

THE CHALLENGE OF SOUTHEASTERN MEXICO

Edgar Celada

In seems almost paradoxical that one region of Mexico, its southeast, should contain so many contrasting features.

In the states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatán and Quintana Roo lie a crucial part of Mexico's natural wealth. Its rich soil provides the entire country with many products and meets export demand, while in its underground the bulk of Mexico's oil reserves can be found.

Mexico's southeast also possesses the secrets of ancient civilizations carved in pre-Columbian buildings and walls which fill abandoned cities throughout the rich jungles of the region. Edgar Celada confirms this and much more in a journey through this magnificent area.

A geographic, historical and socioeconomic review of the five states which make up southeastern Mexico will allow us to understand why one of the main challenges for Mexico's next government lies in this region

In the unforgettable experience of traveling by road from Mexico City to this area, the traveler can appreciate the clean geographical cut made by the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The traveler will surely be impressed by the strong winds which cross this extraordinary 130 mile-wide corridor. To the west, snake-like roads wind over the mountains of Oaxaca to Mexico City and Puebla. To the northwest, lie the low lands of Veracruz. In a straight line to the north, the Gulf of Mexico; in the opposite

Despite the "Mexicanization" of the southeast, the region continues to be "another Mexico"

direction, the Pacific Ocean. But another world begins on the east, that which was the home of one of the most important Mesoamerican societies, the Mayas. To cross this wide space, there are only two possible roads. The Gulf Coast road will take us through the impressive tropical plains of Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatan and Quintana Roo. Its natural course continues beyond national boundaries to Beliza and the

Guatemalan province of Peten.

The other road passes along the narrower stretch formed by the Pacific Coast lowlands. The continuity of this path led Nahuatl-speaking peoples to places as far away as today's Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala.

The Sierra Madre mountain range rises up between both stretches of lowlands. These mountains form the historic heart of most of the five states in the region. With its nearly 3 million inhabitants and 28,730 square miles, Chiapas is in many ways the synthesis of southeastern Mexico. While some geographers claim that Central America begins in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, for the historian and the anthropologist, Central America begins in Chiapas. In any case, it is not difficult to believe that the development of the Mexican nation state has marked another route against the grain of the

region's geographic and historic legacy.

Despite the undoubted "Mexicanization" of the southeast, the region in many senses constitutes "another Mexico." Fifty-four years ago the phenomenon was much more notorious when Vicente Lombardo Toledano, the founder of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) wrote: "In the hunting grounds and many of the ranches in Yucatan and Campeche, as in Guatemala, alcohol, instead of enraging our Indians, fills their eyes with tears and tightens their throats until they can't talk. From the drunkard there appears not a brave macho or an offended man seeking revenge, only the bitter source of tears from a being who complains for himself and for all his race, without knowing it, in a sad, silent and tragic manner that causes emotion even in the rocks."

Economic Base of the Nation

The winds of modernization that began blowing forty years ago in the country and which converted it into an industrial-agricultural economy, arrived with less strength in Mexico's southeast. A type of center-periphery relationship was established with the area, making it an important supplier of strategic primary products, but a minimal receiver of the advantages of modernity.

From the maguey fiber of Yucatan to the coffee of Chiapas, including the enormous oil reserves and water supplies transformed into energy, southeastern Mexico is today the base on which the Mexican economy rests.

—Southeastern Mexico supplies nearly 90 percent of the nation's total oil and natural gas production. Ninety percent of the known oil reserves are located in this region—65 billion barrels—. More than 40 percent of the value of the nation's exports in 1987 consisted of sales of oil and oil byproducts.

—More than 50 percent of the nation's coffee crop is produced in the region. Coffee grain exports in 1987 constituted the main agricultural export, worth 600 million dollars. The region's water

The winds of modernization arrived with less strength in Mexico's southeast

supplies represent two-thirds of the national total.

From the state of Chiapas alone fifty rivers lead to the Gulf of Mexico, while another 72 flow towards the Pacific Coast. This explains why the nation's main hydroelectric plants are located in this zone. Electricity generated in the area supplies more than 50 percent of that used to move the national economy.

Seventy percent of soils suitable for agricultural production are located in southeastern Mexico. The richness and variety of flora and fauna is also the most important in the nations. More than 8,000 plant species have been registered in Chiapas representing 32 percent of the national botanical total. Chiapas has 614 bird species, representing nearly 58 percent of all birds identified in Mexico.

Richest and Poorest

In contrast with its enormous natural wealth, in exploitation or still in potential, southeastern Mexico is the region in Mexico where the image of underdevelopment is most visible.

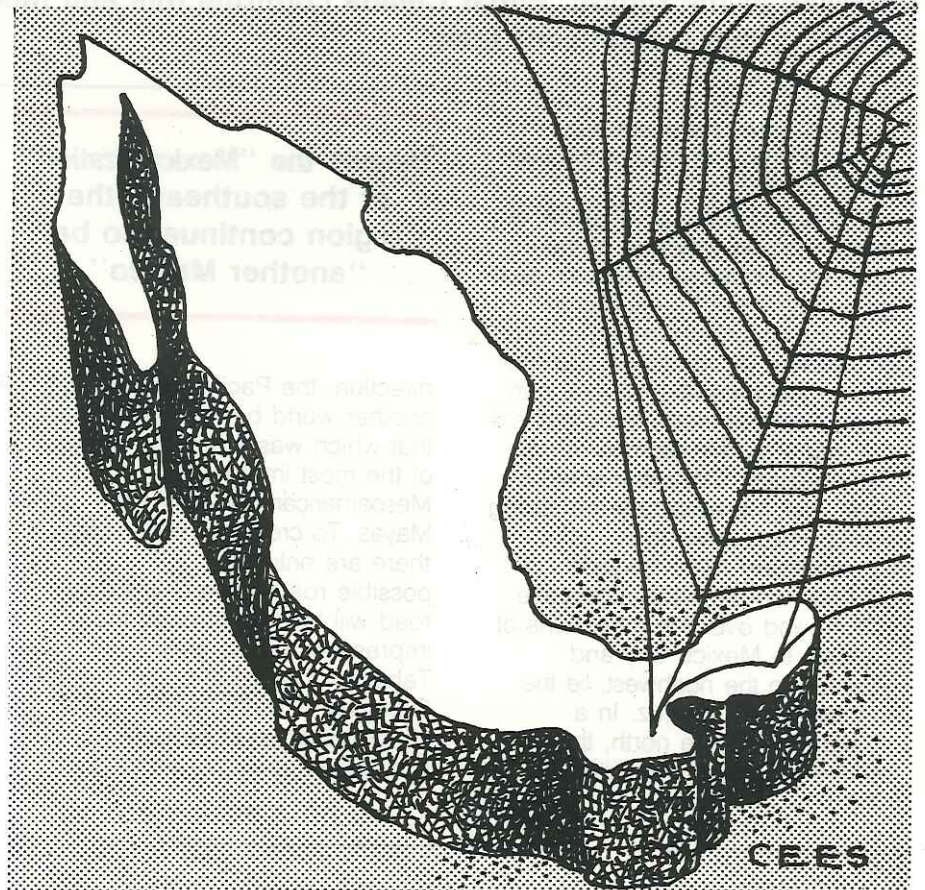
Social indicators such as health, housing, services and education are lower here than the national average.

More than 60 percent of children aged between 1 and 2 years show some grade of malnutrition. In the highlands of Chiapas, malnutrition is estimated at 75 percent.

Only half of the region's homes have drinking water, only 32 percent have drainage services and just a little more than 60 percent of homes have electricity.

Of every 100 children who enter primary school, only 42 manage to finish their primary school studies.

Since the 1950s—and in the Yucatan this dates from earlier decades—accelerated deforestation has been observed. The forests of Tabasco were reduced from over 2 million acres



AGRARIAN CONFLICT IN CHIAPAS REMINDS US OF CENTRAL AMERICA

Southeastern Mexico is a mosaic made up by a confluence of various peoples and cultures from Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Waves of migrants arrived in different stages and formed colonies which, although not very numerous, were sufficient to displace the original inhabitants of the area who were descendants of the Mayas.

The tropical and subtropical forest, unhygienic living conditions and isolation from the rest of the country, meant that during many years the region did not attract massive migrations. Thus, the zone has retained a low population density of 62.2 inhabitants per square mile. In Quintana Roo, population density only reaches 19.2 inhabitants per square mile, and in Campeche, 30.3 inhabitants per square mile.

Paradoxically, it is in the southeast, particularly in Chiapas, where the Mexican agrarian conflict has one of its principal focal points. The violence of this conflict inevitably reminds us of Central America where land-related problems constitute one of the basic components of the social-political conflict.

Chiapas is not only the southern state with the largest population, it also the state with

has the region's best agricultural land and water resources. However it is also a state where pre-revolutionary social and economic structures remained immune to changes begun by the Mexican Revolution of 1910. "Although this might seem to be a paradox," writes researcher Alicia Paniagua, "the Revolution was won by counter-revolutionaries who established themselves in power with all

the support of the center 'revolutionary' government."

The survival of the latifundium—whereby large tracts of land remain in the hands of a few—in clear or disguised forms and the displacement of indigenous peasant and their expulsion to mountainous territory characterize the history of agrarian relationships in the region. These relations entered a period of crisis in the 1970s, when the federal

government began to turn its attention to hydraulic and oil resources in the state of Chiapas.

Roads, dams and hydroelectric plants were built. Various federal institutions with their corresponding bureaucratic apparatus began to make their presence felt in the region. Modernization was installed on top of the old socioeconomic structures.

The inevitable result: a large chain of agrarian conflicts which continue to the present. Government bodies in charge of land reform have some 547 files which represent applications for land made by 15,000 peasants. An estimated 300,000 hectares are necessary to satisfy this demand.

However, according to Jesús Mario del Valle Fernández of the Agrarian Reform Ministry, "the repartition of land is reaching its limits, and policies should now aim to consolidate what has been handed over."

Meanwhile the agrarian conflict is the source of numerous violent incidents. The National Coordinator of Indigenous Peoples (CNPI) reports that in just three years, between 1983 and 1986, nearly 100 peasants were killed in Chiapas. Most of these murders were related to conflicts over possession of land.



The state of Chiapas is a synthesis of Mexico's southeast.

to just over a half million acres between 1940 and 1970. The forests of Chiapas, Campeche and Quintana Roo are likewise threatened by the timber industry. Erosion caused by deforestation affects nearly 2 million acres in Chiapas. The biospheric reserve of Montes Azules in Chiapas has 818,000 acres and is the only significant portion of evergreen forest which remains today in Mexico.

The road system in the region is underdeveloped. Road density in the region is only 145 meters per square kilometer, the average for a good road network is 500 meters per square kilometer. This means that the region's internal markets are not extensive, and at the same time partially explains the low degree of development in the manufacturing industry.

The lack of manufacturing in the region is most characteristic—only 19.2 percent of the work force in the region's five states was employed in manufacturing industries in 1986.

Thus we can observe some of the effects of a regional economic model described by researcher Rafael Abascal Macias, of the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE): "During many decades economic growth was based on agricultural trade aimed at foreign markets, but this did not manage to transcend the primary stage, thus constituting regional economies which did not generate sustained economic expansion."

Strategic Zone

Located in one of the extremes of the convulsed Central American world, southeastern Mexico has seen its strategic importance grow not only due to its natural wealth and economic potential, but also due to the events in the Caribbean and Central American.

Events on that side of the border have reconfirmed an old national saying that security on Mexico's northern border with the United States cannot exist without similar security on the southern border.

When the expansion of U.S. interests on the small Balkanized republics of the Central American



Guatemalan refugees in Chiapas.



Henequen growers in the Yucatán peninsula.

isthmus was no more than two decades old, southeastern Mexico did not escape the attention of investors and strategists. During the years of revolutionary commotion—which in this region ended with local deals between oligarchic landowners and representatives of the central government—the significance of the region was made clear.

Southeastern Mexico supplies nearly 90 percent of the nation's oil and natural gas production

In a little-known passage from the history of those years, Guatemalan dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera revealed the existence of secessionist plans to Ricardo Carrascosa, a Chiapas supporter of Venustiano Carranza: "With the territories of Chiapas, Soconusco, Lacantun and part of Peten we are going to form a new republic in the south of Mexico. I even have the name: it will be called the Southeast Republic. You, the victorious chief will be first president with resources that I will provide, and the state will be declared separate from the federation. The United States will immediately recognize the new

SECTS AND PROTESTANTS

A hot tropical night. The Caribbean breeze does not mitigate the heat generated in the modest church where nearly one hundred people meet regularly to listen to "the Lord's word." Song, prayers, tears and even scenes of hysteria are reproduced by the hundreds throughout southeastern Mexico. They express a new phenomenon: the proliferation of sects and Protestant denominations.

Protestant churches favored by the Reform laws of 1859, began to arrive in this region at the end of last century, and their presence began to be felt again during the 1940s. But their expansion over the last ten years has no precedent. In Tabasco, for example, nearly 25 percent of the population, some 300,000 persons, are affiliated with the various non-Catholic churches and sects.

In Tabasco's 1,399 towns with less than 2,500 inhabitants, which contain 61 percent of the state's population—there is invariably at least one Protestant church, although it is not unusual to see three, and in some places there are seven distinct religious groups.

A study carried out in the state of Yucatan in 1982 revealed the existence of 307 sects in 106 municipalities. It was in Yucatan where a Protestant church was first established in southeastern Mexico in 1877.

Not even Chiapas, the center of the region's Catholicism, has been able to escape the avalanche of sects and Protestant groups. It is estimated that between 11 and 30 percent of the population of the state belongs to a sect or Protestant denomination. In towns such as Ocosingo, Corozal, Palestina, Las Margaritas, Santo Domingo and Reforma, Protestants now form a majority.

Mexico's Constitution guarantees freedom of religious expression. The diversity of religious beliefs does not bother some sectors as much as the rapid expansion over the last few years of the sects and Protestant groups and their effects on the region's social and political life.

Many observers claim that behind most of the sects are foreign interests trying to prevent social conflicts through the diffusion of a very conservative and militantly anti-communist ideology. Generally the sects aim to preserve the existing *status quo*. More than one investigator has called attention to links between Protestants and ruling officials of the

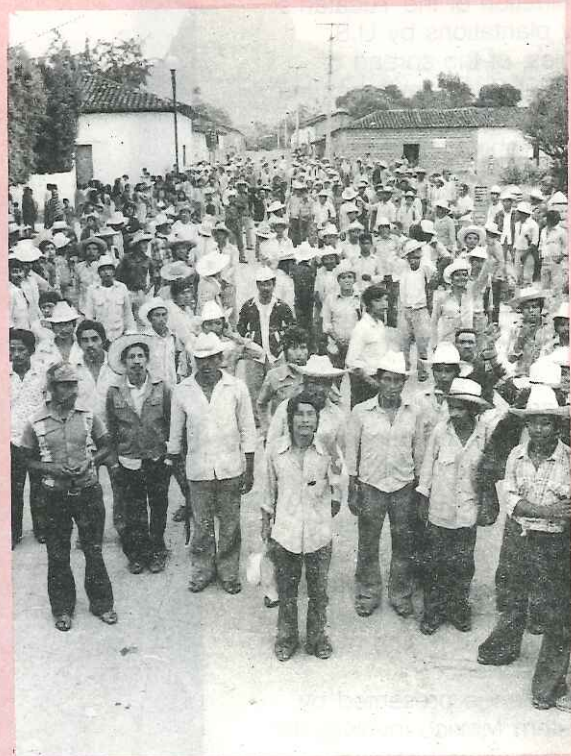
Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in small communities.

On the other hand, some sects promote political abstinence, while others oblige their member to renounce recognition of national symbols.

Some cases of interference by the sects in community health programs carried out by regional authorities have been reported. In Chetumal, Quintana Roo, groups of indigenous Mayans, influenced by the sects, refused to give blood for the National Epidemiological Campaign.

In the highlands of Chiapas the proliferation of sects and Protestant denominations together with numerous agrarian conflicts have given rise to various armed confrontations.

Nearly 10,000 Protestant Chamula Indians have been expelled from their communities by their Catholics of the same indigenous group, according the Bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas, the Rev. Samuel Ruiz.



Peasant farmers meeting.



The southeast produces more than 50 percent of Mexico's coffee.

state and your government."

If this version related by Rafael Arévalo Martínez is true, there exists little doubt that Estrada Cabrera was not speaking just for himself. These were the years of the domination of the Yucatan's maguey plantations by U.S. companies, of the spread of United Fruit Company's banana empire into Tabasco's tropical lands, and, above all, the years when the project of an interoceanic waterway in Tehuantepec—parallel to the recently-built Panama Canal—had not been completely discounted.

The Future Challenge

Today, when Central America's conflicts are affecting geopolitical relations maintained during more than half a century, Mexico's southeast is seen once more to be the nation's weak point. Not because anachronistic separatist projects are likely to prosper, but because regional security and stability make the region of key national importance.

The challenge presented by southeastern Mexico involves the need to overcome historical backwardness and put the region on the road to modernization advocated by the current and



Population growth exceeds the southeast's economic growth.

future leaders of the nation. Given events on the southern side of the border, the region needs to develop capacity to assimilate demographic and socioeconomic pressures that come from those countries.

On this last issue, analysts estimate that even if the war were to end tomorrow in Central America, Central American economies would take between 15 and 20 years to recuperate to 1978 levels. Meanwhile, they point out, the population increase in those nations is much higher than economic growth, thus producing the migratory flows observed over the last ten years. Mexico's southeast is an important receiver of these migratory movements.

With low population density—62 inhabitants per square mile in comparison with the national average of 109 inhabitants per square mile—southeastern Mexico should prepare itself for the Central American overflow, which has already begun.

Currently, the population of Guatemala and El Salvador triples that of the five states which make up southeastern Mexico—14 million people in Guatemala and El Salvador compared with only 4.7 million in southeastern Mexico. Calculations for the first decade of the 21st century put this population ratio of Central America to Mexico's southeast at four to one.

Mexico's southeast is seen once more to be the nation's weak point

Both factors—regional underdevelopment and pressure from Central America—have led Mexican authorities to make short- and medium-term plans for the incorporation of the region into the nation's modernization as a principal means of preserving national security in this area.

Consequently, industrial, tourist, educational and cultural development are crucial means to prevent the flames of the Central American conflict from extending to southeastern Mexico. □