

THE MAYAN CYCLE OF LIFE IN CHIAPAS

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In the first few early hours of 1994, the collective mass of an indigenous army descended from the mountains of Chiapas, Mexico and into the cities and world consciousness. The Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle, Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, short dark “sickly” Indians carrying AK-47's, .22 caliber pigeon rifles, and wooden sticks, declared war on Mexico's “illegitimate government”, and said “Enough is Enough!” Their audacity seemed surreal. After ten days of bombardment by the Mexican Federal Army, national and international opinion convinced the image-conscious, Mexican government and ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), to call a cease fire on January 12th and negotiate with the rebels, members of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). The world had discovered Chiapas - *El Mundo Maya*.

The Maya are a spiritual people. They, along with the other Mesoamerican people believed that theirs was one of the many universes that had existed before and that would eventually be destroyed, only to give rise to another universe and begin the cycle of creation and life once again. But just as the Mayan destruction and creation repeats itself approximately every 5200 years, modern Mexican history is also a cycle of life death and rebirth, and the Zapatistas are part of this history.

For many people unfamiliar with Mexican history, Mexico is an exotic paradise. Mexico is a peaceful third world country that has been spared the political violence that swept most Latin American nations after the Second World War. Mexico is sunny beaches in Acapulco and Cancun, tequila, *mariachis*, and the Mexican Hat dance, colorful customs and costumes. On January 1st, 1994 the Zapatistas cracked this image.

And then, for many people unfamiliar with Mexico, the Zapatistas became the strange, wonderful guerrillas; the first post-Cuban rebellion in exotic Mexico; the pacifist, Mayan guerrilla. The Zapatistas poetic entrance onto the world stage was the “noble savage's” mystical entrance into the new millenium; the coming of a New Age.

Yet the Zapatista rebellion and the struggle of the people of Chiapas and Mexico is even more remarkable than that. The Zapatistas are an integral part of the Mexicans struggle for life in a system plagued with injustice. They are the rebirth of the popular movement destroyed in the 60's - the 5200 Mayan years compressed into a quarter century of the modern Mexican struggle for social justice.

Twenty-five years before the world discovered Marcos, there was a rural schoolteacher of humble origins named Lucio Cabañas. In the mountains, only a short drive from Acapulco, poor *campesino* and indigenous people organized peaceful marches and meetings to protest their living conditions. These were met by the fire of state security forces and after many dead and many more injured, Lucio Cabañas decided that only an armed rebellion would let their voices be heard.

It took the Mexican Army and its U.S.-advised, Vietnam-inspired, scorch-earth-policy seven years to defeat Lucio's ragtag army of peasants. And this was without the world's eyes, and without human rights observers, and with a much more cowardly press. Lucio's group was never more than about a few hundred armed guerrillas, though it did have the support of many impoverished communities.

In the years following the suppression of rebellion in Guerrero, little changed to resolve the social problems and injustices. The residents of indigenous communities of the Highlands, the Canyons, and the Jungle, as well as Indian women forced to make the old colonial capital of San Cristóbal their home, describe the necessities that motivated them to organize both economically and politically. Their experience during this process led many to decide that they had to choose but to take up arms and rebel. Even those who decided against an armed uprising sympathized with their brothers and sisters and kept their organization and their January 1st, 1994 date a secret

And once again, the Mexican government is seeking a military solution to its insurgency problem. The Zapatista Army (EZLN) is poorly armed, yet thousands strong. According to U.S. and Mexican government intelligence reports, there are about a dozen guerrilla insurgent groups in Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chiapas, and other states of the Mexican Republic. How long will it take to achieve the solution sought by the Mexican government and its World Bank advisors? How many more cycles of destruction and rebirth must pass before the elite realize that as long as the social and economic conditions of Mexico do not change, these rebellions will not disappear.

El que nada debe, nada teme, (he who owes nothing, has nothing to fear) goes a popular Mexican saying. Now three decades after Lucio's rebellion, Mexico strives to present itself as a modern "first world" country. As it incorporates itself in the New Financial World Order, Mexico finds the scrutiny of national and international human rights observers, United Nations Special Rapporteurs, solidarity groups, and NGO's, a bit uncomfortable. This is especially so, if they intend to visit the other Mexico, the indigenous Mexico, the Mexico belonging to the poor struggling for justice.

On February 9th, 1995, the Zapatista command was waiting for the government negotiating team to continue with the dialogue in the Lacandona jungle town of Guadalupe Tepeyac. However they were met by the arrival of tanks, soldiers, and police intent on their arrest. Marcos and his insurgent colleagues managed to escape as the army occupied the towns of the Lacandona ravines. Along with them thousands of civilian Zapatista sympathizers were displaced.

This military offensive failed to decapitate the Zapatista movement, but it allowed the Mexican Army to advance its positions. Deep in the jungle is now the San Quintín military headquarters, the largest and most important base of the conflict zone. Its concrete multistory buildings and asphalted airstrip seem to snub the humble wood-planked Indian homes telling them they are the intruders.

At the same time the army was establishing these new jungle positions, the popular desire for a peaceful solution was legislated by the *Law for the Dialogue, the Reconciliation and a Dignified and Just Peace in Chiapas*. This established the legal bases for the dialogue between the Federal Government and the EZLN. From that moment on, the Mexican military left the forefront of the counterinsurgency strategy. In

order to protect its image in the public eye, the Army, the police forces and other governmental authorities organized paramilitary groups that formed part of a war of attrition against the enemy. The U.S. School of the Americas training was put to use.

The Mexican Army began a more discrete war that would permit the government to plausibly deny its complicity in human rights violations and atrocities. Behind the formation of paramilitary groups lies a clear strategy to diminish the organizational strength of the opposition. The *Manual of Irregular War* by the Mexican National Defense Secretary mentions the “operations to control the population” which include among other measures the “organization of control forces” and “the training of forces (civilian military and militarized)”.

The first place to have this new strategy applied was the Ch'ol region bordering the State of Tabasco in the north of the state of Chiapas. This region has been plagued by paramilitary violence since the beginning of 1995, when the group cynically named *Paz y Justicia* (Peace and Justice) first appeared on the scene. Its objective was to destroy communities which opposed the government and expel from the few communities with a PRI majority those who do not share their ideas. Within the complex picture of the region, one thing that is obvious is the illicit complicity between *Paz y Justicia* and the Chiapan police forces.

In March of 1995, one month after the government's offensive, the first reports of paramilitary violence in the Ch'ol region of Tumbalá reached the San Cristóbal office of the *Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas* Human Rights Center. The case involved the assassination of a young man named Pascual Sánchez by the PRI municipal president of Tila, Jesús Celis Guillén, who used an R-15 automatic rifle. In June and July of that same year *Paz y Justicia* attacked the lowlands of Tila, and in August the violence spread to the municipality of Sabanilla.

Paz y Justicia reinitiated its attacks in September in the municipalities of Tila, Tumbalá, and Salto de Agua in order to paralyze the opposition Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in the local election of October 15th. The attacks caused great displacements of PRD sympathizers. In this period some PRI sympathizers also left their PRD ruled communities, but the number was about ten times less than the people fleeing from PRI villages. The *Paz y Justicia* members won the elections (marked by a great absenteeism) for the PRI. The local *Paz y Justicia* leader in Tila, Marcos Albino Torres López, was made First Councilman of the Constitutional municipal government. Samuel Sánchez Sánchez, a known founder, leader and protector of *Paz y Justicia*, became representative of the Yajalón municipality in the State Congress.

The second peak of violence in the Cho'l region was reached between June and September of 1996. In the middle of July of 1996, the *Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas* Human Rights Center sent a brigade of 13 national and international observers to the Northern Zone to document the situation in the different communities with displaced people. On July 17th 1996, 17 year old Mateo Vázquez Sánchez was ambushed and killed shortly after having given his testimony to the brigade.

A similar situation occurred again a year and a half later. On February 21st, 1998, José Tila López García was ambushed and killed almost immediately after having talked about paramilitary violence to international human rights observers. In both cases

eyewitnesses named members of the paramilitary group *Paz y Justicia* as the perpetrators.

In July 1999 Margarita, a Cho'l women, gave Asma Jahangir, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Summary Executions, her testimony after several paramilitary attempts on her life. That the above pattern of terror did not repeat itself with Margarita is a sign that national and international solidarity has made an impact.

To this day there have been hundreds of deaths due to the violence that erupted in 1995. The region has more than 1,500 displaced people and the paramilitary group physically dominates the roads of Tila and Sabanilla. The police forces, the Mexican Military and the national Government allow that a paramilitary group governs de facto four municipalities in northern Chiapas, however the daily injustices committed do not seem to be enough to take action against them.

With the northern part of the state of Chiapas under control, the curtain of paramilitary violence designed to geographically divide the area of Zapatista influence, descended 50 kilometers south to the municipality of Chenalhó - the heart of the highlands of central Chiapas.

The authorities insistently repeated that the origin of the violence in Chenalhó, and of the Acteal massacre itself, stems the founding of the Autonomous Municipality by the Zapatistas. Government authorities claim that this inevitably led to conflicts between the constitutional municipality (PRI) with its seat in the municipal capital of Chenalhó and the Autonomous Municipality with its seat in Polhó. What they do not mention is the fact that this is fundamentally a political conflict that should have been dealt with as such. It should have been resolved according to the popular mandate given to the Federal and State authorities, as written in the Law for the Dialogue, Conciliation and a Dignified Peace in Chiapas. President Ernesto Zedillo publicly assumed this as his personal commitment. They also do not mention that the same authorities sabotaged the attempts at dialogue.

In August 1996, a group of *Priístas* threw six young men, sons of Zapatista sympathizers into a 100-meter deep abyss, yelling "they are Zapatistas, they are Zapatistas". This crime, like so many others in Chenalhó and in the rest of Chiapas, remains unpunished. It was used as a pretext to substitute the then municipal president with Jacinto Arias Cruz, a PRI hard-liner, who at all times opted to resolve conflict with force and violence.

Jacinto Arias Cruz is currently in prison for his participation in the massacre of Acteal. He was one of the scapegoats used to distract the public from the complicity of higher level authorities. After the massacre, the authorities recognized the participation of Arias Cruz in the trafficking and the distribution of high power weapons to the paramilitary *Priístas* of the municipality. These facts were denounced for many months before the massacre, but were conveniently ignored by government officials.

With the support of Jacinto Arias Cruz, the *Priísta* paramilitaries began to threaten anyone who did not want to collaborate with them. This included not only Zapatistas, and Abejas, but also *Priístas* who opposed the paramilitary violence. The paramilitary threats and attacks provoked what is now one of the major human and political

problems in the municipality of Chenalhó: the displacement of one third of the population of the municipality in fear for their lives. Alonso was one of the first people in Chenalho forced to leave his family and home for refusing to participate in the paramilitary violence. In September of 1997, accompanied by several other men, he left his community of Los Chorros. Those who stayed behind were not allowed to leave later. They had no choice but obey the new paramilitary leaders and pay heavy fines used to buy more arms..

The number of displaced people today is calculated to be 10,000 in a municipality that has a population of 30,000. The displaced live in conditions of extreme poverty and psychological anguish because of constant threats and harassment by the Army, the State Public Security police, as well as paramilitaries that remain free and unpunished. It was one of those groups of displaced, members of Las Abejas, which was attacked on December 22, 1997, in Acteal, their place of refuge.

On December 22nd, 1997, at approximately 10:30 a.m. in the community of Acteal, municipality of Chenalhó, 300 displaced people, members of the pacifistic group Las Abejas were attacked by a heavily armed group of members and sympathizers of the Party of the Institutionalized Revolution (PRI, the ruling party in Mexico). One hour after the shooting had begun, the Dioceses received a call from the public phone in Acteal expressing concern about the shooting that could be heard (the phone was about a hundred meters from where the massacre was taking place). One of bishop Ruiz's vicars called the Secretary of the State Government, to inform him about what was happening in Acteal and to ask for his urgent intervention.

According to the Assistant Secretary Uriel Jarquín "At 11:30 a.m. I received a call... took note and informed him that we had no report at this moment. We immediately notified the Public Security Police stationed in the vicinity to verify. They found no evidence of a confrontation, no house burnt down, no problem in the region which they reported to us, we re-enforced the patrols and remained attentive." The assistant Secretary speaks about confrontations when the paramilitaries were attacking unarmed people. The Public Security Police (PSP) was about a hundred meters away from where the massacre took place. Acteal neighbors alerted the PSP of the shooting, but the PSP did not enter the community until after 5 p.m., more than six hours after the paramilitaries had started their attack and five hours after the vicars' call. Finally, according to the government's National Human Right's Commission, the Ministry of Interior's intelligence service had already informed the Secretary of the Government, that the killing was taking place in Acteal, before the vicars' phone call.

The shooting lasted until six in the evening, even though Las Abejas did not respond to the aggression. Besides the 45 deaths there were 26 people injured by bullets, most of them children. A few weeks after the massacre, when the majority of the material perpetrators were still free, they even had the liberty to plunder the houses that the displaced in Acteal had left behind. Two years after the massacre, the survivors of the attack and other displaced people continue to receive threats by paramilitaries, as the displacement of eleven families on November 1999 illustrates. Not all of the material perpetrators of the massacre and none of the intellectual authors have been arrested.

In the days following the massacre the national and international outrage provided the pressure people like Alonso needed to be able to return to their communities and rescue

their families. Five days after the massacre, in the predawn hours of December 27, Alonso, accompanied by human rights organizations and protected by the Mexican Judicial Police returned to Los Chorros, where his family was being held hostage by paramilitaries. As his wife and children began to leave, other families asked to be rescued. More than 300 people left Los Chorros that day.

Did the Mexican government's behavior show its complicity or incompetence? The day after the massacre, the media questioned the then Secretary of State Emilio Chuayffet. Why had the government not done anything to prevent the massacre, given that the military, the police and the National Intelligence Service were present before and during the massacre? The public official responded that "events like the one on December 22nd escape any system of information". Yet in the weeks preceding the massacre a Mexican national television program denounced the violence in the municipality and demanded an urgent solution to avoid a tragedy. The program was watched by millions of spectators all over the country. One sector of the media repeated the denunciations almost daily. Members of the CONAI (the mediation in the stalled Zapatista-Government dialogue), insisted that a bloodbath could be foreseen.

Also telling is the position of the Public Security police during the massacre on the road that would have been the only escape for the victims. The aforementioned *Manual of Irregular War* clearly describes a Hammer and Anvil Encirclement *destruction and annihilation* operation. It is this maneuver which corresponds to the tactic used in the Acteal attack. The paramilitaries played the role of the Hammer and the police were the *block force* that played the role of the Anvil.

The first action taken by the Government after the massacre was to send 5,000 more soldiers to Chiapas. Of these five thousand, two thousand were sent to reinforce the soldiers already stationed in Chenalhó. They were not sent to the communities where the aggressors live, but close to the displaced victims of this violence in an encircling operation as described in *Manual of Irregular War*. In the municipality of Chenalhó there is about one soldier for every ten inhabitants. The government claims they are there to protect the displaced and provide medical care and other social services. With the excuse of preventing another Acteal, the government mounted its facade and its Low Intensity War went on the offensive.

The offensive continued throughout the first half of the next year. In 1998 the paramilitaries took a back seat to the Bases of Mixed Operation (BOM for its initials in Spanish). The BOM were composed of members of the Mexican Armed Forces together with state and federal police, and often times immigration officials.

The paramilitaries did not disappear, but collaborated with the BOM forces in their attacks against autonomous Zapatista municipalities. To prepare for these attacks, an anti-foreigner xenophobic campaign was started to justify the illegal expulsion of human rights observers. This was accompanied by a defamation campaign against the Dioceses of San Cristobal de Las Casas, its bishop Samuel Ruiz, and the CONAI, of which Samuel Ruiz was the president.

On April 8th, 1998, a predawn BOM operation in the San Cristóbal de Las Casas indigenous neighborhood of *La Hormiga*, proved to be a practice-run for the coming attacks. In an overwhelming use of force, thousands of armed personal were used to

arrest several sleepy “criminals”. With this success, the BOM were ready to attack against the Zapatista communities. The dawn of April 11, 1998, thousands of army troops, police officers, and masked paramilitaries, attacked the community of Taniperla, arrested a dozen community members, several Mexican human rights observers, and deported another dozen foreign human rights observers.

The attacks continued in May with similar operations in Amparo Agua Tinta, Navil, and Nicolas Ruiz. At the same time, the government’s defamation of Samuel Ruiz and the CONAI was such that on June 7th, Samuel Ruiz resigned, and the next day the CONAI disbanded. The governor of Chiapas could not contain his glee and he publicly stated that “with the dissolution of the CONAI we are closer to peace.” The governor’s notion of peace was made clear just a few days later. On June 10th, 1998, in the most bloody of all the operations against the autonomous communities, at least eight *campesinos* and two police officers lost their lives in the BOM attack of El Bosque.

With the national, and especially international attention caused by the killings in El Bosque, the government’s Low Intensity War, changed its emphasis once again. With visits from the Pope, the United Nation’s Special Rapporteur on Summary Executions, and finally the United Nation’s High Commissioner on Human Rights, the government turned to publicity campaigns and the counterinsurgent use of economic resources in order to continue in its military advance. The Government stepped up its spending on military infrastructure such as roads, and justified it as economic development for the indigenous communities.

It was exactly this sort of road that is currently being unanimously opposed by the community Amador Hernández at the edge of the Biosphere *Montes Azules* in the Lacandona jungle. This road would originate in the largest military encampment of the jungle, San Quintín. This military camp, a permanent concrete construction, with an asphalt airstrip, contrasts dramatically with the thatch roofed wooden homes of Ejido Emiliano Zapata only a few meters away.

The Government bragged that they were closer to peace. But the closer we are to the Government’s peace, the farther we are from the peace sought by the indigenous communities of Chiapas. Their peace means living with respect and without fear. It means being able to be part of the decisions that affect their lives and their community’s development. Yet the Government’s peace is one of absolute political and economic control. It may be a peace without bullets, but replete with social, economic and political violence.

The current struggle of Chiapas’ marginalized communities portray the hope of an old people in a continuing struggle for dignity. The destruction and the rebirth; as many times as is necessary for a life with dignity to be accompanied by justice.

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