

# **Zapatista autonomous municipalities**

**The Resistance of the Indigenous Communities in response to the War in Chiapas**

Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional

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In December of 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) revealed the existence of 32 rebel indigenous municipalities, which are known as autonomous municipalities, within the district lines of the official municipalities.

The autonomous municipalities are the organization of the rebel peoples of Chiapas for resistance. The war and the militarization prevent the people, in many cases, from going to the municipal seats in order to resolve their immediate problems; the soldiers at the checkpoints assault and interrogate every person suspected of being a zapatista: that is, all poor campesinos. There have been instances of rape against women at the military checkpoints, and also of kidnappings and attacks.

The lack of freedom of movement in the state has also forced the appearance of the autonomous and rebel municipalities.

Some autonomous municipalities have opened their own marriage, birth and functions registries, because, since 1994, many villages have stopped utilizing official services, because they belong to the civil support structure of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation.

Completely abandoned by state institutions, and without basic services, the indigenous communities of Chiapas have opted to resolve some of their own problems through self-organization.

The legitimacy of the autonomous municipalities is based in the Treaty 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO), to which Mexico is a signatory, and which recognizes the rights of the indigenous peoples to live according to their uses and customs. In addition, municipal autonomy is recognized in Article 115 of the Mexican Constitution.

For the rebel peoples of Chiapas, the creation of the Autonomous Municipalities is also a means for carrying out the San Andres Accords. On February 16, 1996, the Mexican government signed the Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture with the EZLN. These accords were to have been transformed into constitutional changes. But the Mexican government rejected the legislative proposal of the Commission of Concordance and Peace — made up of all the political forces in the Congress of the Union — which they had prepared in December of 1996.

The carrying out of the San Andres Accords on indigenous rights is still not resolved, and it is one of the EZLN's essential requirements for returning to the dialogue table.

The EZLN maintains that the autonomous municipalities are legitimate, given that they are the results of the application of the San Andres Accords, which the government signed, and which it now refuses to recognize.

## **THE FUNCTIONING OF THE AUTONOMOUS MUNICIPALITIES**

The autonomous municipalities are made up by the indigenous communities within an area defined by zapatista influence. The communities of an indigenous zone or area are the ones who decide, at an assembly of all their members, whether or not they will belong to the autonomous municipality.

The autonomous municipalities, parallel to the constitutional ones, do not receive any financing from the state, nor do they collect taxes.

It is the communities who elect their representatives for the Autonomous Municipal Council, which is the authority for the municipality. Each representative is chosen for one area of administration within the autonomous municipality, and they may be removed if they do not fully comply with the communities' mandates.

Generally, a Council is made up of a President, a Vice-President, a Secretary, a Minister of Justice, a person in charge of Agrarian Matters, a Health Committee and a director for the Civil Registry. Each members' powers are clearly defined within their appointment, and they function in a collegial manner, with the advice of previous authorities or of the Council of Elders.

The Councils are elected and renewed every one or two years, according to the municipality.

The activities and the responsibilities of each autonomous municipality are dependent on the will of their members, and on their level of consolidation. They do not manage public resources, and their budget, if it exists at all, is very limited, and due to the cooperation of some of their members. Those who hold a position on the Municipal Council do not receive a salary for it, although their expenses should be paid by the same communities who request their presence, through cooperation among the members. In some cases, members of the Council are supported in their farm work, so they they can dedicate themselves to their [Council] work, and not have to go the fields.

The autonomous municipalities resolve local problems of coexistence, relations and exchanges between communities, and they attend to minor crimes. The application of justice is based on customary law. For example, in cases of common crimes, the punishment imposed by the Autonomous Council is reparation of the damages: instead of punishment by jail or fines, a sentence is imposed of working for the community, or for the aggrieved family.

In the autonomous municipality of Polho, in Chenalho, where thousands of war displaced are found, the Autonomous Council receives national and international humanitarian aid, and it distributes it to the camps through the Supply Committee.

Some autonomous municipalities occupy the Constitutional Municipal building, such as in San Andres, in Los Altos of Chiapas. The autonomous municipality of San Juan de la Libertad, officially El Bosque, met in the official municipal seat facilities until the military offensive against it last June 10.

The non-governmental organization, Sipaz, has this to say concerning the autonomous municipalities:

“Considered from a western political perspective, the autonomous municipalities make no sense. They have no resources or real power or legal legitimacy, and they are dying, encircled by hunger, diseases, the paramilitary threat and the security forces. However, for the indigenous peoples, they constitute an eloquent symbol of a culture which is resisting and defying the dominant culture, making a reality of a different way of understanding politics and of organizing the economy, society, and even human relations.”

## **THE OFFENSIVES AGAINST THE AUTONOMOUS MUNICIPALITIES**

For the Mexican government, autonomy is the “worst enemy of the state of law”, and it implies secession from the national territory. Nothing could be further from the actual demands emanating from the autonomous municipalities themselves, where all their members declare themselves to be Mexicans and demand their true integration into the republic, beginning with the recognition of their indigenous identities.

Despite having signed the ILO Treaty 169, and despite having signed the San Andres Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture, the government has made the autonomous municipalities their

worst enemy, accusing them of being unconstitutional and illegal, and organizing military and police operations against them.

In 1998, the repressive activities of the state against them has grown at an alarming rate, leaving an undetermined number of indigenous displaced, wounded and detained, and more than ten incarcerated, 10 dead and more than 200 international observers expelled from the country.

## **“RICARDO FLORES MAGON” AUTONOMOUS MUNICIPALITY**

On April 11, 1998, a police, military and immigration operation dismantled the “Ricardo Flores Magon” Autonomous Municipality, in Taniperlas, officially in the municipality of Ocosingo. During this operation, 9 persons were detained and remain in jail, charged with political crimes. Seven of the Taniperla prisoners are indigenous, and two are mestizos from the Metropolitan Autonomous University. Twelve foreigners who were in Taniperla were returned to their countries of origin, and expressly prohibited from returning to Mexico.

Since then, a military camp and a police checkpoint have been set up in the middle of Taniperla. The men fled to the mountain out of fear of being detained, and more than 100 women remained behind, along with their children, closed up in their houses, without food or water.

During this time, and with the support of the forces of order and the State government, the MIRA (Indigenous Revolutionary Antizapatista Movement) paramilitary group has grown in the Taniperla zone.

## **TIERRA Y LIBERTAD AUTONOMOUS MUNICIPALITY**

On May 1, 1998, a police, military and immigration operation, with more than 1000 troops, dismantled the headquarters of the “Tierra y Libertad” Autonomous Municipality, in Amparo Aguatinta. This repressive action left 63 detained, 3 wounded, 3 women raped and 140 displaced.

A military camp and various police checkpoints were set up at the entrances to, and within, the town of Amparo Aguatinta.

The situation in the communities was made untenable; the new patrols create fear among the people and hundreds of families have displaced to other towns. The Autonomous Council of this municipality have been incarcerated.

## **THE INTERIM GOVERNOR OF CHIAPAS’ REDISTRICTING**

At the end of May, 1998, the State government, determined to do away with those areas of indigenous self-government, proposed REDISTRICTING, and, through an official “consultation”, is drawing up a plan for the creation of 33 new municipalities.

In this manner, the Chiapaneco Government says it is carrying out the San Andres Accords. However, the official plan turned out to be impossible to implement, since it did not live up to the expectations of the indigenous communities.

For example, within the official redistricting plan, the government proposed the community of Guadalupe Tepeyac as one of the municipal seats, while this town is not inhabited, since its residents abandoned it after the February 1995 army offensive, and it is now a military barracks.

## **NICOLAS RUIZ MUNICIPALITY IN RESISTANCE**

On June 3, 1998, at 6 AM, more than two thousand police and army troops surrounded the town of Nicolas Ruiz, in the municipality of the same name, known for its opposition to the PRI and for being supported by EZLN civilian sympathizers. Men, women and children made a human cordon around the town in order to prevent the operation. The forces of order arrived, setting off tear gas, and they violently entered in to the town center, hitting pregnant women. Dozens of persons and children were injured and overcome by the gas, the houses were searched without warrants, and of all of the peoples' money and objects of value were looted. Carmen Gomez Perez, 7 months pregnant, was beaten with rifle butts. Twenty men and one women were detained and taken to the Cerro Hueco jail. There were charges brought against eight of them. They were not released until the end of October, after peaceful resistance and the continuous protest by the organized people.

## **SAN JUAN DE LA LIBERTAD AUTONOMOUS MUNICIPALITY**

On June 10, 1998, a new police, military and immigration operation took place, with two thousand troops, for the purpose of dismantling the "San Juan de la Libertad" Autonomous Municipality. Thousands of soldiers entered the communities of Chavajeval and Union Progreso, and opened fire against the campesinos, causing the death of 8 indigenous persons. Two policemen lost their lives. The people, terrorized, fled their homes and went to the mountains. The result was more than a thousand displaced, belongings stolen and looted, churches and chapels profaned, animals killed and stolen, harvests destroyed, and all the identification materials (voting credentials) which were found in the campesinos' houses, disappeared.

On June 13, 1998, the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) delivered the corpses of the 8 indigenous persons assassinated in this operation to Union Progreso. The cries of the people pointed out that these eight people had still been alive when they were taken away in the Public Security police trucks, and they accused the army of having executed them.

The corpses were in a state of decomposition, and they were mutilated. The residents of the community held a kind of "political trial" for the CNDH fourth representative, who was in charge of the delivery of the deceased, because of the inhuman manner in which they had been delivered.

## **THE VISITS BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE GOVERNMENT AND THE MILITARY AND POLICE OFFENSIVES**

The President of the Republic, Ernesto Zedillo, has repeatedly visited Chiapas during 1998. During all of those visits, he has condemned violence, and he has made calls for direct dialogue with the EZLN. Nonetheless, the dates of his visits have coincided with those days just prior to the dismantling of some of the Autonomous Municipalities.

For example, on April 29, 1998, Zedillo visited Chiapas. Two days later, the operation against the "Tierra y Libertad" Autonomous Municipality was initiated. On May 29, 1998, the President reiterated his desire for peace during another visit. On June 10, 1998, the large operation against the San Juan de la Libertad Autonomous Municipality occurred.

The autonomous and rebel municipalities of Chiapas are now a fact, which the repressive actions of the government cannot prevent.

The police, military and immigration operations against the autonomous municipalities have been accompanied by flagrant human rights violations, against the people and the towns, leaving terrible consequences, which speak to the war which has been unleashed in Chiapas against the indigenous poor: deaths, imprisonments, thefts, lootings, rapes, destruction of harvests, displacement of populations.

Repression is not the means for ending the rebellion of the indigenous of Chiapas, who have found no other path than self-organization and resistance, in response to the cruel war being waged against them.

IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ALL MEXICANS TO SEEK THE PATH TO PEACE FOR OUR COUNTRY

IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF EVERYONE TO SEE THAT THE MEXICAN GOVERNMENT ABANDONS ITS WAR POLICY IN CHIAPAS

IT IS IMPERATIVE FOR THE PEACE OF THE NATION THAT THE GOVERNMENT CARRY OUT THE SAN ANDRES ACCORDS ON INDIGENOUS RIGHTS AND CULTURE, AND RENEWS A REAL DIALOGUE FOR A SOLUTION TO THE CONFLICT

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