



Chiapas Update



Information and Analysis from the Chiapas Support Committee

April 2008

Zapatista Women Touch Our Hearts *by Mary Ann Tenuto*

I am once again inside the La Garrucha Auditorium, Francisco Gómez autonomous Zapatista municipality in rebellion, Chiapas, Mexico. My first time in this auditorium was in July 1996 during the First Intercontinental Encuentro for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism. This time I am attending the Third Encuentro of the Zapatista Peoples with the Peoples of the World, Comandanta Ramona and the Zapatista Women. It is December 2007. More than eleven years have passed since that first Encuentro and although La Garrucha has grown, its essence remains the same.

Inside the auditorium are hand-printed signs that read: "In this Encuentro, men cannot participate as note-takers, translators, presenters, spokesmen, or representatives. Men can only work making food, sweeping and cleaning the Caracol and the latrines, taking care of the children, and carrying firewood. On January 1, things will return to normal." Wow! I see these signs posted around the Caracol and realize that this Encuentro (Gathering) is muy otro (very different).

La Garrucha is located in the Patihuitz Cañada (Canyon), one of the valleys east of the city of Ocosingo. At an altitude of around 3,000 feet, it gets plenty hot and humid here but often catches a breeze and cools off in the evening. The Lacadón Jungle's rains are usually plentiful, but this year there wasn't enough rain in these parts, and many of the subsistence farmers will not have a good harvest, if they have any harvest at all. They are worried.

Ever since the 1996 Encuentro affectionately nicknamed "the Intergalactic," I have returned here to visit many times. When I think of La Garrucha, I think of its essence: the central plaza, where all the visitors are housed and where all the activities take place. The offices of the Good Government Junta and the four autonomous municipalities, the offices of the vigilance committee and the information committee, the auditorium, the new church, primary school, basketball court, clinic, café and some stores all surround the central plaza. Being housed in the central plaza creates the opportunity to chat with residents and to feel a part of the community.

The central plaza of La Garrucha is a little different now. An old wooden church used to be in the center of the plaza. It's gone. The old church served as a discussion space during the Intergalactic. I have fond memories of the old church its altar decorated with beautiful dolls and hand-embroidered altar cloths, its ceiling adorned with paper cuts. Five or six years ago, an imposing mural was painted on the front of the old church: big ears of corn with ski masks depicting the revolutionary people of corn. The mural is, of course, gone too. Now in the center of the plaza is a large covered stage, raised high atop a cement block structure. The stage is at least two stories tall. My attention is drawn there by the familiar sound of "Cañadas

Music." To my amazement, I look up to see a young person, who appears to be no more than 9 or 10 years old, belting out the favorite local corridos. He is the lead singer with "Dos Vientos," a Zapatista band from Ricardo Flores Magón. He is awesome!

The community is opening its heart and its doors to those of us who come from many states in Mexico and countries around the world to listen to the Zapatista women speak. Some of us are taken into the homes of community members; others bring tents and set up camp

outdoors; still others are on the floor of any available building with sleeping bags and pads. Zapatista authorities tell me that 3,000 people registered and received identification badges. There are approximately 200 Zapatista women participants in the program and another large



Women's Encuentro. Foto: La Jornada

number of Zapatista men working on the Encuentro in one capacity or another, mostly cooking or cleaning.

There is good energy here, high energy. The women who planned this gathering create an atmosphere of warmth and compañerismo, a good feeling among everyone. The warm sunshine facilitates socializing and mingling, as does the location of activities around the central plaza. It is exciting to be here: to see old friends from the communities, from the United States, and from Chiapas and to meet new friends from around the world. I am, as are my traveling companions, nevertheless aware of the dangerous counterinsurgency campaign being waged against Zapatista communities throughout Chiapas, but especially in areas where strategic natural resources are coveted for the extraction of oil, biodiversity, water or electric energy, as well as for "ecotourism."

Little cocinas (kitchens) are set up all over the central plaza. I quickly locate the Cocina Ramona set up by San Manuel, the Chiapas

(continued on page 2)

contents

- * Zapatista Women Touch Our Hearts.....p 1
- * Impressions of the Women's Encuentro..... p 3
- * Thoughts on the Zapatista Women's p 4
- * Hunger Strike in Chiapas.....p5

(...continued from page 1)

Support Committee's partner autonomous municipality. The cocinas serve as a meeting place for folks during breaks in the program, as well as a source of good food. (After the Encuentro, I am told that the Cocina Ramona was financially very successful.) There are also places selling crafts, CDs, literature and T-shirts. Some activity booths and cultural events took place here on the plaza between sessions and in the evening.

Only women are allowed inside the auditorium while the Zapatista women speak. They talk about the old days when the plantation owners raped them and their fathers decided who they would marry. While an exodus from the plantations ended the rape by plantation owners, it was not until the 1993 Women's Revolutionary Law that women won the right to choose their own husbands. Their ongoing struggle within their own Zapatista communities to have the right to an education, to speak in assemblies and participate in community decision making, as well as to hold positions of responsibility, is inspiring. As with any struggle, it is not over. It continues.

The compañeras tell us that their work in women's collectives helped them learn to speak about their situation as women. Bread-baking, artesanía, grocery store and vegetable garden collectives run by women helped to integrate them into community production and to then find their voice in community assemblies. The collectives functioned somewhat like support groups for them.

Whenever I visit "the Cañadas," I am always mindful that I am surrounded by the people who rose up in arms against the plantation owners that so cruelly exploited them, the Zapatista people who succeeded in claiming those very same plantations as their own in order to end their hunger and exploitation. Now, I am also mindful of how far the Zapatista women have advanced in the last 14 years (often over the objection of their fathers, brothers, and husbands) in order to establish their place in the Zapatista movement and to be able to organize this amazing event.

Many of the women who participate in the program are dressed in their finest traditional clothing. In the case of the women in the La Garrucha region, that consists of dresses covered with a rainbow of multicolored ribbons and lace. They also wear either ski masks or paliacates (red bandanas) to cover their faces. Very few of the other Zapatistas present at the gathering cover their faces. Keeping one's face covered is not customary (unless there's someone with a camera around) in the region encompassed by the Caracol of La Garrucha. That region includes the autonomous municipalities of Francisco Gómez, San Manuel, Francisco Villa and Ricardo Flores Magón. There are lots of cameras inside and outside the auditorium, so the women cover their faces.

The compañeras talk about the triple oppression they face: 1) discrimination against them for being indigenous, 2) discrimination for being poor, and 3) gender discrimination for being female. I believe all of us who are old enough to remember what it was like growing up female in

the United States before the Women's Movement of the 1970's are able to identify with their struggle. Although we are not indigenous or poor, we understand gender discrimination from our own experience. Tears formed in many of our eyes as we proudly watch the dignity of these female council members, comandantas, insurgents, mothers, wives, sisters, grandmothers and daughters. I think we understand what they are saying with our hearts.

Women are here from the movements in Oaxaca, Atenco and around the world to listen to the word of the Zapatista women. A delegation of women representing Via Campesina from the several continents is present to support the Zapatistas. Many of these visitors speak at the Encuentro's last session. Messages of support from women who could not be present are read. A standing ovation marks the end of the presentations. It is now early evening on December 31. Indigenous women perform a beautiful traditional dance on the high stage. A little

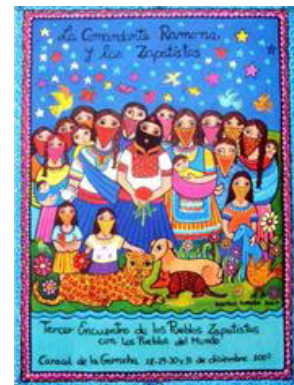


Zapatista seniors at Encuentro. Foto: La Jornada

before midnight, Comandanta Rosalinda takes the microphone and reminds us of the government's betrayal on February 9, 1995, when the Mexican Army entered the Zapatista communities and tried to finish them off but didn't succeed. She also reminds us that the land reclaimed on January 1, 1994, "was bought with the flesh and blood of the compañeros." The comandanta concludes by calling out the names of all those who have given their lives in the struggle. By now, there were 5,000 of us gathered in La Garrucha's central plaza, and we responded with "presente" after each name. Zapatistas and their supporters are here to celebrate the 14th Anniversary of the Zapatista Uprising. They come from surrounding communities and towns.

The Women's Encuentro ends and men can once again speak. Comandante Omar takes the microphone and states the obvious: "After 14 years the party continues." He notes the "chingo" of provocations that the Zapatistas have resisted because the bad government continues to "purchase people's consciences." As he speaks about the political parties no longer being an option for change, I briefly reflect on the current media circus of an electoral process in the United States. "They only change their discourse when they need something from the people," says Comandante Omar, and warns: "the parties aren't going to change if the people don't demand that they do." He then urges people to organize and struggle against the "bad governments" so that one day we might have a better world. We all sing along as best we can to the Zapatista Hymn. It's midnight, the fourteenth anniversary of the Zapatista Uprising. Everyone hugs and wishes one another Feliz Año Nuevo! Happy New Year! and then we begin dancing the night away, a happy ending to a most successful Encuentro.

Somehow, I don't think that the "normal" to be returned to on January 1 will be the same as it was before the Women's Encuentro. I see this gathering as a milestone for Zapatista women within the EZLN, as well as a milestone for the Zapatistas as a national and international political movement. ☺



Chiapas Update

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Impressions of the Women's Encuentro at the Mexico City Airport by Sarah Salisbury

As I await my flight home in the Mexico City airport, the following are impressions of my time in the jungle.

As some of you know, one of the features of this trip was to be a Women's Encuentro (Encounter or Meeting), held in one of 5 "centers for good government" of the Zapatista revolution in the mountains of southeastern Mexico. This community is one that I have spent time in as a peace camper or human rights observer on 2 different occasions. However, on this trip I hooked up with a different crew than before: representatives of the Chiapas Support Committee out of Oakland. They were a good bunch... 5 of us in all and not a whiner or slouch amongst us!

Being at an encuentro is much different than living in a community for 2 weeks at a time, as I rapidly found out. Many little temporary stalls for food around the open center of the community, a cement block 2-story covered stage, an auditorium (a long wooden, tin-roofed, dirt-floored building where the plenary sessions took place).. all new to me.

The women of this struggle have never had an encuentro focused just on their concerns before, though there is a strong "women's law" as part of the Z platform. But, as we all know, change comes "poco a poco" (little by little), as I heard over and over again from the women. At this encuentro, men were not allowed in the auditorium (though they could sit right outside and listen to everything), nor to translate, nor to speak.

They were expected to take care of the work that the women would usually do: cooking, childcare, cleaning of latrines. I had lunch served to me one day by masked Zapatista men (other days, at other booths, they were unmasked). Some of the statements made in the plenary sessions were extremely moving. And just to see the women, in their traditional clothing, with ski masks, massed together was also very powerful. These women have endured so much... especially the older ones, some of whom were born into virtual serfdom, living on the fincas. One of my companions collected a story from an older woman about the bad old days when she was a girl. None of the young women (we're talking 13-14 years old) wanted to have to go up to work in the finquero's house because it meant rape. But sometimes, their fathers buckled under the pressure and sent them up there anyway (and bless those fathers who did not). The girls did not have a choice in these matters. Often, a pregnancy would result and the finquero provided neither support nor recognition for the child. The young mother would be expected to return to her work the next day. Remember, these memories came from a woman not much older than I (or you, maybe).

Some quotes:

"We are starting to learn to participate, to read, to write."

"We have the same responsibilities as our male partners, because when they go away to work, we must take care of everything... our own work and theirs"

"We are proud of the work we do with other women."

"We serve on commissions in our communities... often as secretaries." (I later saw this in a community we visited)

"Each community has a women's commission."

"We keep vigil, too." (read security)

"We intervene and dialogue in cases of internal conflict."



La Garrucha mural. Foto: CSC

"The family is the basis of survival."

"To sell the land weakens the people... we don't do private land... we work together."

"Capitalism is one of the strongest forces against our life." (Transnationals are another.)

"These rats and serpents don't respect the peace accords, they kill us!"

"We must continue to organize, so we can struggle."

"We are mistreated because we are indigenous and because we are poor."

!VIVA! las mujeres! (the women)

Ramona vive!(long live Ramona.. a much loved female comandanta who died last year)

Also heard at plenary sessions: mention of organic fertilizer, of protection for local plants and animals, for the natural springs. And one other thing: in the women's law it is said that women have the right to determine the size and spacing of their families. One of my favorite activities at the encuentro was working on a giant banner that had the women's law printed on it and masses of embroidery thread and needles and scissors, so that many could embroider over the letters at once... and many did... my favorite was seeing a young indigenous man working hard at his embroidery and later, a number of adolescent boys... not an everyday sight in Mexico, I assure you!

In the evenings, there was entertainment. There was some good music played by a gal from the states... powerful guitar and singing. There were songs by local women... one announced by a young woman saying that the song would be hard to sing, because it was about abortion and to even think of such a thing in indigenous communities is difficult, dances (in one of which the women even wiggled their hips!), more songs... some by the women of Via Campesina... with a song of sisterhood. And, there was dancing. A band played (the synthesizer is very popular) and we all... old and young DANCED! During the dancing, a giant puppet of Ramona came out and joined us. Happily for me, I had run into an old traveling buddy and her Guatemalan "family" and so had a circle to dance with (you don't see people dancing alone... it's either couples or groups... the conga line is also popular). The biggest dance night was New Year's Eve, which is also the anniversary of the beginning of the Zapatista revolution (1994.. so this is the 14th!)

There is much more to say, but I'm about to run out of minutes and my flight leaves soon, so I must close.

La lucha sigue! ✪

Thoughts on the Zapatista Women's Encuentro

by Abigail Andrews

I looked forward to the Encuentro de las Mujeres Zapatistas con las Mujeres del Mundo from the moment it was announced. As an active feminist who works in an all-female clinic back in Oakland, I was wondering what an all-female space in rural Chiapas could look like, especially when I was so used to hearing male voices from and around Chiapas. How would these women, most of whom don't speak much Spanish, step out and, by the very act of speaking out loud, demand to be heard? How would they connect with women from other places, some of whom face the same struggles, but some of whom are very different? How would they address the internal contradictions the Zapatista Movement has faced around maintaining both community coherence and at the same time pursuing feminism?



San Salvador Atenco Women. Foto: CSC

I realize, having been to the Encuentro, that the most compelling thing about it was the very fact that it came to pass. In fourteen years, though they still (as they told us over and over) face domestic violence, sexism, and all kinds of gender burdens, the women of the Zapatista movement have come



Vía Campesina Women. Foto: P. Rosset

leaps and bounds. Where the very same women had been too shy to speak a few years before, we saw hundreds of Zapatista women stand up in front of thousands of people and bear witness. This immense courage, stronger in the face of the most oppressive circumstances, echoed in the loudest voices from the audience: those of the women of Atenco and the women of Oaxaca. Sitting prominently in the front rows of the assembly hall, the women of Atenco defiantly raised and clashed their machetes each time a Zapatista woman said something they, too, wanted to defend. After the final plenary session, as the Zapatistas walked out, instead of filing out of the hall with them, the women of the world just stood and watched, clapping, cheering, honoring the small, masked indigenous women as they proceeded out of the hall. Telling them, by planting our feet, that watching them filled us with inspiration. Knowing, as we all knew, that the last few months have brought more violence, threats, and militarization than these women have seen in many years. Knowing that they would need to keep refortifying this great courage of theirs to withstand the coming phase of destruction. Leading the cheers, like "Long Live the Zapatista Women!" were the proud women of Atenco.✪

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

Hunger Strike by 37 Indigenous Political Prisoners in Chiapas

Saying that he is "willing to die," Zacario Hernández Hernández began a hunger strike on February 12, 2008. Zacario is a catechist from San Juan Chamula municipality and a member of Pueblo Creyente (Believing People), a Catholic organization in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. In 2003, Zacario and 3 other Tzotziles from Chamula were accused of murder, arrested and have been confined in the state's El Amate prison ever since. One of the four, Mariano Heredia Gómez, was just released because of his poor health and age. He is 88! Mariano is now at home cared for by his family, but under restrictions. The Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center (Frayba) has followed their case, known as the Tres Cruces case and implied that Zacario was accused of crimes because he was affecting the interests of the political bosses in Chamula by practicing the Catholic religion as a catechist.

On February 19, approximately ten thousand Catholics belonging to PuebloCreyente (Believing People) marched through the streets of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. Singing, carrying banners and accompanied by their priests and bishops, they demanded the release of Zacario Hernández Hernández and the three others imprisoned in the Tres Cruces case. Pueblo Creyente stated "they have suffered a judicial process full of falsities, injustices and corruption." The marchers also demanded the release of the two Zapatistas from Tila, imprisoned in Tecoalpa, Tabasco.

On February 25, twelve more indigenous prisoners joined the protest, eight of them belonging to the Voice of El Amate, which is adhered as an organization to the Other Campaign. On February 26, Mateo Hernández Bautista, a member of the Central Independiente Obrera y Campesina (CIOAC), joined the hunger strike, bringing the total number of participants to fourteen.

On March 4, 9 prisoners in the Center for Social Re-adaptation 5 (Cereso, its acronym in Spanish), located in San Cristóbal de las Casas municipality, joined the hunger strike. They call themselves the Voice of Los Llanos and say they are "political prisoners," as do those on the hunger strike in El Amate. All claim they signed confessions under torture.

On March 9, eleven more indigenous prisoners in Cereso 17 at Playas de Catazajá (north of Palenque), as well as three more in El Amate, joined the hunger strike. The latter three are members of the Movimiento Campesino Regional Independiente (MOCRI-CNPA), a peasant organization. According to La Jornada, there are now 37 indigenous prisoners on strike in three different prisons of Chiapas. About one half are adherents to the Other Campaign.

The eleven male prisoners in Playas de Catazajá are all from Busiljá, a community located in the eastern part of the Lacandón Jungle. Some are Zapatista support bases

LIBERTAD
para los presos políticos



and others are PRD members. There is also a woman prisoner from Busiljá in Cereso 5 (San Cristóbal). It has not been confirmed if she is participating in the hunger strike. The men from Busiljá talk about what they term their "agrarian suffering." They tell of kidnapping, torture and murder by PRI members also belonging to the Organization for the Defense of Indigenous and Campesino Rights (Opddic, its initials in Spanish), a group with paramilitary characteristics. All these prisoners were evicted by PRI members in 1997 and remained displaced from their homes until 2005, when they returned to Busiljá.

After his return to Busiljá, Pablo Gutiérrez Hernández was kidnapped by Opddic members. He was taken to the communal house where Pedro Chulín Jiménez him-

self ordered the Opddic members to burn him alive with gasoline if he didn't tell them where the Zapatista military camp was. Pablo Gutiérrez Hernández was taken to the woods, shot and left for dead. One of the PRI members was also shot in front of Gutiérrez Hernández, whose unconscious body was found by family members and taken to San Cristóbal to recuperate from the bullet wound to his head. He stayed in San Cristóbal for eight months. When he was feeling a little better, he traveled to Busiljá to visit his mother and was promptly apprehended by judicial police, beaten, and placed in Cereso 17 in Playas de Catazajá. He has received no medical attention and his condition is grave.

The other Busiljá prisoners were detained and tortured in July 2006. They were accused of kidnapping and extortion, which crimes they say were fabricated by the Opddic members headed by Pedro Chulín Jiménez. "Our struggle is with all our heart has to give. If we have to die, it will not be because of murderers, extortionists or kidnappers but because of the miscarriage of justice," say the hunger-strikers from Busiljá.

There is a support network inside El Amate and from organizations and individuals adhered to the Other Campaign in Chiapas, as well as on the outside from Frayba, Pueblo Creyente, the CIOAC and the MOCRI-CNPA. Supporters are visiting as often as permitted and checking on the health of the hunger strikers. The Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas is in contact with the governor about the situation. It's a little different at the San Cristóbal prison (Los Llanos). Information is harder to come by. The Voice of Los Llanos is, however, able to send out messages and has sent messages to the APPO folks in Oaxaca, the residents of San Salvador Atenco and the prisoners at Playas de Catazajá who just joined the hunger strike.

There are now 37 prisoners in three Chiapas prisons participating in the hunger strike and ten more fasting in solidarity. The Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights

(Continue on page 6...)

(...continued from page 5)

Center wrote Chiapas governor Juan Sabines on March 13, asking for a resolution to the what it termed the "penitentiary crisis."

The governor's apparent response was published by certain Chiapas media the next day: "No one has reason to call themselves a 'political prisoner.'" The governor went on to say that he was reviewing 360 requests for release from 'political prisoners,' and that he would have a response in no more than thirty days. It seems that the Governor overlooked the fact that some of the hunger-strikers could die during the next 30 days, while others could sustain irreversible damage to vital organs.

Not surprisingly, the participating organizations responded to the government by saying that they didn't have another month to wait, and calling its response "a joke." Pueblo Creyente responded with a march to the El Amate prison, demanding the release of the political prisoners.

Zacario Hernandez was released from prison on March 17, after 35 days on the hunger strike. The strike continues, stay tuned. ♣

You can send an email (in either English or Spanish) to Chiapas Governor Juan Sabines Guerrero demanding the immediate liberation of all political prisoners. His email is: secparticular@chiapas.gob.mx



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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