

Beyond the truce

The Indian and peasant armed movement that began in Chiapas on January 1 received an unusual response from the federal government, in terms of the rapidity with which a truce was negotiated and talks were begun in order to bring about a peaceful solution to the conflict. According to information provided by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), which organized the uprising, it took ten years of organization and training of members before they decided to take the armed road as a means of having their demands heard. In his first declarations, the movement's spokesman Subcomandante Marcos indicated that the Indians were prepared for a prolonged war.

However, within twelve days the Zapatistas agreed to a dialogue with the federal government. With the support of broad sections of Mexican society they reached an armed truce with the army and federal government; after forty days of contact with Manuel Camacho Solís (the Peace Commissioner named by President Carlos Salinas) and the mediator Samuel Ruiz (bishop of the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas), negotiations started. One and a half weeks later, the negotiators made public the document "Agreements for Peace,"¹ whose 34 points answer each of the Zapatista demands put forward in the "Manifiesto of the Lacandon Jungle."²

¹ See "Chronicle of a conflict foretold," *Voices* 27 (April-June 1994), pp. 72-92.

² According to some political analysts, the document defines an "alternative project for the country," since it proposes not only to rescue the Indians and peasants of Chiapas from neglect and long-standing discrimination, but also to broaden spaces for democratic participation by all of society's members and to satisfy the needs

of those sectors of Mexican society most adversely affected by the "neo-liberal" economic model promoted by President Salinas. Nevertheless, according to Julio Moguel, the document is only the "beginning of a dialogue," given that it contains gaps and omissions, ambiguities and examples of imprecision, as well as juridical contradictions which would have to be clarified before it could be approved definitively (*La Jornada*, March 18).

On March 17, at the end of what is known as the first phase of negotiations, the delegates of the Clandestine Revolutionary Indian Committee (CCRI)/General Command of the EZLN returned to their communities to begin the phase of explanation, consultation and —perhaps— approval of the contents of the document. But new actors had arrived on the scene and the attainment of an "honorable peace" still seems a distant goal.

Chiapas goes on the back burner

Two events at the national level displaced the conflict in Chiapas: the assassination of PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, on March 23; and the reactivation of political campaigns —which had been overshadowed both by the conflict in Chiapas and the Colosio assassination— of the various parties' candidates, looking toward the August 21 presidential elections.

The holding of a public debate on May 12 —for the first time in the history of electoral processes in Mexico— between the candidates of the three principal political forces in the country (PRI, PAN and PRD) dominated the front pages of all the press.

The assassination of Colosio, which has yet to be clarified, provoked a new outbreak of criticism

of armed struggle as a means of solving social problems. Some government functionaries, businessmen, intellectuals and members of other sectors of society interpreted the assassination in Tijuana as the result of a nation-wide climate of violence provoked by the Zapatista uprising. The media, which had extensively covered the events in Chiapas, were also accused of supporting the use of violence as a way to find answers to unsatisfied demands.³

Despite the fact that EZLN spokesmen issued a communiqué condemning the assassination and denying all involvement in the events,⁴ there was little they could do to stop the hostile reaction of a section of public opinion toward their movement. One day after the events in Tijuana, the EZLN announced the suspension of its consultations in Indian communities, declaring that their troops had been put on "red alert" in anticipation of a possible army offensive against them.

The death of Colosio affected the credibility not only of the Zapatistas but also of Manuel Camacho Solís, one of the key players in the negotiation process. Camacho, who had been one of the main contenders for the PRI's presidential nomination, did not hide his anger when Colosio was nominated last November. In response he resigned as mayor of Mexico City, a post he had

³ The main targets of these attacks were the national dailies *La Jornada* and *El Financiero*, the Chiapas newspaper *El Tiempo* and the national weekly newsmagazine *Proceso*.

⁴ In one of three communiqués on the assassination issued by the EZLN, the Zapatistas charged that it had been a provocation plotted by hard-line members of the government. They also expressed their recognition for the prudent and respectful attitude Colosio had demonstrated toward their movement, and the commitments he had made in relation to the struggle for a peaceful transition of Mexico toward democracy (*La Jornada*, March 26).

occupied since the beginning of President Salinas' administration. His appointment as Secretary of Foreign Relations was interpreted as the prelude to exile for not having accepted the rules of the sexennial *destape*.⁵

However, when the conflict in Chiapas exploded, Camacho was designated Commissioner for Peace and Reconciliation and reemerged politically. From that moment on, the PRI's presidential campaign was shadowed by rumors that Colosio might "abdicate" the candidacy and be replaced by Camacho. The Peace Commissioner maintained silence, avoiding public statements on these rumors until exactly one day before the murder of Colosio, when he declared his commitment to peace was more important than his political aspirations. His declarations brought sighs of relief from PRI members—above all the Colosio campaign team, who for the first time saw a clear path for their presidential candidate to capture voters' attention.

With the death of the PRI candidate one day later, Camacho was the target of multiple attacks by sectors of public opinion and Colosio's followers. These attacks affected his work in Chiapas. In statements to the press on April 10, he indicated that it was essential that the EZLN reinitiate the process of consultation in their communities, given the risk of losing what had been obtained during the first stage of negotiations (*La Jornada*, April 12).

Almost a month later—on May 4—Camacho and Ruiz, along with some of their collaborators, went into the jungle to reopen talks with members of the Clandestine Revolutionary Indian Committee. They were only able to attain agreement among the negotiating parties to "maintain communication" over the

following weeks; the possibility of beginning the second phase of dialogue remained up in the air.⁶

An additional obstacle has been the campaign of aggression aimed at Bishop Samuel Ruiz, accompanied by attempts to discredit him. This campaign was begun by the cattle ranchers, landowners and members of *Coletos*⁷ society in San Cristóbal de las Casas. According to these groups, Ruiz has acted against his religious obligations by supporting the rebels. In response, Camacho has called the bishop's work as mediator indispensable.

On another front, the debate between Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, Diego Fernández de Cevallos and Ernesto Zedillo—presidential candidates of the PRD, PAN and PRI, respectively—distracted attention from the events in Chiapas once again. The event was hailed as a step forward—above all a non-violent one—toward the construction of democracy in our country. Camacho himself told the press that Chiapas moved to second place in light of the historic meeting between the candidates. He declared that "Chiapas is no longer the main political topic in the country; it is an important topic, and what follows will have an impact on Mexico's political life for years to come, but it is not the topic it once was.... The main topic now is the governability of the country... that is, a democratic government" (*La Jornada*, May 12).⁸

⁶ Alejandro Ramos maintains that the work of pacification in Chiapas has accelerated, due to internal and external pressures generated by the August 21 elections, now that the Zapatistas have declared that clean elections will help the peace process. According to Ramos, the choice in the political terrain is clear: to advance towards a democratic transition through a peaceful solution to the conflict, or to fall back on the military solution, as demanded by some sectors both within and outside of the government (*El Financiero*, 8 May).

⁷ "Coletos" is a term for people born in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas.

New players, old conflicts

While at the national level attention was drawn to other issues, in Chiapas chaos and uncertainty have been provoked by the suspension of dialogue and delay in reinitiating peace talks. The state is plagued by violence: assassinations, clashes between groups of peasants, attacks by ranchers against Indians, land takeovers, sackings, expulsions for political/religious reasons, the seizure of municipal buildings, incidents involving the army, hunger strikes and a rise in common crime are the order of the day.

According to data collected by *Proceso* (May 2), between January 1 and March 31, 228 evangelical Protestant Indians were expelled from the town of San Juan Chamula, while 20 peasants were murdered in several municipalities of the Los Altos region. Involved in these events were soldiers, municipal police, cattle ranchers, peasant groups in conflict with each other, and unidentified masked individuals.

⁸ It is noteworthy that, despite the Zapatistas' declarations that they would remain outside the electoral process, a few hours before the debate was held the EZLN sent an invitation to PRD candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas to visit them in the Chiapas jungle. This contrasts with the refusal to receive candidates of other, minor parties who had expressed the desire to meet with them. The meeting was held on May 16, attended by Cárdenas together with some members of his campaign team and of the PRD leadership. The EZLN did not, as had been expected, give the PRD a "blank check" of support. Instead it severely criticized the party's methods for choosing candidates; Subcomandante Marcos said the PRD unfortunately reproduces some of the worst vices of the official party (PRI). Nevertheless, the Zapatistas noted that they differentiate between the candidate and his party and avoided blaming Cárdenas directly for the problems they criticized. They also stated they would support him if he guaranteed that he would put forward genuinely democratic, alternative proposals and refrain from making empty promises.

⁵ See "Chronicle of a conflict foretold....," *op. cit.*, and "How presidential succession works in Mexico," *Voices of Mexico* 26 (January-March 1994), pp. 75-81.

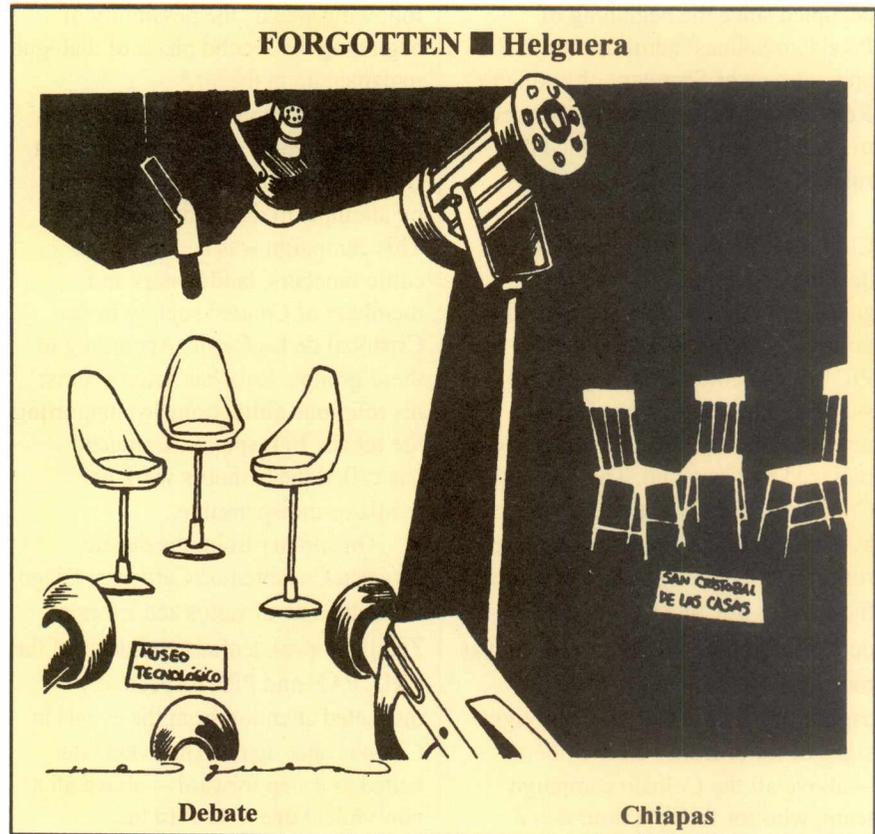
In April two children were burned to death in the town of Oxchuc when persons unknown set fire to their home. Five more peasants were killed in an ambush on lands belonging to a family peasants accuse of being the region's *caciques* (local bosses). Meanwhile, in Mitontic the bodies of nine members of a family—including several minors—were found; the Justice department claims they were killed due to problems related to supposed Satan-worship. Three of the bodies had been decapitated, included that of a baby less than a year old.

For their part, Chiapas cattle ranchers have been involved in acts of violence against peasants. One assassinated a local leader of the EZLN. While it was reported that the Zapatistas kidnapped two members of the rancher's family in retaliation, these individuals later showed up safe and sound.

On April 15, an attack on a military post at the entrance to Tuxtla Gutiérrez, by unknown persons in civilian dress, raised fears that the army-EZLN truce might be broken. Peace Commissioner Camacho urged the Zapatistas to make a statement of their position on the events. The EZLN responded with a communiqué stating that it had no troops in the area and denying any connection with the attack. Unofficial and unconfirmed reports mention another armed group as responsible for the attack: the Clandestine Workers Revolutionary Party/Union of the People (PROCUP).

In terms of local politics the Zapatista rebellion highlighted many communities' rejection of their official representatives. Peasant organizations, members of political parties (including some PRI members) and groups of dissatisfied citizens took over town halls and carried out demonstrations demanding the removal of mayors accused of corruption, *caciquismo*, abuse of power and embezzlement.

Land seizures seem to have been one of the elements leading to a



deepening of the conflict which threatens peace talks. In the months following the outbreak of the armed uprising, and even after the first phase of the peace negotiations was concluded, peasants from several organizations (whether Zapatista or non-Zapatista) have invaded more than 100 properties, confiscated cattle, and demand that the federal and state governments buy the properties for their use.

Ranchers and landowners have responded by threatening to violently dislodge the peasant groups, if the authorities do not take action. On April 19 President Carlos Salinas received a delegation of cattle ranchers, promising to give them a legal response that would put a stop to land seizures. In line with this, two properties were ordered vacated on April 27, leading to the arrest of more than 60 peasants. Nevertheless, the problem continues to exist and takeovers are still occurring.

Several hunger strikes have also taken place in the state. In April, 21

prisoners accused of being Zapatistas fasted for 18 days to protest their unjustified imprisonment. Subcomandante Marcos himself publicly declared that the prisoners were not members of his organization. Sixteen of them were released at the recommendation of the National Human Rights Commission, but they are now asking to be given some kind of aid, since they have no jobs and are rejected in their communities. There were also hunger strikes by groups of technical and secondary-school teachers, as well as members of the local PRD.

In light of these events, interim Governor Javier López Moreno's efforts at conciliation would seem to be insufficient: the new Electoral Reform law, the agreements for land rental and purchase, the review of cases and legal prohibition of expulsions for political and religious reasons—as well as promises of unconditional support for the peace negotiations—have not produced the desired results.

On top of this came the recent nomination of Senator Eduardo Robledo Rincón as the PRI's candidate for governor of Chiapas. Some political analysts have noted that his candidacy is little different from the traditional "*dedazo*" (nomination by decision of the president or the party tops, without rank-and-file participation), and this has led to questions regarding the state and federal governments' commitment to democratization.⁹

In Chiapas, provocation is the order of the day. Neglecting the importance of a peaceful solution—and one which comes as rapidly as possible—could lead to a new outbreak of even more serious violence, since the number of participants in the events has increased, and the conflicts among them would seem difficult to reconcile. Although many would like to deny it, the fate of Mexico continues to depend in large measure on what happens in Chiapas.

Crisis in peace talks

After a consultation process that took more than three months and involved all the inhabitants of the areas controlled by the EZLN, the

⁹ According to Carlos Ramírez, Robledo Rincón would seem to have little to recommend him as a candidate, given that he collaborated with two former governors who have been accused of corruption and abuse of power. He was private secretary to Absalón Castellanos—who was seized by the EZLN, which gave the ex-governor a military trial and found him guilty of the offenses he had been accused of, only to free him as a result of mediation efforts by Samuel Ruiz and Manuel Camacho. Robledo Rincón was also president of the state PRI during the governorship of Patrocinio González Garrido, who at the outbreak of the EZLN rebellion was Secretary of the Interior (Gobernación), responsible for national security, but resigned his post as a result of the uprising. González Garrido supported the nomination of Robledo Rincón for the post of Chiapas governor (*El Financiero*, May 5).

Clandestine Revolutionary Indian Committee/EZLN General Command declared that the federal government's peace proposal had been rejected by majority vote. In four communiqués dated June 10, the EZLN reported the following:

1. The results of the vote: 97.88 percent voted NO to signing the proposed accord, against 2.11 percent voting YES. At the same time, only 3.6 percent voted in favor of renewing hostilities, while 96.74 percent voted to maintain resistance and call for a new national dialogue with the country's honest and independent forces, focusing on issues of democracy, freedom and justice.
2. The rebels ordered their regular and irregular forces, both within Mexico and abroad, to unilaterally extend the ceasefire, so as to continue the search for a peaceful solution to the conflict and avoid interfering with the August 21 elections. In line with this the EZLN will allow voting booths to be installed in the areas it controls, under the supervision of non-governmental organizations and the International Committee of the Red Cross.
3. That the EZLN will not accept aid from the federal, state or municipal governments, and will resist the army's encirclement by its own means and with the aid of the Mexican people.

After expressing thanks to Samuel Ruiz for his assistance as mediator and to Manuel Camacho for his efforts as peace commissioner, the EZLN declared that the dialogue begun in San Cristóbal de las Casas had come to an end.

The Zapatistas explain that their decision is due to the fact that the document *Agreements for a Just Peace in Chiapas* does not give a satisfactory answer to their national as well as local demands, stressing the

government's refusal to recognize the EZLN as a belligerent force. They also repeat their demand that clean, democratic elections be held with the participation of the forces of "civil society." They end by warning that they will not surrender under any circumstances.

Two days later, Manuel Camacho held a press conference to report the federal government's response. He emphasized that:

1. On President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's instructions, the Federal Army will maintain a unilateral freeze on all offensive military action, while troop deployment will be maintained in the area in order to prevent the movement of arms and explosives.
2. The federal government will go ahead with the commitments set forth in the document rejected by the EZLN, applying the document's points in communities not involved in the conflict, while the state government will participate in those forums for dialogue and negotiation which fall within its purview. The mediation of Samuel Ruiz was requested for issues relating to the EZLN.

Commenting on the Zapatistas' demand to be recognized as a belligerent force, Camacho explained that "it would be completely unacceptable to give the EZLN the juridical status of a belligerent force, since this would call into question our national sovereignty and the integrity of our territory, providing the basis for the interference of international forces in Mexico's internal affairs."

As we go to press

On June 16 Camacho resigned as peace commissioner, in response to criticism by PRI presidential candidate Ernesto Zedillo ✽

Elsie L. Montiel
Assistant Editor.