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Rebellion Still Brews Just Below The Surface In Chiapas

by Guest

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By Wayne Pitts

[The author, a graduate student in sociology at the University of New Mexico, is writing his thesis on the impact of tourism on the local economy in Chiapas. Pitts visited southern Mexico from March 7-19, where he interviewed peasant supporters of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional, EZLN), as well as local religious leaders, army representatives, government officials, business people, and others.]

With the temporary break in peace negotiations in San Cristobal, Chiapas, and the retreat of international journalists from the area, one might suspect that the political insurrection that exploded in southern Mexico in early January has been quelled. A lengthy visit to the region, however, leads one to suspect that the present cease fire may just be the calm before the storm. Many would-be Chiapan rebels feel that the dialogue between the insurgent leadership, headed by "Sub-Commander Marcos," and the government envoy, Manuel Camacho Solis, served only as a political maneuver by the government to calm the rebels and remove the sting from their movement. "The talks are just a political ploy," said one Chiapan peasant. "They are not really concerned with the social realities of poor indigenous communities."

This opinion seems to be shared by most peasants in the area. Few believe that any of the demands made by Marcos will really be met, or for that matter, even seriously considered. Reflecting these concerns, Marcos himself has become more belligerent in his communications with Mexican officials and the press, repeatedly insisting that all of the 34 resolutions which the EZLN negotiated with Camacho's delegation must be ratified and then instituted before the rebel army will down its arms.

With the fighting quieted, at least for the time being, the crisis is no longer making headlines in the US press, and the Mexican elite has breathed a sigh of relief. But the war is far from over. Indeed, many fear the government's call for a political solution is simply a smoke screen to recover its international legitimacy and the confidence of foreign investors. But if the government is not serious about negotiating a peaceful end to the conflict, then officials would be ill- advised to believe that the present lull on the battlefield will hold.

Clandestine meetings

Many clandestine groups throughout Chiapas continue to meet and organize, often with the support of representatives from other states of Mexico, particularly Oaxaca and Guerrero. At one such meeting that I attended on the outskirts of San Cristobal, an estimated 300 EZLN supporters came together to discuss future strategy and methods of organization to build the Zapatista movement. The assembly, which met in an abandoned warehouse, included representatives from Morelos, Veracruz, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Michoacan, Campeche, Quintana Roo, and the Yucatan. Such

peasant support for the EZLN is not always overtly evident. On the surface, for example, the town of Ocosingo where most of the deaths occurred during the first week of the uprising appears to be recovering from its involvement in the conflict. The walls of the buildings in this small community-located between San Cristobal and Palenque are curiously devoid of any graffiti in support of the Zapatistas. In contrast, Zapatista murals cover the buildings in neighboring San Cristobal, although many have been white-washed with fresh paint. In cities such as Tuxtla Gutierrez, Oaxaca, Puebla, Villahermosa, and Mexico City, graffiti in support of the EZLN is also commonplace.

Still, appearances can be deceiving. I asked one Ocosingo resident why there was no graffiti or outward show of support for the Zapatista movement, and he candidly replied that the people of Ocosingo "vehemently support" the EZLN, but they are unable to show their solidarity due to fear of the military. Notwithstanding the cease fire, Ocosingo is a town under siege. Military checkpoints throughout the area have become routine, although the largest army contingents are usually located near the state-run PEMEX gas stations, possibly in an effort to guard those installations against sabotage.

In Oxchuc, just west of Ocosingo, the military has a huge base of operations established that acts as its local nerve center in the area. Army training exercises are regularly held there. At the military checkpoint located on the eastern outskirts of Ocosingo, I spoke with three soldiers who had been stationed in the town since Jan. 2. One of them told me that there were 3,000 military troops patrolling around Ocosingo. "Nobody does anything unless we know it," he boasted. Inside the army outpost there was a large wall map which had red circles drawn around the towns of Ocosingo, Las Margaritas, Altamirano, and Comitan.

Another soldier explained that these towns were the ones completely shut off by the military. All three soldiers matter-of-factly stated that they thought the insurgency in Chiapas would indeed continue, and probably even intensify. But in a deliberate display of bravado, one soldier slapped the side of his rifle and warned that if another uprising did occur, "a bloodbath will take place."

A 'dirty war'

The bloodbath may already be occurring in the form of a "dirty war." Several campesinos charged that the military is carrying out assassinations in the "selva," the Spanish word for jungle which local residents often use to mean places just outside of town. In fact, residents said that assassinations had already been occurring prior to the conflict, and nobody believes that newly-established government human rights offices will provide any protection.

"The human rights offices are only tokens provided by the government," said one Ocosingo resident. "They are not authentic offices. They don't carry out real investigations." Juan Hernandez Meza, who is president of COPUMALI a local umbrella organization that incorporates more than twenty small Indian and human rights groups agreed. "The government rights offices are simply a facade," said Hernandez Meza, whose group includes tens of thousands of local residents. Chiapans are not just wary of government human rights organizations. They distrust nearly all state institutions that are supposed to be advocating the interests of the poor, such as the National Institute for Indigenous Peoples (INI).

"There are two INIs: a government INI and a people's INI," said Hernandez Meza, explaining that COPUMALI together with other local indigenous groups jointly make up the people's INI. "The government INI was set up to make the government look good. The people's INI really works to improve the conditions of indigenous communities." It is this basic distrust of the government that continues to fuel insurrectionary fervor in Chiapas. After decades of repression by the Mexican government, few Chiapans are ready to accept government promises prematurely, thus keeping the specter of a new rebellion alive. "We have come too far," explained one Zapatista supporter. "We have committed ourselves too completely to cut short our demands now and retreat back to the same position as before."

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