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Guest Author
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[John Ross is a free-lance journalist who has written on Mexican political and economic affairs for years. He has written several books on Chiapas, including The War Against Oblivion Zapatista Chronicles 1994-2000]

Just after midnight, on Jan. 1, 1994, the pitch-black night suddenly came alive with darting shadows. Their features hidden behind ski masks and bandannas, men and women without faces advanced on San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, the capital of Mexico's most southern and impoverished state. The indigenous rebellion, which began in the very first hour that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect, left a deep mark on Mexican history. Ever since that first frigid midnight, the fates of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) and NAFTA have been irrevocably intertwined.

But long before New Year's 1994, the two were already old adversaries. Three years earlier, then President Carlos Salinas de Gortari took initial steps to pave the way for implementation of the agricultural provisions of NAFTA. Salinas pushed a constitutional amendment through the Mexican Congress that ended distribution of land to the landless. This move, in effect, privatized the ejido and the comunidad, the two collective forms of landholdings for poor farmers in Mexico promoted by revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata.

The still-clandestine EZLN saw Salinas' "reforms" as a betrayal of their namesake Zapata, and a deathblow to their Mayan farmer constituency. In early 1993, as NAFTA corn quotas were being negotiated in Washington, the Zapatistas fearing that massive importation of US and Canadian grains would displace them from the Mexican market secretly formulated a declaration of war against the Salinas government. "We had no other choice," the EZLN's charismatic spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos said. The Mayans are known as "the people of the corn" and their survival is dependent on the cultivation of this important grain.

In May of that year, as NAFTA neared a crucial vote in the US Congress, the EZLN and the Mexican military squared off in a jungle confrontation that left several civilians and soldiers dead. However, both Salinas and then US President Bill Clinton managed to squelch news of the clash so as not to alarm the US legislators. If word had leaked out that an Indian rebellion was brewing in Mexico, the specter of instability south of the border might have sealed NAFTA's fate, Ross Rogers, chief political officer at the US Embassy in Mexico City said in an interview just days after the uprising had taken Washington "by surprise."

NAFTA cleared the US House of Representatives by only 34 votes six weeks before the rebellion exploded. In the months leading to the implementation of NAFTA, Salinas bragged that the trade
treaty would elevate Mexico into the first world. However, the takeover of San Cristobal and six other county seats in southeastern Chiapas on Jan. 1, 1994, by impoverished indigenous farmers forcefully reminded the nation that it was still deeply mired in the Third World. The Zapatista uprising acutely embarrassed Salinas at the beginning of a tumultuous election year, and he eventually left office in disgrace. Income gap has widened in Mexico under NAFTA.

Ten years later, Mexico remains in the Third World with one of the widest income divides between rich and poor outside of Africa, the World Bank recently reported. A paper issued by the bank in anticipation of the tenth anniversary of NAFTA concludes that the accord has only aggravated that divide, particularly in the rural areas that are home to the poorest Mexicans. Imports of US grains heavily subsidized by Washington have devastated Mexico's agricultural sector, with small farmers throughout country unable to compete with the flood of cheap corn from the north.

A recent study by the Carnegie Institute for Peace found that 1.3 million farmers here have abandoned their plots as the direct result of the flood of NAFTA-driven imports. The study, entitled NAFTA Promise and Reality Lessons For Latin America, said Mexico would import 6 million metric tons of corn in 2004, 60% of it thought to be genetically modified.

Many experts already anticipated the exodus from the countryside. One NAFTA impact study prepared by UCLA professor Raul Hinojosa for the Mexican federal government projected as a worst-case scenario that 10 million farmers would abandon the land as a result of the agreement. This worst-case scenario is quickly becoming a reality, with 6.5 million residents of rural Mexico already having emigrated from their homes. While some of the exodus has been to the large cities in Mexico, many former rural residents have taken the treacherous trip to the US to seek gainful employment. As many as 3,000 Mexicans, many of whom are displaced farmers, have lost their lives attempting to cross the border since NAFTA was signed in 1993, according to government statistics.

And even though NAFTA was promoted as a deterrent to "illegal" immigration, the numbers have actually gone up since 1994. A study by the Pew Hispanic Institute said an estimated 650,000 Mexicans, almost all without proper documents, have emigrated to the US since Mexico's economic crisis in 1994-1995, which was partially triggered by NAFTA trade distortions.

Another NAFTA-related concern for Mexican farmers is the massive importation of genetically modified corn, which has produced serious contamination of native seed in the highlands of central and southern Mexico. The destruction of ancient corn in the very region where it was first cultivated is a frontal attack on biodiversity, but it is not the only downside of how NAFTA has stained the environment at a cost that the Carnegie report tabulates as being in the billions (36 of them to be precise.) One example: since NAFTA kicked in, southern Mexico has lost almost 810,000 ha of tropical forests to transnational timber giants like the Boise Cascade Corp. Industrial workers have fared no better under NAFTA's heavy hand.

The aggressive invasion of manufactured goods, from textiles to toys, has decimated national industries. Mexico's banking system is now all but wholly owned by US, Canadian, and European institutions and its railroads now belong to US-based Union Pacific. Such "economic integration" has not brought much reciprocity.
Ten years after the implementation of NAFTA, an agreement (or treaty as Mexico terms it) that stipulated Mexican truck drivers would be licensed to ply US highways, they still cannot drive their rigs across the border. Although trade between the US and Mexico has multiplied 300 fold since Jan. 1, 1994, only 500,000 jobs have been created in Mexico over the past decade, even though NAFTA was heavily promoted as a job creator. Most of those new jobs were in the maquiladora sector along the border, where transnationals were flocking to absorb cheap Mexican labor.

But the highly promoted "NAFTA Miracle" has proven ephemeral. In the past two years, more than 600 foreign-owned maquiladoras have fled Mexico for lower-wage economies like Honduras, Haiti, and China in a cutthroat race to the bottom. Meanwhile, a quarter of a million maquiladora workers are not working and Mexico is experiencing its highest unemployment numbers since the 1995 crisis.

For those Mexican workers who still have a job, real wages have fallen by 3.4% since Jan. 1 1994, affirms the Carnegie report. US efforts to extend NAFTA's dubious benefits throughout the hemisphere via the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) have hit a wall as well, as leery Latin leaders like Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva resist Washington's commercial hegemony.

The Washington-dominated Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), a NAFTA-type accord for Central America, was significantly weakened after Costa Rica, the wealthiest nation in this poverty-stricken narrow neck of the Americas, pulled out of negotiations in December 2003 (see NotiCen, 2003-12-18).

The CAFTA debacle on top of failed FTAA summits in Miami and Cancun are important setbacks for the proponents of globalization, whose passion for economic domination Marcos and the EZLN have been warning the world about for years. EZLN changes Mexico If NAFTA has had a rocky road, the Zapatistas too have traveled an arduous track since Jan. 1, 1994. The rebels and their supporters have suffered invasions, massacres, and indifference from the Congress, the courts, and the Mexican press.

Several incidents highlight their rocky history during the past 10 years, but a particular milestone was the massacre of 46 residents of the Tzotzil community of Acteal in December 1997 (see SourceMex, 1998-01-07). Some 18,000 Mexican army troops continue to patrol the highlands and jungle of southeastern Chiapas. It is no coincidence that hundreds of Zapatista supporters have been murdered by the military and the paramilitary groups in the region. Still, the Zapatista movement has survived, and, 10 years later, with support from national and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and a fair-trade price for their organic coffee, the EZLN and its sympathizers are expanding their infrastructure.

Rebuffed by the Mexican Congress and the political parties that mutilated an indigenous-rights bill (see SourceMex, 2001-05-02) that would have granted limited autonomy to the nation's 57 distinct indigenous peoples, the EZLN is building its own autonomy. Since 1994, the Zapatistas have created 38 autonomous municipalities.
In the summer of 2003, the Zapatistas also reformed their organizational structure, creating the Juntas de Buen Gobierno (committees of good government) at five political/cultural centers in their region, which they have named caracoles or spirals (see SourceMex, 2003-09-17). This move has allowed the EZLN to establish autonomy in southeastern Chiapas without the need of any government decrees.

After ten years on the warpath and peacepath, the EZLN has changed Mexico in important ways. The Zapatistas are fond of saying that they put on their masks to unmask Mexican racism, and, unquestionably, the Indians are not the same as they were on that distant Jan. 1. Now in the vanguard of social change, their numbers are said to have increased from 10 to 20 million since 1994 not as a result of high birth rates but rather because mestizos, now proud of their indigenous roots, today identify themselves as Indians.

The Zapatista rebellion galvanized a civil society that had been seething ever since the 1968 student massacre in Mexico City underscored general dissatisfaction down below. On the march since 1994, civil society rescued the rebels from government persecution time and again during their most difficult years, and, in 2000, civil society was instrumental in toppling the tyranny of the long-ruling (71 years) Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), an event akin to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Across borders, the Zapatistas have been in the forefront of the struggle against corporate globalization, having sown the seeds of protest at World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings in Seattle and Cancun and at a huge gathering in the Lacandon Jungle in 1996, which the EZLN denominated "InterGalacta." There were few celebrations for NAFTA in Mexico on Jan. 1, 2004, but the EZLN held a huge celebration of its uprising in Oventic, Chiapas. The celebration was the culmination of the EZLN's commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the founding of the movement at a jungle clearing in Chiapas in November 1983.

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