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The rebel army.

Chiapas War on the Net

Five Years of Negotiations

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1994: CHIAPAS

AND THE COLLAPSE OF CARLOS SALINAS DE GORTARI

The outbreak of the Chiapas crisis on January 1, 1994, brought Mexico's entire political system into question. The main thing challenged was the legitimacy of then-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, which had a noticeable impact on the transformation of Mexico's image worldwide.

From being a country gaining entry into the first world, signing a free trade agreement with two of the most advanced countries in the world, the United States and Canada, and rapidly modernizing, Mexico became a place blazoned across front pages and

making the lead story on television news programs worldwide as a country where indigenous guerrilla wars broke out and an important part of its population lived in deep poverty.

In less than a week, Subcommander Marcos managed to destroy the image that had cost Carlos Salinas de Gortari so many millions of dollars in U.S. congressional lobbyist fees. The Zapatista guerrillas had practically no military capability at all, threatening the army with wooden rifles, but they brought the entire political system into question.

The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) rapidly awakened sympathies in Mexico and abroad, making it impossible for the government to crush it militarily. On January 12, 1994 the Mexican army declared a cease fire accepted by the EZLN leadership. Thus began a very different story from that of Central America during the bloody wars of the 1980s.

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Octavio Nava/AVE

The national army.

THE WAR ON THE NET AND NEW CIVILIZING CONFLICTS

One of the explanations of the support for the EZLN in Mexico and abroad, expressed through the solidarity networks in the United States, Canada and Europe, is that the war in Chiapas is a postmodern war, with invisible soldiers who do battle through the Internet and offer solidarity to the EZLN from all parts of the globe. The Mexican government has no effective weapon at all to fight this war without borders. The unique thing about this war is that an armed guerrilla group, with an indigenous social base, was able to take advantage of post-Cold War resources to successfully fight, unarmed, a much better equipped army with an estimated 100-times-greater troop-strength.

This new form of warfare—to use Alvin Toffler’s analytical framework of three civilizations— involves the first premodern agrarian civilization on the side of the EZLN waging war using religious images. This is mixed with the Mexican government and army, a modern army organized for the kind of fighting characteristic of the second industrial civilization. And, once again, benefitting the EZLN, it also involves the use of the civilization of science and technology, networks, the Worldwide Web and invisible soldiers.

This means that using a strategy corresponding to the first and third civilizations, the EZLN attacks an army that only knows how to act using strategies and tactics from the industrial civilization. In other words, the EZLN has the strategic advantage and is on the offensive, without engaging in military com-

bat, and the Mexican army is on the defensive, unable to act against the new guerrillas.

LEGITIMACY AND NEGOTIATION

Through the army, the Mexican government has superior military strength, but it does not enjoy the political support needed to act against the EZLN. The EZLN has no military might, but has developed the backing of Mexican and international society. In the new end-of-century wars, to measure the balance of forces of the armies in conflict, it is not necessary to engage in combat.

This is why the dialogue between the EZLN and the government—unique in the world— was on the agenda after only 12 days of fighting.

The first round of negotiations was crucial. Manuel Camacho, the government negotiator, got the EZLN to talk about its demands so hostilities could not be renewed. This period was very important because it transformed the EZLN from an indigenous guerrilla army into an armed guerrilla organization that did not fire on the government. The negotiations were dubbed the “Dialogues in the Cathedral.”

They were very important for the government because they made it possible for the presidential elections to be held successfully. For the EZLN they meant going from being a totally unknown guerrilla organization to achieving great political support. The mediator, like in many countries where negotiations

are carried out with armed groups, was a representative of the clergy, the bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Samuel Ruiz.

These negotiations broke down after three months; Luis Donaldo Colosio, the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) presidential candidate, was assassinated March 23, 1994, and the dialogue was suspended for more than a year. A second government mediator, Jorge Madrazo, made no progress with the EZLN.

The important thing in 1994 was that neither side used weapons to try to improve its position. By the end of 1994, Mexico had a new president, Ernesto Zedillo, whose administration began with a profound economic crisis. In February 1995, the Zedillo government broke the cease fire and attempted, unsuccessfully, to capture Subcommander Marcos. That was the moment of greatest military tension of the conflict.

SAN ANDRÉS LARRÁINZAR

A third government negotiator, Marco Antonio Bernal, buttressed by the mediation of the National Mediating Commission (CONAI) headed by Father Samuel Ruiz and the Peace Commission (Cocopa) made up of senators and deputies, began a new stage of negotiations that concluded in February 1996 with the San Andrés Larráinzar Accords.

These accords on indigenous rights are the first and only progress in the negotiations between the EZLN and the government. The accords have not been discussed in the Mexican Congress and therefore have not been put into practice; this has originated great tension between the EZLN and the government. The EZLN demands their immediate application and the government has not managed to turn them into law. If they became law, the Larráinzar accords would affect many vested interests, mainly those of the local strongmen-landlords in Chiapas, who keep the indigenous groups there under a feudal system of exploitation.

PARAMILITARY GROUPS AND THE ACTEAL MASSACRE

Between 1996 and 1997, the Chiapas political and economic establishment developed a stratagem of terrorizing the indigenous communities who sympathized with the Zapatistas. In response, violence began to spread inside the communities, mainly in the northern part of the state, between members of

the PRI and Zapatista followers, between Catholics and Protestants. In excess of 10,000 indigenous inhabitants are estimated to have fled their communities: these are the new refugees. At the same time many human rights violations began to be recorded.

The most important occurred in the town of Acteal on December 22, 1997, when 47 children, women and old people were murdered in cold blood by a paramilitary group financed by the PRI and landlords while they attended a religious service. As a result, the governor of Chiapas resigned after the National Human Rights Commission accused state troopers of supporting the massacre.

BETWEEN ACTEAL AND PEACE

The Acteal massacre is the gravest violation of human rights in Mexico in recent years. Dialogue between the government and the EZLN—currently at a standstill—must be reestablished to prevent the spread of violence in Chiapas.

Father Samuel Ruiz dissolved the CONAI in 1998 because it no longer fulfilled its mediation functions. Current government negotiator Emilio Rabasa has not managed to reestablish communication with Subcommander Marcos. In mid-1998, the Secretary General of the United Nations visited Mexico and there was some discussion of the possibility of the U.N. helping to break the impasse in communication between government and EZLN. The government refused this alternative, saying that it could affect national sovereignty.

In brief, five years after the beginning of the conflict, there is no war, but neither is there peace. Peace is not only the absence of war. It is also the creation of conditions whereby violence does not spread among indigenous communities, so there is no paramilitary activity and so that the EZLN can turn in their arms and become a political party as the guerrilla armies of Central America did.

For this to happen, peace talks between the government and the EZLN must be renewed to ensure there are no more massacres like Acteal and to reestablish the rule of law and the justice system. Another mediating body must be established that can make it possible to come to another peace accord, this time a definitive one. ■■■

Note: On March 21, the EZLN carried out a public consultation nationwide in which the population was asked if they agreed that the San Andrés Larráinzar Accords be accepted immediately. Approximately 3 million people 12 years and older answered the EZLN call.