

Mayan Rampage Over Police Abuses

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Guatemalan police escape mob rage fueled

by alleged abuse of Indians

By WILL WEISSERT

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FRAY BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS, Guatemala (AP) -- A mob of villagers that stormed a police station held two officers for hours until one escaped and the other was freed, ending a rampage that residents blamed Saturday on police mistreatment of Mayan Indians.

The violence broke out in Fray Bartolome de las Casas, 95 miles northwest of Guatemala City, after a police truck ran over a woman here Friday, injuring her leg.

About 500 angry villagers stormed the police station and took two police chiefs hostage. The mob ignited a huge bonfire, burning motorcycles, typewriters and chairs looted from the station, and threatened to throw their hostages in the fire.

One of the hostages, Obidio Escobar, was tied to a wall in a jail cell with a mob of locals standing guard outside.

"I saw some of my friends planning to join the mob," said Escobar, chief of police for this steamy mountain town of 33,000. "I just had to wait until they were given the chance to stand guard" in order to escape, he said.

After Escobar's escape late Friday, police officers talked the rest of the mob into releasing the group's second hostage, officer Marcelino Mendoza.

Residents of this largely Indian town said Saturday that police insensitivity toward Mayan Indians motivated the confrontation. The spark came, villagers said, when police showed indifference after the car accident.

"The opinions they have of us Indians are drastic," said Andres Ayu, a first grade teacher in a nearby hamlet. "This time they tried to cover up evidence and dismiss a crime against us. They got a surprise when we arrived at the station to really show our feelings." "It's a lack of respect for the police, it's that and nothing else," Alfred Ku, a local shop owner, said of the incident. "But how can people respect a police force that fails to respect them?"

Escobar did not comment on charges by villagers that police ignored the injured woman. "One of our cars ran into a vendor's stall and ran over a woman. I don't have details of what happened," he said.

"We work with people. We try to bring them the law and teach it to them. But it's difficult. They insist on taking the law into their hown hands," Alfredo Anton, deputy commissioner of the National Civil Police, said.