



Chiapas Update



Information and Analysis from the Chiapas Support Committee

September 2008

Colombian Echoes: "The Merida Initiative" and Mexico's New Kind of Violence *by Abigail Andrews*

During my recent visits to Chiapas, over and over again, scholars and activists have told me that there has been a change in Mexican law enforcement. Not just a quantitative change, in the number of police, or the value of pesos going into counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and border security - though there has been that - but a qualitative change, in the kinds of tactics used, and the way they instill fear. The police brutality in San Salvador Atenco in May 2006 heralded this new kind of violence. Since then, focusing his administration on the "war on drugs," current Mexican President Felipe Calderón has used anti-narcotics efforts to justify heavily militarizing his country, in consort with the Bush white house. While the autocratic, seventy-year rule of Mexico by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which ended in 2000, can hardly be called gentle, the PRI relied primarily on corruption and fraud to secure control. In contrast, Calderón's military has turned to the strategies of intimidation, torture, and rape. The more I heard about these kinds of tactics, and the more I watched military personnel begin to proliferate in the cities and jungles of Chiapas, the more Calderón's Mexico started to remind me of Colombia.

In Bogota, where I lived for most of 2006, heavily armed young men, both police and private security personnel, are ubiquitous in the streets. Each day, these guards, most of whom look like they've just barely turned 18, loll on their AK-47s, or stroll back and forth with the attack dogs they keep by their sides. Once you get used to their omnipresence in Bogota, if ever, you don't see many other open signs of the country's state of siege. Instead, it comes out in peoples' attitudes. They hurry about their business, not looking at one another as they pass, assuming a protective stance in each part of their routine, and, especially if they are judges, lawyers, writers, or activists, building walls around themselves that only forestall the fear that someday, someone might kill them for what they've said or done. Awareness of the state of siege comes out in the realization that people my age - 27 - have never lived with anything else.

Elsewhere, however, Colombia's "low intensity" war is palpable, painful, and plain. As a result of guerrillas' and paramilitaries' efforts to appropriate land for political, economic, and strategic gain, two to three million people have been internally displaced in Colombia. Upon seizing a region, armed groups often threaten or kill human rights defenders and civilians they suspect of supporting the opposite side, compelling those residents to flee. Paramilitaries, in particular, are notorious for their mercenary status and human rights abuses, ravaging the countryside and its inhabitants in search of land, position, and drugs. The cocaine trade, in turn, fuels their operations with immense sums of cash that enable them to buy state of the art weapons and hire young, desperate peasants as foot soldiers.

While I was in Colombia, I worked as a research assistant, inter-

viewing leaders such as businessmen, guerrillas, paramilitaries, and indigenous activists. Through my conversations with these influential individuals, I gained fleeting insights into the tangle that constituted this war. They told me of the inextricable links between the U.S. military, the Colombian military, and paramilitary groups. They spoke of the hopelessness of ending a war that was driven by enormous financial incentives from U.S. drug users, on one hand, and from the U.S. government, on the other. They told me how fear had

led the Colombian people to rally behind Alvaro Uribe, a strongman president known for his lack of concern for human rights and committed to pouring money and guns into crushing the FARC guerrillas (Revolutionary Armed Forces



Mexican army deploys to fight the "war on drugs". Photo Noroeste

of Colombia). They explained that Colombia's leaders had won the attention of the pentagon and a blank check for military training and guns by demonizing drug suppliers and guerrilla groups. Some told me of their own experiences at the School of the Americas, learning to torture suspects, and others told me of the vast paramilitarization that had accompanied "Plan Colombia" and U.S. support. Still others spoke of the way, since September 11, 2001, marking the FARC as "terrorists" had reinforced Uribe's heavy-handed rule and broadened his mandate. Given the intricacies of the politics of drugs, money, and violence, few saw openings for ending this interminable war.

Too many of these themes are echoing in Mexico today. On June 30, 2008, George Bush signed into law the Iraq War Funding Bill.

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Tacked on to the end of this bill was the “Merida Initiative.” Popularly known as “Plan Mexico,” for its resonances with the failed “Plan Colombia,” the bill authorized \$1.6 billion dollars of funding for the Mexican military, over four years. The money is allocated for fighting drug traffic, combatting terrorism, and enforcing U.S. security concerns throughout North America. Because the bill stipulates that the money is to be used for equipment and training, the majority of the \$400 million annual budget will be reserved for U.S. companies, including defense, IT, and private security. The bill’s blueprint, indeed, is eerily similar to that of Plan Colombia.

However, Plan Mexico explicitly goes beyond counter narcotics initiatives. It includes border security, criminalizing migrants and lumping them into a category with drug traffickers and terrorists. Like in recent years in Colombia, it also merges the anti-drug mission with the U.S. “war on terror.” Thus, where the FARC has recently been labeled a terrorist organization, the new Mexican bill provides for hunting down “terrorists” (including guerrilla groups?) within Mexico. So doing, it extends the so-called “Security and Prosperity Partnership” (SPP), widening the U.S. security perimeter through Canada and Mexico and deepening the relationship between the pentagon and the Mexican military. As a result of the SPP, and likely of the Merida Initiative as well, Mexico has increasingly taken on American priorities, including not only anti-drug efforts but also regulating migrant flows from Central America and snuffing out groups that may threaten the United States. In the United States, the SPP and the Merida Initiative give the pentagon leave to take over relationships the state department once managed with our neighbor to the South.

Meanwhile, Mexican law enforcement officials have increasingly been linked with torture and human rights violations. The day after Bush signed Plan Mexico into law, journalists discovered a video of U.S.-affiliated contractors teaching torture techniques to members of the Leon, Guanajuato municipal police force. The trainer, who is believed to be working for a Miami-based military consulting firm, appears leading this “Special Tactical Group” in dragging practice suspects through their own vomit and shooting water up their noses. Yet, even more chilling than the images themselves is the fact that when the tapes were revealed, local authorities dismissed the human rights denunciations and refused to stop the program. Not only are U.S. contractors in Mexico disseminating torture techniques, but this abuse of human rights has become systematic, institutionalized, and officially condoned.

Nevertheless, the mainstream news largely accepts Calderón’s self-depiction as a white knight who is taking on villainous drug cartels and humbly soliciting U.S. assistance for his quest. Like in Colombia, by portraying drug traffickers as evil and his own government as tough on crime, Calderón has garnered significant popular support

in Mexico. By mixing fear with politics, and by marking specific groups as the scourge of society “-traffickers,” “terrorists,” and “illegal immigrants-” Calderón has made “the answer” seem simple. The reality is not so straightforward. Like in Colombia, Mexican mafia and law enforcement agencies are closely intertwined. Like in Colombia, U.S. interest in the region has as much

to do with the agenda as the security and well-being of the Mexican people. Crime provides a convenient rationale for inflating the scale of military operations and using armed personnel to penetrate civilians’ daily lives. It classifies torture, human rights violations, and paramilitarization as secondary concerns.

At the same time, on the demand side of the drug trade, the silence is deafening. With so much money and equipment going to fight narcotics suppliers in places like Mexico and Colombia, the absence of efforts to curb demand indicates how superficial the issue of drugs may be. It reveals the role of this problem as a veneer for other interests, such as obliterating groups like the Colombian FARC. What’s more, acknowledging drug consumption complicates the issue, and brings it too close to home. Condemning drug users blurs the distinction between “good” law enforcement and “evil” cartels, linking right to Bush himself. There is no question that the drug cartels that have recently been leaving decapitated bodies in the middle of Mexican town squares are mad with the spectacle of violence. But who else may be enraptured with brutality and with its performance? Who else may be tied to its causes and its complications?

Finally, where do the Zapatistas, who for fourteen years have so deftly refused to be involved in the use or trade of drugs, fit into this picture? On a broad level, the Zapatistas, too, are starting to see a shift in the quality of military activity. Even in Chiapas, Calderón’s methods differ fundamentally from the military activity to date, not only because they are cruel and brutal (indeed, we have seen too much of that), but because they are systematic, nationwide, and increasingly openly driven by the interests of the U.S. government. U.S. support has already been used in Chiapas; beginning in the early days of the Zapatista Rebellion, the Mexican army used U.S.-donated helicopters to strafe rebel territory. Drugs, too, said to be flowing over the border from Guatemala, or growing in jungle communities, have been an ongoing excuse for army raids and abuse of the Zapatistas. Just this June, more than 200 federal agents plunged into the Patiwitz Canyon (where La Garrucha is located) looking for marijuana. Things may just get worse.

In Colombia, drug equipment and training have long been used to suppress activists and attack insurgent organizations. Silencing has ballooned in the name of safety. Unofficially, both the Mexican and the Colombian governments have built close ties with paramilitary groups, supplying arms and training for these mercenaries to act beyond the confines of the law. In Chiapas, OPDDIC, the confusingly named “Organization for the Defense of Indigenous and Peasant Rights,” has recently scaled up efforts to take over Zapatista-controlled land and to harass the autonomous municipalities. Lastly, if Calderón succeeds in building anti-narco and pro-security sentiment, as Alvaro Uribe has done in Colombia, he may be able to lump the Zapatistas into the category of “terrorists,” or simply “bad people,” undermining the 26% support they wield to their advantage in Mexico. Last month, Colombia’s armed forces captured several hostages from the FARC guerrillas, claiming to have dealt them a crippling blow. Yet, they have been able to claim this success only after more than forty years, in which displacement, questionable alliances, U.S. control, repression, militarization, human rights abuse, and spectacular violence have become commonplace. What parts of this history could repeat themselves in Mexico? And, at what cost? ✪



Chiapas Update

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Progress in San Manuel, Tension in Chiapas

by Todd Davies

I visited Chiapas in July to learn more about the situation of the Zapatistas generally, and their use of computers and the Internet, in particular. This was my fourth trip to Chiapas. I first visited in 2002, and have since traveled there for the First Encounter Between the Zapatista Peoples and the Peoples of the World (Oventic, December 2006) and the Zapatista Women's Encounter (La Garrucha, December 2007).

I teach at Stanford in a program that focuses on the relationships between people and computers. But while I am interested in the potential of information and communication technology to liberate people, I am wary of technology's profound downsides. Using technology appropriately is difficult but important, given its tendency to become pervasive. I want to know how Zapatistas and those who have worked closely with them, who know as much about liberation as anyone and who developed a reputation early on for being savvy users of technology, think about these issues. And I want to share my own skills and resources as I learn from the *compañeras/os*.

My traveling companion was my friend, Carolina, also a member of the Chiapas Support Committee (CSC). Our destination was the Autonomous Municipality of San Manuel, with whom the CSC has an *hermanamiento* (partnership). Our first stop on the way to San Manuel was La Garrucha, the caracol or regional headquarters of the Zapatistas' Zona Selva Tzeltal (one of five regions into which Zapatistas divide their territory). San Manuel is one of four autonomous *municipios* (municipalities or counties) in this *zona*. I have a lot of affection for La Garrucha, having spent ten days there in 2002-2003 and returned three times since. But this trip was different and I was more apprehensive. We had read that the Mexican Army and local police had engaged in a provocation in Garrucha and nearby Zapatista communities on June 4. In what is probably a sign of things to come, the Army accused the Zapatistas of growing marijuana. Zapatistas in more than one community met the convoy en masse, and drove the Army away, but the soldiers destroyed a cornfield and promised to return in two weeks. It had now been over a month, and the Army had not returned, but I knew they might come back at any time.

Everyone who knows the Zapatistas knows that the charge of drug cultivation is bogus. The Zapatistas are strictly anti-drugs. They don't even allow alcohol in their communities. But this provocation by the Army came, notably, in the same month when the U.S. Congress passed \$400 million in first-year funding to Mexico for the Merida Initiative ("Plan Mexico"), which will provide funding to Mexican military and police in the name of the War on Drugs. The Mexican

(and U.S.) government has other reasons to harass the Zapatistas, but combating narco-trafficking is one they can sell publicly, regardless of its falsehood. The choice of La Garrucha for this provocation surely reflects its strategic placement as a gateway to the Lacandón and a barrier to resource extraction and commercial development.

Members of the rotating Junta de Buen Gobierno (Good Government Council) in La Garrucha confirmed for us that this provocation had taken place but had failed to gain entry into the town of La Garrucha itself. Many supporters had come from other countries and other parts of Mexico to stay in the peace camp, which probably helped keep the soldiers away. Things had been calm since June 4, we were told, and we were given permission to continue to San Manuel.



Girl in San Manuel cornfield. Photo: Carolina Dutton

The next morning, Carolina and I visited the brand new Women's Clinic in La Garrucha, an impressively modern structure amidst the wooden, windowless huts of the town. The clinic had just been completed thanks to Paz y Solidaridad, a Basque NGO, with funds from the Basque government. Garrucha looked better than I had ever seen it, and the new building (added to a secondary school completed a few years ago) gave the impression of a movement still on the rise. Progress is coming to the Zapatista territories, but on their terms. Every project like this is a boost to the Zapatistas in their competition with the Government and the paramilitaries.

On the ride to San Manuel, our driver told us that the paramilitaries there were still active, but that things had been calm recently. Our next stop was Emiliano Zapata, the headquarters community of San Manuel. Paz y Solidaridad is funding a municipal clinic there that is an architectural marvel. The work is being done by community members, and has progressed nicely since my last visit in January. The building for the Chiapas Support Committee's current project -the pharmacy warehouse- has been completed, but its roof leaks and must be repaired before it can be stocked with medicine. The new clinic and the pharmacy warehouse will serve both Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas.

Meeting with the Autonomous Council of San Manuel, I asked them how they feel about the Internet. The community where we were sitting had no electricity, so this might seem a premature question. But electrical outlets are being built into the clinic, and the Council said it expects to get electricity in Emiliano Zapata in the next month or so, by agreement with the government in Ocosingo. Internet access is already available in the caracoles, such as La Garrucha, so access in the *municipios* is a logical next step. The Council members told me that they are very interested in getting Internet access. This would have all kinds of benefits, from communication with supporters to education and getting medical information.

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We had dinner and the next morning's breakfast with a family I have gotten to know during my visits to Emiliano Zapata. The grandfather had grown up here when it was part of Tecojá, one of the largest estates in the Lacandón, and had helped to liberate it into the autonomous community it is today. The recency of this history and the change that has occurred within the lifetimes of living Zapatistas amazes me. At the Women's Encuentro in December, I had heard many accounts from women who had been raped by the *finqueros* (estate owners).

Next day, we continued on to Arena, a lovely community that houses the only working computer in San Manuel. It is located in the Compañero Manuel grocery warehouse where the Zapatistas dispense grocery items to community stores in nearby canyons. The grocery warehouse was the CSC's first joint project with the Autonomous Municipal Council. During my visit in January, I had looked at the computer and found that it needed a backup system. This time, I brought an external hard drive and presented it as my gift to the community.

Installing the hard drive proved difficult because the power kept going out, so we had to stay for two nights. The local education promoter (teacher) invited us to read in the library at the end of the day. The library had only a few books, mostly for children, but did have copies of *Rebeldía* (Rebel Magazine), a journal of Zapatista thought. I read one copy and the teacher read another. A very bright, committed young man, this teacher and the kids he works with are my inspiration to return. I thought about all the curious minds I have encountered in these communities during my trips to Chiapas, and wondered about a day when they will have Internet access without having to leave their communities. He also showed us a new school building, not yet totally completed.

We were surprised to learn that the majority of Arena's residents are Tzotzil-speaking. Most compas in San Manuel are Tzeltal speakers. In addition to speaking much better Spanish than I, Carolina has worked extensively in the highlands of Chiapas, in the Tzotzil-speaking Zapatista community of Santa Magdalena. Carolina's experience with Tzotzil language and culture drew her especially to these displaced Zapatistas, and we shared wonderful conversations and meals with them during our stay in San Manuel.

Tzotziles in San Manuel generally were forced to flee from their ancestral homes in and around the highland Municipality of Chenalhó, following the anti-Zapatista violence that culminated in the Acteal Massacre. On December 22, 1997, 45 pacifist Zapatista sympathizers (including five pregnant women) were killed by paramilitaries, supported by the state. The Tzotziles we met in

San Manuel have relocated (at least for now) to this part of the Lacandón region. After fleeing their homes, they had generally lived in very cramped and unsettled conditions in the encampment at Polhó, where Zapatista refugees were driven after the Acteal Massacre. San Manuel is five to six hours from the highlands by car, and is very different from Polhó in elevation (lower), climate (warmer), and vegetation (more jungle-like). So the refugees from Polhó who live in San Manuel are far away from the experiences, as well as the people and places they knew before. The presence of a majority Tzotzil community in the heart of what the Zapatistas call the Zona Selva Tzeltal (Tzeltal Jungle Zone) illustrates the complexity that confronts the inquisitive visitor in Chiapas.

The Zapatistas' debut on the world stage, memorably coinciding with the first day of NAFTA on January 1, 1994, is often represented as the day when traditional people said "Basta!" ("Enough!"). But the Zapatistas were not just saying, "Stop the world, we want to get off." They were saying, "Another world is possible," one "where many worlds fit." The Zapatistas' famous takeover of San Cristobal, 14 1/2 years ago, lasted only a little over a day. The rebellion was not a symbolic stand against economic "progress". It was an uprising of campesinas/os who liberated perhaps as many as one million acres of land on which they had lived as serfs, under powerful landowners who had cruelly exploited their indigenous workers with impunity. Between 1994 and 1998, campesinas/os occupied this land as *tierra recuperada* (recuperated land) and gradually transformed it into autonomous municipalities. The estate owners were vanquished, and the communities that were created have been able to thrive, though under constant threat from transnational capital, the Mexican government, and their surrogates who want to exploit the land and its people once again. The low-intensity warfare against the Zapatistas is all about taking away much of the land recuperated by the Zapatistas in order to exploit its natural resources and use the indigenous population as cheap labor.

This struggle over possession of recuperated land was one of the major topics of conversation when we returned to San Cristóbal. Folks there are expecting an important announcement very soon by the EZLN. Everything has been building to a crescendo, with the violence and repression getting worse. Some of the recuperated lands have been lost, mostly in the last year, and the Zapatistas at some point must draw a line in the sand. The question is where and how to draw it. Will the Zapatistas remilitarize? I hope not. I much prefer the model that relies on nonviolent resistance and international solidarity. But the Zapatistas will decide that for themselves. That's what autonomy is all about. ★

For More Information Visit:

www.enlacezapatista.org chiapas.indymedia.org

www.ezln.org.mx www.jornada.unam.mx

www.narconews.com

www.chiapas-support.org www.ciepac.org

www.capise.com.mx www.detodos-paratodos.blogspot.com

Chiapas Political Prisoners Win Their Freedom: 8 remain in prison

As the March deadline for our last Chiapas Update (April 2008) arrived, more and more indigenous Chiapas political prisoners joined the hunger strike. The number of days Zacario Hernández had been without food mounted. Some joined the strike and then withdrew. There were even a few who sold out to the government in exchange for their freedom. Others, too sick to participate in the hunger strike, fasted every other day, as they were able. Ultimately, those on the hunger strike and fasting in support totaled 47, counting the 2 Zapatistas in the state of Tabasco.

The Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center (Frayba) played a major role in representing and supporting the hunger strikers. Frayba called for sending letters urging the release of the hunger strikers to Juan Sabines Guerrero, the Governor of Chiapas, and Mexican president, Felipe Calderón. The organizations to which political prisoners belonged and the prisoners' families formed a permanent occupation (sit-in) at the entrance to the government palace in the Chiapas capital of Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

Zacario Hernández was released from prison on March 17, after 35 days without food. The remaining prisoners were encouraged by this and vowed to continue their protest. Even the two Zapatista prisoners in Tacotalpa, Tabasco, indicated a desire to join the hunger strike, in spite of their poor health. On March 25, the Good Government Junta in the Zapatista Caracol of Roberto Barrios issued a communiqué asking for letters in support of Francisco Pérez Vázquez and Angel Concepción Pérez Gutiérrez, father and son respectively, Zapatistas from the community of Guapacal in the Northern Zone of Chiapas.

Letters of support for the prisoners were pouring in from all over Mexico and the world. The Chiapas Support Committee (CSC) drafted a simple letter in both English and Spanish and solicited signatures at local events and by email. Task Force on the Americas (formerly MITF) sent individual letters from those in attendance at one of its events to the Mexican Consul in San Francisco. In the end, the CSC collected more than 100 email signatures. They were emailed to Felipe Calderón, Juan Sabines and Andrés Granier Melo, the governor of Tabasco, with copies to the San Francisco Consulate and Frayba.

On March 30 and 31, the government released 30 of those participating in the protest. Upon their release, many of the hunger strikers joined the sit-in at the state capital in support of the 17 who remained in prison, continuing the hunger strike and fast. The government claimed that it had reviewed all the files and had released all those who were able to prove their innocence, a signal that the release of those still on a hunger strike would take some time.

As of April 5, the hunger strikers and those fasting in El Amate prison ended their protest at the request of

Bishop Emeritus Samuel Ruiz García. Bishop Ruiz is also the president of the board of directors of the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center and he instructed its staff of attorneys to represent the remaining prisoners in their legal proceedings with the state. Bishop Ruiz asked them to end their protest for "humanitarian" reasons so that there would not be irreversible damage to their bodies. His request was honored.



Bars won't quiet the truth.

We later learned that the liberation of these prisoners came with conditions. Those from the community of Busiljá had to sign away their land rights in that community, so that the paramilitaries who had falsely accused them could keep the land. Other "freed" prisoners were told that they had to report to Tuxtla once a month. Many formed an organization called Innocent Voices to support each other and continue the struggle for the release of the remaining prisoners. They made a decision not to report to Tuxtla.

Previously unable to participate in the hunger strike due to poor health, the two Zapatistas incarcerated in Tabasco had prepared themselves for a hunger strike and started one on April 21. Supporters began a sit-in and protest outside the jail. After only three days of protest, Angel and Francisco were suddenly whisked away from Tabasco by jet and taken to a hospital in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, for a "medical evaluation." The following day, they were taken to the state prison at Yajalón, in northern Chiapas. The transfer ended their hunger strike and left their legal situation hanging. The governor of Chiapas reportedly committed to freeing both men. Finally, on June 2, Angel and Francisco were released from prison after more than eleven years.

Another six of the original group of hunger strikers from the Voice of El Amate and the Voice of Los Llanos were released on July 24. They joined Innocent Voices and then traveled with the National and International Caravan of Solidarity that visited many Zapatista communities for two weeks beginning the end of July. Four of the political prisoners remain in El Amate prison and four in Los Llanos. Frayba continues working on their cases.

Arbitrary detentions, warrantless searches, fabricated charges, confessions obtained under torture, false witnesses, extralegal proceedings, lack of translation and/or legal representation and the consequent sentencing of innocent indigenous people all came to light in the hunger strike by 47 Chiapas political prisoners.

Thanks again to everyone who signed our petition to free these innocent men and women. And stay tuned for news about the 8 still awaiting their freedom. ☆

SAVE the DATE - November 16, 2008
ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION



10 Years - Chiapas Support Committee (CSC)
25 Years - Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN)



November 16, 2008
5:30 - 9:30 PM

Guest Speaker

(More Details to be
Announced Soon)



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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