



Chiapas Update



Information and Analysis from the Chiapas Support Committee

February 2009

Dignified Rage, Internally Displaced People and "Buying Consciences"

by Mary Ann Tenuto

A delightful surprise awaited us as the 3rd phase of Digna Rabia (Dignified Rage) began on January 2nd. Philosophers, activist organizations, journalists, musicians and the EZLN participated in panels, all addressing the general theme of *Otro Mundo, otra política* (Another world, another politics). Several thousand packed the CIDECI auditorium to overflowing and managed to fill three rooms in other buildings as well. Banners from participating organizations decorated the grounds of the Universidad de la Tierra (University of the Land), also known as CIDECI for its capacity building center on the outskirts of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. Vendors sold T-Shirts, music, magazines and books. Indigenous cooperatives spread their embroidery and weaving for all to see and, hopefully, buy.



CNI banner at CIDECI. Foto: M. Tenuto

This happy and colorful scene was the 1st World Festival of Dignified Rage, sponsored by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN).

I was particularly impressed by the quality of thought expressed by all that participated. This gathering was notable for the fact that presentations by individuals and organizations occupied most of the time and the EZLN occupied only a small fraction of the time. This shared participation was a marked change from the Encuentros where the EZLN did almost all the talking. It was also notable for the large crowds that were present every day, a show of support for the Zapatistas and a sign of their strength in Mexico and internationally.

The weather was perfect: warm and sunny days, cool crisp nights with a sky full of stars and at least one planet. I had not visited Chiapas since a cold spell drowned the Jungle in pouring rain and near-freezing temperatures at night, the day after the Comandanta Ramona Women's Encuentro (Gathering) one year ago. This year the weather was a welcome change and it was good to be here. A group of us from the Bay Area and Sacramento arrived and departed Chiapas at different times. Some of the Sacramento compañeros and one compañero from our organization attended the first phase of the World Festival of Dignified Rage in Mexico City between December 26 and 29, 2008. Several folks had to return to Sacramento for the start of school, but one intrepid compañera joined us in San Cristóbal after

celebrating the 15th Anniversary of the Zapatista National Liberation Army on New Years in Oventik, also the 2nd phase of the Festival. "The largest crowd ever" reportedly attended the anniversary celebration. This writer joined up with folks in San Cristóbal, where she had been working for several days.

Marcos' statement on Gaza, entitled "Gaza Will Survive," was beautiful and inspiring, evoking strong emotions in the assembled crowd. After that session, the crowd marched from CIDECI to the Zócalo (central plaza) in downtown San Cristóbal de las Casas (several miles), chanting and painting graffiti on the municipal headquarters.

Likewise, Marcos' analysis of (Mexican president) Felipe Calderón's "War on Drugs" was precisely on point. "Mexico is being run by organized crime," declared Marcos in his first public statement on the insatiable violence prevalent in Mexico and usually attributed to a war by and between drug cartels. Calderón "decided to support one gang of drug traffickers to make war on another gang and unleashed the Army throughout the country to act as police, prosecution, judge, and executioner," Marcos alleged. More than 5,000 Mexicans have lost their lives in this war, more than the reported total of U.S. troops who have died in the entire Iraq War.

Raúl Zibechi characterized Haiti as a laboratory for testing civilian control techniques (repression) to later be used against social protest in Latin America. Don Pablo González Casanova got rave reviews when he announced: "Dignity is not negotiable," and "Autonomy is not negotiable," referring to the fact that the Zapatistas have not sold out. Justice for the Barrio, an organization of mostly Mexican

(continued on page 2)

contents

- * Dignified Rage, Internally Displaced People.....p 1
- * Harassment of Zapatista Communities.....p3
- * Message from CCRI-CG of the EZLNp5

(...continued from page 1)

immigrants fighting displacement by developers in New York City, showed an excellent video about their struggle. Paulina Fernández talked about the struggle of the community police in Guerrero, a struggle that has kept drugs and drug-related crimes out of the communities that police themselves, much like the Zapatista ban on drugs has done in Chiapas.

One of my favorite organizations in Mexico is the National Indigenous Congress (CNI, its initials in Spanish). Its leaders have been struggling as indigenous campesinos all their lives. They know who they are and who their enemy is. They are inspiring. Carlos González spoke on behalf of the CNI. He opened by stating: "the history of indigenous peoples in Mexico is one of continuous conquest." He went on to list some recent and current examples of capitalism's conquest of and repression against those peoples.

Hugo Blanco (Perú) spoke about indigenous resistance to oil and mining companies in the Peruvian Amazon. They resist for the same reasons as the Zapatistas and indigenous peoples throughout the world: a respect for nature, culture and balance, in defense of their land.

Marcos concluded the Festival by urging attendees to stay united so as not to weaken "our force." This was, in a way, a summary of all the messages delivered throughout the Festival. Comandante David made a similar plea on New Years. The auditorium was still packed at the closing. We stumbled out into the cold night air reflecting on all the ideas and examples of struggle we had heard. The Other Campaign is evolving, maturing.

After the conclusion of Digna Rabia, three of us traveled to the colorful Zapatista Caracol of Oventik, home to the Good Government Junta of Los Altos (The Highlands). The process of autonomy (self government) led the Zapatista communities to elect good government boards, or Juntas, in 2003. The Caracols are the regional governing centers. Beautiful murals decorate the various buildings in Oventik and one can shop for all sorts of artesanía (crafts), a little like an Other Mall. The Che Guevara Cooperative store sells every kind of Zapatista-related paraphernalia one could possibly want and serves food besides. Mujeres por la Dignidad Cooperativa (Women for Dignity Cooperative) offers women and children's embroidered blouses, tablecloths, jewelry, purses and much more in its Oventik store. We were in Oventik to ask formal permission to visit the headquarters of San Pedro Polhó autonomous municipio (county). Our organization has supported Polhó ever since paramilitary violence forced many thousands to flee into camps of internally displaced people within that county during the last half of 1997. While we were in Oventik, of course, we bought things to bring back: T-shirts, ski masks and paliacates (bandanas).

The autonomous municipal council greeted us upon our arrival in Polhó. One of its members escorted us to the women's weaving collective. We had played a role in starting the cooperative and have always taken advantage of the opportunity to buy from them, whether in the community or at large Zapatista gatherings. A member of our

group had seen them on New Years Eve in Oventik and told them we would visit Polhó after Digna Rabia. The women in the weaving collective produce exquisite hand-woven and embroidered huipiles (traditional blouses). The Junta had notified Polhó that we were coming and they were waiting for us. After a lengthy shopping spree in the women's collective store, we met with the autonomous council. The all male



Toñita, Marcos and Lupita at Digna Rabia.

council wore the traditional clothing of wool vests, skirts and hats with multi-colored ribbons. Most of them did not speak Spanish, so a spokesperson that did talked to us.

"We are surviving," the spokesperson said in response to our question as to how they were doing. "We do not have enough to eat because we are

still unable to go to our fields. The paramilitaries are there. Our diet is limited to 3 tortillas per day, one serving of beans per day and meat once a month." There are still 6,000 displaced people in the county, many in encampments inside the municipal headquarters known as Polhó. Others are in camps located throughout the county. They told us there are sometimes rumors of another paramilitary attack like Acteal. The Junta in Oventik had denounced threats being made against the San Pedro Polhó displaced Zapatistas shortly before we left the Bay Area for Chiapas.

I thought about the EZLN's New Years message, read in Spanish by Comandante David and in Tzotzil by Comandante Javier at the New Years celebration in Oventik. Now I understood. David said:

"With effort and difficulty we have tried to take a few steps but it has still not been sufficient to resolve the problems and the great needs of our peoples. Our authorities have tried to resolve the problems of our peoples and some of the multiple needs of our communities, but the large part of our needs continue without solutions. The hunger, the misery and the illnesses are increasing every day." [CCRI-CG, EZLN, January 1, 2009.]

I noticed two newly constructed attractive buildings along the roads to Oventik and Polhó. They looked expensive and also familiar. We learned that the government built them to house artisan cooperatives. I had seen the same style building on the Ocosingo-Palenque highway two years ago. Development and counterinsurgency wrapped into one expensive package. They are there both to compete with the Zapatista cooperatives and to convince the non-Zapatistas that they are better off being loyal to the government. As Comandante David said in the EZLN's New Years message, the government is "buying consciences."

The following day, we rented a very small car and 4 of us drove out to La Garrucha, the Caracol for the Tzeltal Jungle region. Many changes have taken place in this region with respect to the Good Government Junta. Autonomous council members no longer rotate to serve on the Junta. Instead, six delegates are elected from each of the four

(...continue on page 4)

Harassment of Zapatista Communities

by Luis Hernández Navarro*

In Chiapas, the harassment of Zapatista communities follows a precise route. As if they were dealing with a relay race, campesino (peasant) groups linked to the state government alternate in different regions trying to exhaust indigenous resistance. Throughout the length and breadth of the rebel territories, an army of initials that speak in the name of workers regularly and systematically provoke the support bases that reject having dealings with the government.

There is no truce in the provocation. We are dealing with not giving a moment of rest to those who have dared to construct autonomy without asking permission. One day they occupy their lands, another day they steal their coffee or their cattle, another day they break fences, the next they destroy the small fields on which they grow the coffee. They are vigilant for the opportune moment for ambushing rebels, for brandishing machetes or shooting their slingshots.

A mantle of impunity protects the aggressors. The law is not for them. Confronting campesino against campesino and indigenous against indigenous has been a common practice of the power. They are tools for making money. They charge for their services, sucking resources from the budget destined for the combat of poverty or for farming development and, if they have even more luck, occupying some government job.

During the years before the armed uprising, the majority of the mercenary organizations belonged to the ranks of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI, its initials in Spanish). Nomads of politics, they have changed their domicile since 2000 to the headquarters of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). The Aztec sun [the PRD's party symbol] in Chiapas is not only the vehicle for committing fraud against their own and anointing Jesus Ortega as their leader, but it is also the paramilitary lair.

The Regional Organization of Ocosingo Coffee Growers (Orcao) was responsible for one of the latest episodes of the unspoken war against the Zapatistas. While the EZLN was celebrating the Festival of Dignified Rage in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, members of this organization attempted to steal 500 hectares of land in Bosque Bonito, Che Guevara autonomous county, from the Zapatistas.

It was a high stakes gamble. If what they wanted to do was to delegitimize the Zapatistas, the theatrical image could not have had a better moment. In a high level international meeting, before hundreds of invitees from different countries, with the media spotlight on them, the coffee growers organization presented themselves as the victim, and “exhibited” the rebels as a force “questioned” by a group of indigenous people. The provocation was not accidental, nor an act that “got out of control.” It was something programmed.

The Orcao wasn't always like that. For several years it had a close relationship with Zapatismo. Nevertheless, it broke this tie between 1997 and 1999, and its leadership then began to dispute the rebel social base, with governmental supports [economic aid] and elected positions for its leaders. With the arrival of Pablo Salazar to the state



New Clinic in San Manuel. Foto: M. Tenuto

government, the rupture became a growing conflict. In 2002 the organization of coffee growers' aggressions against the Zapatista bases increased dramatically.

The Orcao was formed in 1988, with 12 communities of Sibacjá, in the municipio (county) of Ocosingo. In a little while other villages added themselves to it, until amounting to almost 90. Their original demands consisted of the search for better prices for coffee (they plummeted drastically in 1989) as well as in the solution of the agrarian backlog. In 1992, within the context of the commemoration of 500 years of indigenous, black and popular resistance, it [Orcao] vindicated indigenous self-determination, opposed the reform to Article 27 of the constitution and demanded liberty, justice and democracy.

Orcao forms part of the National Union of Autonomous Campesino Regional Organizations (Unorca) in Chiapas. As has happened to almost all the campesino organizations in the state, national and local, those that make up Unorca suffer an unstoppable process of decomposition, dispersion and internal division. Orcao directs Unorca in the state. Juan Vazquez, one of its principal leaders, is commissioner for reconciliation in the government of Juan Sabines. The organization has close ties with that administration. The majority of its leaders form part of the PRD.

In December 2007, the EZLN started an agrarian distribution from below, endorsed by the Zapatista Agrarian Law. The measure responded, in part, to the governmental decision of recognizing rights over land occupied by the rebels of other campesino groups. With that, the federal and state public administration sowed the seed of discord among poor people. On May 15, 2008, the Zapatistas informed the Orcao that they would mark off the lands recuperated in 1994 to quantify them in hectares and distribute them. The response from the organization of coffee growers did not wait: it rented and sold its lands, invaded lands of Zapatista bases, stole and injured their adversaries' animals, and violently attacked communities in rebellion.

The rebels are not the only association that has serious conflicts with the Orcao. The Emiliano Zapata Campesino Organization (OCEZ), that has nothing to do with the EZLN, complained pub-

(...continue on page 4)

(...continued from page 3)

lily to Juan Sabines that “different officials of the government you head have hidden abuses, tricks, failure to fulfill agreements and constant provocations committed by the former Ocosingo council members Jose Perez Gomez and the paramilitary group grown inside the Orcao that he directs, who seek to commit the shameful injustice of plundering their legitimate ejido rights from 10 indigenous Tzeltals, that are our compañeros of the OCEZ-FNLS.”

What happened in Bosque Bonito was not a confrontation, but an aggression by the Orcao against the Zapatistas, a provocation that did not overflow its proportions thanks to rebel prudence. ☘

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(...continued from page 2)

municipios in the region to serve three-year terms. In each municipio, two delegates rotate service on the Junta for ten days once a month. Apparently, the work on the autonomous council combined with work on the Junta was too much for the council members. So, the region decided to relieve them of one part of their responsibility.

Another change has taken place with respect to the distribution of projects and donations. There is now a regional assembly of all authorities that must approve projects and where they are located. I am uncertain as to the long-term implications of this change for foundation-funded projects. There is still a lot for us to learn about this new process, but it is clearly a significant change from the policy declared in 2003 when the Juntas were born.

We parked the little rental car near the Junta and bedded down for the night. The next morning the Junta graciously served us coffee and then a truck arrived to take us to San Manuel, the autonomous municipio with which we have partnered for six and a half years. They told us that our car could not travel over the road between La Garrucha and San Manuel. The ruts were too deep. We left it parked in La Garrucha.

We were delighted to see that the new clinic, named the Compañera Lucha Clinic, is now operational. We took a tour and actually slept inside one of the dormitories for health promoters. We understand that there is still some capacity building that needs to occur before the project is complete. But much of our work here was to discuss the lack of progress on the Pharmacy Warehouse. That discussion took the better part of a day and we learned that the government has opened several new clinics that give free consultations and free medicine in order to compete with the Zapatista autonomous health program. The autonomous communities charge a small fee for medicine in order that they can replace it. Given the severe economic recession in Mexico, very few people in this part of the state can afford even a small fee now. The following day we visited Nuevo Arena and the Compañero Manuel Grocery Warehouse. Once again we learned that the government warehouse was giving away groceries so cheap that pro-government community stores could sell at lower prices than the Zapatista stores. This was becoming a pattern; first the weaving cooperatives for government supporters in the Highlands, and now bargain basement prices on groceries and free medicine.

This is the “winning hearts and minds” side of the counter-insurgency; Comandante David’s “buying consciences.” Polhó is the result of the violent side of that counterinsurgency, which is ever present in the form of military bases, army camps and paramilitary groups.

Another interesting activity is taking place throughout this region (the Jungle), which I learned about in bits and pieces. The Zapatistas are measuring their recuperated lands and populating those that are vacant by offering land to folks in other municipios within the Caracol. Land, especially recuperated land, is a tricky subject. Many have speculated



Don Pablo Gonzalez Casanova at Digna Rabia. Foto: La Jornada.

on how much land the EZLN actually recuperated, but I have never seen a figure from the Zapatistas themselves. Yet, I have always been aware that the Junta in La Garrucha (and before the days of the Junta, the 4 autonomous councils in the region) had “un chingo” (lots) of recuperated land on which new farming communities could

be started. San Manuel, for example, is composed primarily of new communities started on old fincas (estates or cattle ranches). Indeed! San Manuel and Francisco Gómez counties recuperated many of the cattle ranches in what was known as the “First Valley of Ocosingo,” an enormous region. And, there are 3 more Caracols that also recuperated land in the Jungle and the Northern Zone: La Realidad, Morelia and Roberto Barrios.

The impetus for the current measuring program seems to be, at least according to those who told us about it, that this land is harder to defend if it is not being used. Several people told me that Zapatistas are moving onto San Manuel’s vacant recuperated land from other municipios within the Caracol. There is some indication that the Caracol may also offer land to Zapatistas from other Caracols. However, when we returned to San Cristóbal we learned that all the Caracols are measuring all their land, that they are doing so pursuant to the Zapatista Agrarian Law, revised about a year ago, and that the Zapatista Agrarian Law was revised in response to the government’s treacherous tactic of giving land titles for recuperated Zapatista land to PRI or PRD party members, thereby intentionally fomenting conflict.

(...continue on page 6)

Message from the CCRI-CG of the Zapatista National Liberation Army at 15 Years from its Armed Uprising

(Transcription of the message read in Spanish by Comandante David and in Tzotzil by Comandante Javier)

The Zapatistas, indigenous peoples that propose struggling for a better and more humane world, begin to be more pursued and beaten up in all aspects by the bad rulers of our country and by the powerful and the political parties.

And so for 15 years we have suffered threats, harassment, persecution, military and paramilitary attacks. The bad government, the political parties and their allies, although they may be poor people, do not cease their attacks in many forms for the purpose of stopping the advance of our struggle and destroying our base that consists of all the peoples in resistance.

For 15 years the bad government has founded, financed and trained paramilitary groups in all the villages that have the task of provoking, threatening and dividing our peoples.

In order to weaken and destroy our social bases the bad government has been distributing alms through their aid programs to families affiliated with the political parties for the purpose of pleasing, quieting and calming the hunger of poor people.

The bad government has tried to convince and buy the conscience of our support bases, promising them better living conditions to forget their dead and their just demands. Unfortunately, there are indigenous brothers that have fallen into the bad government's traps believing that with this they are going to improve their living conditions without struggling.

Nonetheless, we Zapatistas did not rise up in arms to ask for crumbs or to be treated as beggars. We struggle for a real democracy, liberty and justice for everyone. We struggle for the good of humanity and against neoliberalism. We struggle for another more just and humane world. For a world where all those who inhabit our planet fit.

But the bad rulers, the powerful, those that consider themselves lords and ladies of everything, persist in taking out the wealth of our peoples, on destroying nature and on destroying humanity.

Therefore, to all the brothers and sisters, *compañeros* and *compañeras* of Mexico and of the world we ask you and invite you to organize and unite each one in their towns against a common enemy. But we must seek the form and the mechanisms of how to unite and globalize our struggles, our resistances and our rebel spirit.

But it will only be possible if we propose walking together and struggling together without importance to the time and distance that we encounter.

Brothers and Sisters, *compañeros* and *compañeras*, let's carry forward then our banners of struggle, let's make our struggle, our resistance, our dignified rage and rebelliousness strong and large.

We Zapatistas, the original peoples of these lands, we are going to continue forward in the struggle that we have started. We are going to continue resisting the bad government's blows with dignity and a rebel spirit.

In the 15 years that they have been beating up on us we have learned to resist and to survive, but it's also because we have counted on the support and solidarity of many brothers and sisters of Mexico and of the world.



Mural in Los Altos. Foto: M. Tenuto

It is this way that we have started to construct our autonomies at the different levels, like health, education, commercialization and in the self-government of our peoples.

With effort and difficulty we have tried to take a few steps but it has still not been sufficient to resolve the problems and the great needs of our peoples.

Our authorities have tried to resolve the problems of our peoples and some of the multiple needs of our communities, but the large part of our needs continue without solutions. The hunger, the misery and the illnesses are increasing day by day.

In spite of all this, we continue forward in our struggle because we will not betray the blood of our fallen that struggled until giving their lives for democracy, liberty and justice. We will follow their example and continue our slogan of struggling for the fatherland or dying for liberty.☺

**Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee,
General Command of the Zapatista National Liberation Army.**

From Caracol 2, Oventic, Highlands Zone of Chiapas, Mexico.

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(...continued from page 4)

We returned to San Cristóbal to visit with friends, buy books and prepare for the journey home. In conversations with friends, we heard about a brief symbolic "takeover" of the Palenque archaeological site by Zapatistas coming from nearby communities. We also heard about conflict with the Orcao. Upon leaving Chiapas to return to the Bay Area, I am aware of sensing the sharp contrast between the festive atmosphere of the Digna Rabia Festival and the difficulties the Zapatista communities face every day living in resistance. ☸



Church in San Manuel. Foto: M. Tenuto

Who We Are

The Chiapas Support Committee is a grass roots all-volunteer human rights organization in Oakland, California. We work with indigenous and campesino organizations in Mexico. We have an hermanamiento (partnership) with San Manuel autonomous Zapatista municipality. In the Bay Area we provide public information about Chiapas through public events, our newsletter, Chiapas Update, our listserv and web site. We organize delegations to Chiapas and also recruit and certify human rights observers and volunteers. We participate in the Other Campaign and the International Campaign in Northern California. Our contact information is below!

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