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Southern California: Sunshine interspersed with puffy clouds. Still cool with highs in the 60's, except in the 70's in desert areas. Weather map and forecasts for other areas, page 11.

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Detail from "Uprising," a fresco by Diego Rivera

The Long, Dark Trail Of Death

By Jorge Mancillas

LOS ANGELES

Although I was not there, the sound of the gunshots still resonates in my head, the sight of a growing pool of blood still haunts me and the sense of loss has not yet disappeared. I am not referring to the assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio this week, but that of Alfonso Peralta nearly 17 years ago.

Alfonso was a friend and a col-

Jorge Mancillas, professor of anatomy at the U.C.L.A. School of Medicine, led a human rights delegation to Chiapas in January.

league. In the 1970's we worked together unionizing employees at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, in Mexico City. He was shot in front of his students in 1977 as he left the classroom where he had just finished teaching a class in social sciences.

Political assassination is neither new nor unexpected for those who have worked for democracy and justice in Mexico. Contrary to what many people may assume, Mexicans don't all come to the United States lured by the prospect of standing on a street corner in Los Angeles hoping to get work for a day. Many of us have come to escape the kind of political violence that has just claimed the life of Luis Colosio, the presidential candidate of Mexico's governing party, as well as the lives of perhaps hundreds of members of the leftist opposition.

And it is not only political leaders who are targeted. Take Manuel Buenadía, a prominent newspaper columnist and a political centrist, who was killed in 1984 by unknown gunmen, many believe because of his frequent articles about Government corruption. All that is unprecedented is the assassination of a figure of Luis Colosio's stature — at least since 1928, when Álvaro Obregón was killed shortly after being re-elected President of Mexico. But

Colosio was only the best-known victim.

then again, these are not normal times. The rebellion in Chiapas shook the Mexican political system to its foundations. The willingness of the country's disenfranchised to challenge the status quo has threatened those who have skillfully governed Mexico for 65 years.

In spite of what the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, is claiming in the aftermath of Mr. Colosio's death, he was far from a certain victor in the Aug. 21 elections. He was frequently greeted with protests along the campaign trail, as he became the target for dissatisfaction with PRI policies, and the spotlight remained on his chief rival in the governing party, Manuel Camacho Solís, who was widely praised for helping negotiate an end to the Chiapas rebellion. In fact Mr. Colosio could well have been destined for defeat — if the elections were fair and democratic.

There are signs that officials in the PRI are pushing to have Mr. Colosio's campaign manager, Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León, named his successor. Whoever the candidate, the PRI will surely hope it can put the Chiapas uprising firmly behind it and instead benefit from its association with the "martyr of democracy."

But the key issue that will determine Mexico's political future is how the investigation of the assassination is handled. No one yet knows who was behind this dreadful crime, but few believe that the killer, a 23-year-old mechanic, was merely a deranged loner. There could be no better tribute to Luis Colosio than for President Carlos Salinas de Gortari to organize a credible, independent investigation by an international commission.

In addition, the Government must work to disband private paramilitary groups like the Guardias Blancas of Chiapas, who are believed to be responsible for many of the killings that have bloodied Mexican life. The Government must make every effort to insure that Mr. Colosio's death is Mexico's last political assassination. □