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## Site of Zapatista Uprising has Turned into 'NAFTA Theme Park'

by Guest

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In the first hours of Jan. 1, 1994, Mayan Indian rebels marched into San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas state, to declare war on the Mexican government. The takeover coincided with the start of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a strong symbol of corporate globalization. Eleven years later, the Zapatista uprising seems to have lost its luster at least in San Cristobal de las Casas. On New Year's Eve 2004, the colonial city has taken on the appearance of a NAFTA theme park.

San Cristobal de las Casas now features a sprawling shopping mall replete with the region's first McDonald's and a ten-screen Cineopolis movie palace, which has become a threat to the city's flourishing network of cine clubs. The retail scene could grow even larger, with Wal-Mart contemplating the construction of a superstore in the city. Other international corporations are also setting down roots in San Cristobal de las Casas, including hotel chain Holiday Inn and US real-estate giant Coldwell Banker, which sells the picturesque homes that line the city's narrow, gleaming cobblestone streets to well-heeled foreigners.

Just to make the global makeover a fait accompli, two maquiladora plants are doing business north of the city under the logos of KN Knitwear and SpinTex, taking advantage of the cheap pool of Indian labor in Los Altos to manufacture trendy sportswear for Target and other US retail titans.

### *EZLN marks anniversary of uprising at home*

The historic rebellion of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) was not celebrated this past New Year's Eve at Cafe Revolucion in San Cristobal de las Casas. The cafe is a gathering spot for European tourists in the city's popular pedestrian promenade. This zone was thrashed by 21,000 Zapatista supporters when they commemorated the ninth anniversary of the uprising on New Year's Day 2003.

To the great relief of the citizens of San Cristobal, the rebels and their supporters were content to stay home in the mountains and jungles of southeastern Chiapas on Jan. 1, 2005. Instead, they marked the 11th anniversary of the EZLN uprising at the five "caracoles" or cultural-political centers the rebels have constructed throughout their zone of influence.

In Oventic, a one-hour drive into the mountains from San Cristobal de las Casas, several thousand Tzotzil Indian villagers and a handful of foreigners welcomed in a new year of struggle with spirited

speeches and pinging marimbas. On a stage ringed by a hundred highland village elders, Leticia, a young member of the Oventic Junta de Buen Gobierno (JBG), or Good Government Committee, spoke of the Zapatistas' prolonged struggle for autonomy. The JBGs were created as part of the Zapatista restructuring in 2003 (see SourceMex, 2003-09-17 and 2004-09-015).

"It has been 11 years of war against mal gobierno (bad government), 11 years of war against hunger and every kind of injustice, 11 years of war against oblivion and death," said Leticia. "But we have also had 11 years to build and strengthen our autonomy as Indian people living upon this land."

All of the New Year's Eve speakers were drawn from the ranks of civil Zapatismo, members and past members of the JBGs, which now administer the Zapatista infrastructure. It has been many years since EZLN military commanders have spoken at the Oventic ceremony, but the legendary guitar-playing Comandante David and Major Ana Maria who led the assault on San Cristobal Jan. 1, 1994, were no doubt taking note of the proceedings. Oventic is only a 45 km drive up from the Valle de Jovel but the community sometimes appears to be whole solar systems removed from San Cristobal.

The gap between the communitarian autonomy the rebels are building and the garish, franchise-driven commercialization of that colonial nexus grows more painful each year, a sad meditation on the ever-expanding distances between the decapitalized Mexican countryside and the magnet provincial cities now swollen with impoverished refugees from the nation's rural villages. Zapatistas develop tactics for survival Halfway through the first decade of the new millennium, campesinos have become an anachronism in a Mexico that now depends upon the global food chain for its sustenance.

The struggle of indigenous peoples for control of their own destinies no longer seems pertinent to a national agenda obsessed with free trade and which is subordinated to the infinite squabbles between venal political parties for power. In a very real sense, the Zapatistas are building not only an alternative state in southeastern Chiapas but also a parallel reality. It is fashionable among leftists to criticize the EZLN for having abandoned national politics for a narrow and even separatist vision of indigenous autonomy.

But the Zapatistas defend their focus on constructing the infrastructure of autonomy schools, clinics, organic-coffee co-ops, the JBGs as essential stepping stones to controlling their own lives without accommodating the "mal gobierno" and its military, the political parties and the churches, the anthropologists, and the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Such autonomy, they are convinced, will guarantee Indian survival in the face of the brutal corporate globalization of the planet.

To conduct business in the Zapatista zone these days, national and international NGOs are required to develop their projects in collaboration with the local JBGs. Anthropologists seeking access to Zapatista villages must now have an endorsement from the JBGs, and even journalists have to work hand in hand with the local junta. Education has become a galvanizing issue for civil Zapatismo, with nearly 300 rebel schools up and running in EZLN territory, a teacher-training center turning out young education promoters, and even a Universidad de la Madre Tierra (University of Mother Earth), to be financed by organic-coffee sales, on the drawing board. "Thousands of Indian kids who

never dreamed of going to school are taking classes every day," said Arturo Lomeli, a filmmaker who has been recording the Zapatista rebellion for the past decade.

Although the Zapatista educational system was first supported by NGOs like the US-based Schools for Chiapas, the rebels have taken control of the system. EZLN spokespersons are quick to dispute press claims that San Diego bilingual teacher Peter Brown, whose Schools for Chiapas financed the first projects, controls rebel curriculums. Brown has reportedly been barred from Oventic for six months, and his absence was conspicuous at this year's anniversary ceremonies.

"Our educational initiative is the result of the hard work of Zapatista men, women, and children and not someone who does not come from our culture, speak our language, or understand our history," the EZLN's highland educational commission affirmed in a recent communique distributed by Enlace Civil. "We are seeking to rescue our own history, and only we can do that for ourselves."

The Zapatistas' fierce dedication to building a viable autonomy has found a distant echo in the sierras of Michoacan state, 1,600 km to the north. This New Year's Eve, Purepecha Indian militants took a page from the EZLN book and declared the town of Paracho an autonomous municipality. Several majority Indian towns outside of Chiapas, notably Tepetzlan in Morelos state and Suljaa in Guerrero state, have similarly declared themselves autonomous of the state and federal governments emulating the Zapatista model.

In the EZLN's own development, the struggle between local communities and a municipal (county) government that controlled all commerce, government funds, and political power led to the formation of 29 autonomous municipalities with distinct county seats than appear on the official maps, and the rejection of all government aid. Now, in the 11th year of the EZLN's unique rebellion, as the divide between the globalized cities and the abandoned countryside becomes more critical in Mexico, the Zapatista model of autonomy is increasingly pursued as the most viable guarantee of survival for the nation's 20 million indigenous peoples.

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