



Chiapas Update



Information and Analysis from Chiapas Support Committee

October 2007

Chiapas: More than 20 Thousand Excluded from Health Sector

by: isaín mandujano

*AN OUTBREAK OF WHOOPING COUGH UNCOVERED THE PROBLEM

Chankolom, San Juan Cancuc, Chiapas, July 30, 2007 (apro).- The recent death of 14 indigenous because of a whooping cough outbreak in the Los Altos region, crumbled the official discourse about the achievements reached by Chiapas authorities in health matters and bared the fragile health situation which the region's Zapatista communities inhabited by 20 thousand people confront since 13 years ago.

Last June, the Chiapas government assumed that the Pan American Health Organization (OPS, its initials in Spanish), a World Health Organization (WHO) dependency, would establish an office in the border city of Tapachula (Chiapas) and, moreover, anticipated that it would shortly receive "international certification for the achievements it obtained in health matters."

Nevertheless, Oventik's Good Government Junta took charge of taking the makeup off of the official discourse when, last June 13, it announced that at least 14 indigenous people had died from whooping cough and 233 people presented symptoms of the same disease in some communities of the canyon of San Juan Cancuc municipality.

The Junta pointed concretely to the communities of Chankolom, Iwiltik, El Rosario, Tzajal Ukum, Yocwitz, Bakelchan and La Palma. The most serious cases were identified in the first location.

The outbreak of whooping cough was discovered on a visit to those places made by 25 vaccinators, 19 general medicine promoters, a nursing assistant, a doctor, a paramedic and six translators from the Zapatista micro clinics in Agua de León, Estación, Magdalena, 16 de Febrero, Nueva Libertad, San Juan Cancuc, Zinacantán and Oventik.

Members of the General Coordination of the Autonomous Zapatista Health System (SSAZ, its initials in Spanish) attested to the death of the fourteen minors. Informed of the issue, health authorities from Juan Sabines' government tried to hide the pitiful fact that occurred inside of the indigenous communities faced with the fear of losing federal aid and international certification from the OPS.

Nevertheless, the Zapatista Junta publicly denounced the minors' deaths and the marginalization in health matters in which the indigenous communities in the Los Altos region find themselves. Then, the state Secretary of Health came out and denied everything, including the fourteen deaths.



Mural on Oventik Clinic.

He even organized a "tour" to discredit the Zapatista Junta's representatives. On Thursday, June 14, state personnel from the Secretary of Health traveled to the affected communities. The writer of this article accompanied them on the tour.

After traveling for two hours and plowing through inaccessible stretches of road, the reporter found a setup: two vaccination posts, health personnel that were mobilized on each side and teachers that were imparting classes. A classroom was even air conditioned to receive the reporters. Lorenzo Santíz Hernández, president of the community's health committee, and a group of promoters were there. All denied the death of 14 minors due to an outbreak of whooping cough. Moreover, they admitted that more than 25 families adhered to Zapatismo were outside of their supervision.

Before the chief of the health jurisdiction Number 2, with headquarters in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Leticia Montoya Liévano, and the Secretary of health's director of Networks and Services, Alfonso Torres Aguilar, as well as other officials, Santíz Hernández praised the governmental attention that they receive. The medical caravan continued its path on foot. After advancing four kilometers, they stumbled upon the rebel part of Chankolom, where

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just a little while ago the "Santa María Zapatista Microclinic" was installed. We are talking about a cement structure with a dirt floor.

This clinic is attended to by the French organization, named *Médicos del Mundo* (Doctors of the World). They arrived in this place at the request of the Zapatistas themselves. Officials and brigadistas from the state government chatted with one of the foreign doctors, who confirmed that they knew effectively that 14 minors of age had died because of an outbreak of whooping cough in the indigenous Zapatista communities.

"Twelve children arrived in the morning so that we would attend to them, all had the coqueluchoide syndrome, the symptoms of whooping cough," the doctor confided to the reporter, but on instructions from the Junta, did not give her name. Before continuing its path, the state government envoys were witnesses to the crude reality that prevails in said communities. And Antonio Mendoza Hernández arrived untimely at the clinic with his tragedy on his shoulders: he commented that his children had coughs and that even a couple had died because of the cough.

The personal drama of Mendoza Hernández is common in these parts, where water is a luxury. There is not one creek or river from which to obtain water. Due to that situation, trachoma is an endemic ill in this region. An eye infection, terminates by leaving the indigenous people blind. The foreign doctors bring water from San Cristóbal, but lament that the population has to search between the small mountain springs or, plainly, wait until it rains to have water. The Los Altos Canyon is the poorest one in Chiapas, a state that has 17 of the 100 poorest municipalities in the country.

Chiapas, of "high priority"

According to a diagnosis by the Secretary of Health, elaborated in the first six months of this year, Chiapas is a priority state," with historically high rates of marginalization, illiteracy, death and indigenous population.

Even the border situation conditions migratory flows that frequently bring with it risks of disease transmission. Health risks are also present because of environmental contingencies, as a consequence of active volcanos, forest fires earthquakes or tropical storms.

The document indicates that until a few years ago diarrhea, pneumonia and measles, among other transmittable diseases, occupied first place in mortality, although now, it says, suffering derived from the modification of life styles, like diabetes, heart disease, malignant tumors and accidents head the list. The most frequent demand for medical service is due to respiratory and intestinal infections.

"Chiapas is of high priority because of some health indicators of high social impact, like maternal deaths, cervical-uterine cancer, infant and pre-school mortality and, recently, HIV/AIDS," reveals the report.

Another group of diseases also coexist which while they are not of high mortality nor demand immediate attention, are relevant because of being almost exclusive to the state, among them, oncocercosis, trachoma, leishmaniasis (a parasitic disease) and Chagas disease.

All of them are found in the Los Altos region of Chiapas, where the majority of the 17 out of 100 poorest municipalities of Mexico are located.

The Excluded

Roberto is an indigenous Tzotzil who is in charge of coordinating the Zapatista clinic in Chankolom. In an interview, he confirms the existence of an outbreak of whooping cough in Zapatista communities.

Even so, the Secretary of Health wanted to put an end to the controversy with the dissemination of a communiqué, in which it was indicated that all that was found in the Los Altos region were "respiratory type illnesses." "In this zone cases of whooping cough do not exist, the evaluation of examinations always turned out negative for this disease and positive for respiratory diseases," points out the communiqué, with basis on the diagnosis of Adriana Gómez Bustamante, in charge of the State Health Laboratory.

Laboratory results do not interest Roberto. Every day he lives the drama of maternal deaths and infant mortality. He is also clear that the government has forgotten them and that their health and that of the residents of the indigenous communities of Los Altos depends on the "autonomous services," as they call the Zapatista health system.

He adds that the government "seeks to cover the sun with a finger," when it is a reality that many children in the communities continue dying due to diseases which could be curable with prompt medical attention. "That invention that they are diseases derived from forest burning is a lie, because each year the campesinos burn and there are no outbreaks of whooping cough like those that are occurring now," he concludes.

Chiapas Update

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Health Study Reports Alarming Findings in Chiapas Conflict Zone

by: Mary Ann Tenuto Sánchez

The outbreak of whooping cough described in our front page article put a spotlight on the precarious health conditions of indigenous regions in Chiapas. The unpublished second part of that article, which its author, Isaín Mandujano, kindly provided to Chiapas Update, ultimately led us to a research study conducted by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), in collaboration with the College of the Southern Border (Ecosur, its acronym in Spanish) and the Center for Training in Ecology and Health for Campesinos (CCESC, its initials in Spanish). The study's findings are published in a report entitled "Excluded People, Eroded Communities: Realizing the Right to Health in Chiapas, Mexico." [1]

The study's Executive Summary states at its outset: "This report analyzes health conditions and access to care in the conflict zone in the southern state of Chiapas, taking into account the Mexican government's obligations to respect, protect and fulfill the right to health of all its citizens - including its most marginalized indigenous populations."

The two aspects of this study which captured our attention were: 1) it was conducted in what's known as the "conflict zone" of Chiapas; in other words, the Highlands, the Northern Zone and the Jungle; and 2) it addressed the issue of access to care. The conflict zone consists of heavily militarized regions of the state where the conflict between the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN, its initials in Spanish) and the Mexican government has played out ever since the EZLN uprising on January 1, 1994. Although the EZLN has not used its weapons offensively since 1994 and a shaky truce has remained in effect, low-intensity war waged by the government against the Zapatista communities "in resistance" is very intense and affects living

conditions in all the indigenous communities within the zone.

The cited study included interviews in "opposition" communities and "divided" communities, as well as in pro-government communities. Specifically, the study was carried out in twenty pro-government communities, six "opposition" communities and twenty divided communities.

Thirteen communities were in the Highlands, 16 in the Jungle and 17 in the Northern Zone (el Norte). Of the 46 communities studied, information was obtained from 2,997 households; 1,477 (49.2%) in pro-government communities, 256 (8.6%) in opposition communities and 1,264 (42.2%) in divided communities. This represented a total of 17,931 individuals. Between 80 and 99 percent of those individuals who participated in the study were indigenous.

An "opposition" community is defined in the study as one "sympathetic to the EZLN; some of which were 'in resistance.'" Thus, an "opposition" community in this study may or may not have been an EZLN community. The study leaves it unclear, perhaps intentionally. While non-governmental organizations may work in EZLN communities, permission to conduct and publish a study such as this is extremely difficult to obtain and this writer is not aware of any published scientific study of this type conducted within EZLN communities. This was reflected in the small sample of "opposition" communities participating in this study. The study defines "divided" communities as those "which according to available information contained two or more groups whose positions towards the EZLN differed." Here, it is apparent from footnotes throughout the study that some Zapatista support bases lived in some of these divided communities.



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The low representation of “opposition” communities makes comparisons between pro-government or divided communities and “opposition” communities highly questionable as there is simply not a representative sample. Nonetheless, the study published some important findings in that it exposes the shameful inadequacy or virtual nonexistence of government health services within the region studied. The report was published in June 2006. Among the key findings was that the overall rate of malnutrition, according to the height-for-age index, a commonly used methodology to determine rates of stunted growth, was an alarming 54.7%, which is among the highest found in any study within the country -- placing the area studied among some of the most underdeveloped countries in the world. The gross estimated rate of maternal mortality was 607 per 100,000 live births, a number at least seven times higher than that calculated by the health sector for both Chiapas and the country as a whole.



In the forty-six communities studied, pulmonary tuberculosis was detected in 29 people, of whom only 13, or fewer than half, had been identified by health services and were being treated. The unadjusted overall rate of pulmonary TB for the population, taking into account estimated total inhabitants, was at least 85.3 per 100,000 and 161.2 for those age 15 and older, almost three times the rate reported for the entire state of Chiapas.

In the conflict zone, the study found that 23% of the children have not completed their vaccination schemes, a number far higher than the official figures, which is under 5%. This disturbingly low coverage is attributable to many factors, including lack of knowledge about the importance of vaccinations, lack of access to health services, and distrust towards government health services for conflict-related reasons.

In cases of self-reported illness within the last month, three out of every ten persons did not seek any health care (government or other), while six out of every ten sought government-provided health care. As to the reasons for not using government health facilities, members of opposition communities most often mentioned lack of medicines and problems related to the conflict, such as receiving treatment only if certain conditional demands were met, or being denied treatment all together. People in pro-government communities repeatedly noted their distrust of services as well as the lack of care and transportation. In divided communities, economic constraints on using any health service were most often mentioned.

“The people of Chiapas and all of Mexico’s indigenous groups have a fundamental right to health and the government of Mexico has systematically undermined the health of indigenous people,”

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stated Alicia Yamin, JD, MPH, Director of Research at PHR. "The findings of this study clearly show the link between years of human rights abuses and Chiapas' ongoing public health emergency. The basic health indicators for the region place Chiapas among the ranks of some of the most impoverished in the world." [2]

While the findings are useful in demonstrating the health situation in the communities that were studied, there are many factors which make it impossible to generalize from those findings to other communities or to the conflict zone in general. The lack of participation by the "hard-line" communities in resistance; i.e., the EZLN communities, is perhaps the major factor. The question begging an answer is whether the participation of the EZLN communities would have changed the findings in any way.

There are many factors which limit the right to health such as the fact that very few (less than 8%) of those in the conflict zone communities have health insurance, and that the Mexican government allocates very little of its budget to health spending. Chiapas is the Mexican state which receives the lowest number of health resources per capita in the entire country. Add to this the fact that 68 percent of the state's population lives without potable water and 62 percent does not have adequate sanitation. The study finds that those in the conflict zone fare even worse than the deplorable average for the state of Chiapas.

Moreover, approximately one-half of those studied did not speak Spanish, making language a barrier to obtaining health care. Another barrier is discrimination suffered by indigenous people simply because of their ethnicity. According to the study, women suffer gender discrimination at government health facilities and there is also discrimination based on political affiliation. Other barriers to attaining health care were found to be a lack of transportation or a lack of money to pay for transportation and the conditioning of health care on acceptance of government welfare programs.

The study concludes that the Mexican government has not met its obligations under Mexican law and international conventions to which it is a signatory and its findings confirm the urgency of the health situation in the conflict zone of Chiapas.

[1]<http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/phr-library/report-excludedpeople-2006.html>

[2]<http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/news-2006-06-22.html>



EXCITING NEWS!

The Chiapas Support Committee is pleased to announce a generous grant from The Atkinson Foundation for the Pharmacy Warehouse in San Manuel, Chiapas. We extend our deepest appreciation and warmest thanks to the folks at Atkinson for their support of this project.

The San Manuel Pharmacy Warehouse is a joint project of San Manuel autonomous municipality (county) and the Chiapas Support Committee in collaboration with Enlace Civil, a nonprofit organization in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. The purpose of the project is to assure a sustainable supply of medicines and medical supplies to the Canyons region of the Lacandón Jungle.

We now have only \$3,000.00 left to raise in order to complete this important project.

More thank yous...

Thank yous also go out to all those who sent us contributions for our medical delegation to Chiapas.

We were able to buy a large supply of medicine for the medical consultations during our visit.

Report from Chiapas and the Indigenous Encuentro

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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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