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Tierra y Libertad, One Year Later

Luis Fernando Menendez Medina

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From Cerro Hueco prison, the memory of a year is concretized in the problem of the political prisoners, 12 in all, from the autonomous municipality Tierra y Libertad: Aureliano, Artemio, Ruben, Ernesto, Joselino, Roberto, Juan, Antonio, Maximo, Gilberto, Jose Luis and Juan Esteban, the same ones who breathed life into the dove of peace sent as a mural-proposal to the civil society encounter with the EZLN, held last November in San Cristobal de las Casas. Of the twelve prisoners, victims of the ugolino syndrome, eight were arrested in Amparo Agua Tinta last year. The other four were kidnapped in October, 1997, in the Paso Hondo community, which is the auxiliary seat for the zapatista municipality.

A brief panorama of the Tierra y Libertad municipality and in general on the operations that the federal government unleashed against the autonomous municipalities of Chiapas a year ago (note: something which threatens to be repeated), will help clarify the meaning and the transcendence of the problem of the political prisoners, zapatista sympathizers, grouped together in The Voice of Cerro Hueco. Let us begin by locating the

autonomous municipality, Tierra y Libertad, in the southern part of the state of Chiapas, in the border zone between Mexico and Guatemala; it was created December 11, 1994, and made public by the EZLN December 19 of the same year. Within its territory it contains a total of 120 Tzotzil, Tseltal and Tojolobal communities of the official municipalities of Las Margaritas, Ocosingo, La Trinitaria, La Independencia and Frontera Comalapa.

The autonomous municipality was born through the initiative of those communities, with the objective of attending to their demands and needs via their own, democratic, government--named and watched over by its inhabitants. The "lead by obeying" proclaimed by the EZLN is thus concretized in the public exercise of power in service of and direct benefit to the communities which make up this municipality and which for a long time, and a variety of reasons, have been marginalized by the Mexican government and society.

The form of government the communities decided on for their municipality consists of an Autonomous Council, named through direct consultation with the municipal communities. After three years of government, the first Council was renewed May 18, 1997. At that point, some very concrete achievements had been consolidated for its habitants. For example, in health matters, a diagnosis center had been set up to detect infectious diseases (especially tuberculosis and malaria, which have a very high incidence in the region and constitute not just a health problem potentially dangerous to the whole state, but to the whole country, since this is a frequently used route for a considerable number of migrants). This center that was equipped with a clinical laboratory and highly qualified staff from the communities themselves, was put out of commission--along with a basic needs cooperative and productive projects to improve nutrition, housing and education--by the following events:

A year ago, on May 1st, 1998, the federal government deployed, with the help of the governor (the substitute of the interim governor) of Chiapas, an operation against the autonomous municipality Tierra y Libertad: under the direction of the Mexican Army, it subordinated the federal and state police, Cisen and the National Migration Institute in order to militarily occupy the community of Amparo Agua Tinta.

In the first hours of dawn, close to a thousand troops, heavily armed, irrupted violently in the community, heading for the facilities of the rebel municipality, which also served as housing for the municipal council. They sacked the files and the offices, stealing documents, 11 typewriters, a xerox machine, a refrigerator, a stove, gas tanks, and everything else they could. A judicial operation sealed with the spoils of war. Not a single word spoken: justice, Mexican-style.

Three weeks before, the same thing had occurred in Taniperla, and a month later the same formula would be repeated in Nicolas Ruiz and in San Juan de la Libertad, formerly called the municipality El Bosque, where confrontations occurred between governmental armed forces and campesinos who resisted the operation, with the result of 9 dead and 24 arrested: the majority, of course, indigenous.

The long silence that the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee of the EZLN had maintained, made the government's counterinsurgency strategists very uncomfortable. Which led them to act precipitously and clumsily, and creating a window of opportunity with their attack on Taniperla 20 days before the operation in Tierra y Libertad.

The zapatista support bases, of more than 100 communities of the autonomous municipality Ricardo Flores Magon, stood up to the promoters of war and said their word with eloquent acts: the decided to commemorate Zapata April 9th and 10th, reclaiming their political rights to constitute themselves as an autonomous municipality with a seat in the Taniperla ejido, in the heart of the Lacandon Jungle.

The Great State of Albores believed it had finally found the perfect pretext to initiate the government offensive against the autonomous municipalities. Thus they deployed carefully planned operations, which in their execution turned out to be totally out of proportion and grossly illegal. In so doing, the government once again showed, with not a shred of shame, its true face, the face of war, and with it the true sense of the word it gave at San Andres.

Once the operations were over, the Albores government wanted to show off its new war booty to its bosses at the Sedena and on Bucareli: a handful of prisoners to add to The Voice of Cerro Hueco, until then mostly consisting of Chol people from the Northern Zone, zapatista sympathizers, victims of the paramilitary war with which the federal government inaugurated its armed counterinsurgency strategy.

A backfire: because, in the face of the inability to solve the problem of the Chol prisoners and with the recruitment of new prisoners, including Tseltales, Ladino university people, Tzotziles and Tojolabales, the cell of The Voice of Cerro Hueco became the seed of another Aguascalientes, where we can all recognize ourselves in our differences and our similarities as dignified Mexicans with just and true causes, in order to continue with our struggle for a better, different Mexico than the one offered us by the Salinas family and their bands of governors, bankers and the rest of those embraced in the initials of the system.

On this anniversary of their unjust imprisonment, we have to thank the twelve political prisoners of the autonomous municipality Tierra y Libertad, as well as their wives and their children, the valuable and silenced testimony that they leave us, not just in Cerro Hueco, but in their communities as well. This is why in Yucatan, as in other regions of the country, we are putting in our vote for their rapid and just release, and with it, the liberty of all those political prisoners of The Voice of Cerro Hueco and of the whole country.