sold out as fast as vendors could pass them over to buyers wearing "Ya (heart symbol) Internet" buttons and proffering 52,000 rubles (\$8.87) for the hard-bound editions specially stamped for the occasion.

Clinton praises Venezuela as agreement signed with U.S.

By Jonathan Peterson=(c) 1997, Los Angeles Times

CARACAS, Venezuela - Standing near the burial place of the continent's revered liberator, President Clinton on Monday told the people of this South American nation that they are "friends and partners" of the United States in a battle to fight drugs, expand social justice and protect the environment of the Western Hemisphere.

The comments, made as the two nations signed agreements on energy, drugs and the environment, underlined an emerging theme of Clinton's first official visit to South America: The United States wishes to emphasize common interests with the vast continent that long has viewed its northern neighbor with wariness, if not hostility.

"Our hemisphere is growing closer every day," Clinton declared in an outdoor speech at the Plaza El Panteon, a public square near the tomb of Simon Bolivar, the Venezuelan-born hero of the struggle to end Spain's dominance of South America. "... We are joined in the search for social justice within market economies. And we are all working to leave our children a planet as healthy and bountiful as the one we inherited."

In fact, sensitive disputes also divide the two nations, which remain separated by a chasm that is disparate levels of wealth and different political traditions. U.S. and Venezuelan officials have been unable to resolve technical questions related to U.S. investments here, and a spat over air service continues between the countries.

Venezuelan President Rafael Caldera alluded to such realities when Clinton arrived Sunday, noting that for some bilateral agreements, details "have yet to be finalized."

On Monday, however, differences were downplayed as a somewhat subdued Clinton

congratulated Venezuela on its growing economy, its booming energy sector and even its "world-class baseball players."

"Todo esta chevere en Venezuela," - All is cool in Venezuela - he said to applause from a crowd of more than 1,000 who only partly filled the square.

Earlier, at a ceremony near the baroque Miraflores Palace, both presidents sat before an elegant table and watched as their subordinates signed accords.

Under a deal signed by U.S. Energy Secretary Federico Pena, the nations agreed on joint research, training and other cooperative efforts in an industry that increasingly links them. Venezuela has surpassed Saudi Arabia as the chief exporter of oil to the United States, while the South American nation has become an increasing consumer of energy-related equipment and services from the United States.

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright signed an anti-drug agreement intended to increase the exchange of intelligence information, enhance both countries' criminal investigations with legal assistance and emphasize educational efforts to reduce the demand for illegal narcotics.

Although not a major center in the drug trade, Venezuela is viewed by many law enforcement officials as a popular site for laundering drug profits, and its terrain is used to transport narcotics manufactured across the western border in Colombia.

"In both our countries, drugs poison our children and threaten our neighborhoods," Clinton said. "... Thank you, Venezuela, for the tough stand you are taking in this fight for our common future."

Clinton also repeated his call for Congress to grant him broad, fast-track authority to negotiate trade deals in South America and elsewhere, maintaining that the whole world is on a "fast track" to an integrated, global economy.