

# **Chiapas on the Brink**

**Forty-Five Murdered on Eve of EZLN's Fourth Birthday**

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The paramilitaries are still armed in our communities. We left because we are afraid that they will kill us like they did the others,” said Manuel Perez, a 28-year-old refugee who fled his village on December 28 with his family. As he spoke, five days after the brutal massacre of 45 indigenous refugees living in the village of Acteal by the paramilitary group “Mascaras Rojas,” the violence had not stopped. Over 3,500 campesinos had left their villages seeking refuge in the Zapatista autonomous municipality of Polhó.

In the weeks since the bloody massacre the Mexican state has responded to this crime, not by punishing those responsible, but by attacking the Zapatista communities. The massacre on December 22 is only the most brutal act of violence in an ongoing “dirty war” being waged against the indigenous peoples of Chiapas. Clashes between Zapatista supporters and sympathizers, like those in Acteal who are members of the civil organization “Las Abejas,” and government-sponsored paramilitary organizations have been raging for seven months, leaving at least 30 dead and over 2,000 homeless in the region of Chenalhó alone. The victims of the massacre in Acteal were a part of this refugee population who had already been burned out of their homes in nearby villages by paramilitaries.

From the Presidency on down, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the ruling party in Mexico for over 70 years, has been funding and tacitly supporting paramilitary groups in Chiapas in an attempt to eradicate support for the Zapatistas. All the while the federal government has claimed it seeks to “put an end to the violence,” and thrown up flimsy smokescreens to disguise its offensive. In an especially silly foray, Mexico’s Federal Public Prosecutor, Jorge Madrazo claimed the massacre was not caused by the low-intensity warfare being perpetrated against Zapatista supporters in Chiapas, but the result of a “family feud” internal to indigenous communities.

## **A Massacre Foretold**

In Chiapas everyone was shocked but few were surprised by the massacre in Chenalhó. It was, in the words of Bishop Samuel Ruiz “a massacre foretold.” Ever since the Zapatista uprising on January 1, 1994, the Mexican government has been waging a “low intensity war” against the indigenous communities that are the Zapatistas’ base of support. This counter-insurgency strategy was first applied in the Northern region of Chiapas where paramilitary death squads like “Paz y Justicia” (“Peace and Justice”) built up with the support of the Federal Army and the state police waged a campaign of kidnapping, murder and terror against communities that supported the Zapatistas. In 1997 the “dirty war” was enlarged to the Highlands region of Chiapas, in particular the municipality of Chenalhó. (A municipality in Mexico is roughly the equivalent of a county in the US).

Historically Chenalhó has been an area of absolute PRI rule. But with the 1994 uprising many of the indigenous Tzotziles of Chenalhó went over to the Zapatistas. With the support of a majority of Chenalhó’s 33 communities, the Zapatistas established a democratically-elected, autonomous municipal government in opposition to the corrupt and fraudulently elected PRI government—a situation of dual power Zapatistas have also established in 17 other municipalities in Chiapas.

The round of violence in Chenalhó that led up to the massacre in Acteal began on May 24, 1997 when paramilitaries murdered Cristobal Perez Medio, a school teacher and Zapatista sympathizer. For three months his widow, Federico, appealed to the special State Assistant Attorney General’s Office for Indigenous Communities to investigate the crime. But the Attorney General’s office was

controlled by the (now-resigned) unelected PRI Governor of Chiapas, Julio Cesar Ruiz Ferro, widely regarded as a puppet of the the Zedillo administration. No investigation was undertaken; the responsible parties were reassured of their impunity.

The paramilitaries continued to build up their strength and in September their campaign of terror began in earnest. The litany of attacks which barely registered in the international press, overwhelms.

On September 17, 60 families were forced to flee from the village of Los Chorros, a base for the paramilitaries, towards Naranjatik when the local PRI announced that it would launch an offensive to displace the autonomous council of Polhó and demanded contributions to buy more weapons. The PRI members arrested seven people and burnt down 17 homes. On September 19, the PRI-affiliated paramilitary group "Mascara Roja" (Red Mask) tortured 13 Zapatista followers and burned 70 homes in the communities of Miguel Utrilla and Puebla. Two days later groups of masked persons harassed Tzotzils Mariano Vasquez Jimenez, founder of the autonomous Zapatista community of Polhó, and Joaquin Vasquez Perez, from Los Chorros.

On October 1, President Zedillo visited San Cristobal de Las Casas and met with PRI officials from the Highlands who requested a decree that would authorize civilians to have weapons in their homes. The next day in Limas Chitamucum, seven members of a family, including a young girl, were murdered by paramilitaries. Two days later paramilitaries from Los Chorros attacked the village of La Esperanza. Fifty-two people were forced to flee and their homes were burnt. On October 15 two campesinos were killed and three injured in Tzanembolóm. Four hundred seventy-five people fled. Their homes, animals and fields were ransacked. On October 23 paramilitaries opened fire on the community of Las Laminas from a bus. One hundred thirty people fled. Between October 25 and 28 a series of confrontations left 19 in the communities of Oventic and Canonal with bullet wounds. On October 27 a second attack was carried out against the community of Chimix. Several Zapatista homes were destroyed and shots were fired. The next day when the paramilitaries returned they were repelled by the community. The same day, in Kanolal, Zapatista homes were burned and the families fled. On November 4, Paz y Justicia attempted to assassinate Bishop Samuel Ruiz and his assistant Raul Vera. On November 10 the village of Yibeljoj was attacked by PRI members, 18 families fled and their homes were ransacked. Four days later Mariano Arias Perez, a school teacher and PRI member from Yibeljoj was murdered after he denounced the actions of his party. Two days later PRI members fired shots into the air at his funeral.

Zapatistas in the community fled. The next day PRI members robbed people in Acteal. On November 18 a group of 30 presumed members of Mascara Roja armed with sub-machine guns invaded the community of Aurora Chica and opened fire killing six Tzotziles, including an 11-year-old and a 13-year-old. The next day three people were disappeared from Polhó including a nine-year-old boy. Homes were burned in Tzalalucum. On November 20 an armed group set fire to at least 50 houses in three communities inhabited by supporters of the Zapatistas. PRI members entered the communities of Tzahalukun, La Esperanza, Acteal, Chimix, and Pechiquil to burn houses. In Pechiquil over 20 homes were burned and others, with PRI emblems on the doors, were left intact. On November 21, two more Tzotzils in the community of Chimix were murdered.

On December 5, peace negotiations between the PRI and the autonomous municipality were began in anticipation of the visit to Chiapas by the Papal Nuncio Justo Mullor. On December 11 a ceasefire agreement was signed, but in the following days PRI members burned the houses of

Zapatista sympathizers in Yaxjemel, Chimix and Majomut. On December 12 the EZLN issued a communique that detailed the state of siege imposed on the Zapatista communities and noted that the refugee population living without shelter in the mountains had grown to 6,000 people.

On December 15 General Secretary of Chiapas, Homer Tovilla Cristiani issued a statement that there were no paramilitary organizations operating in Chenalho, echoing an earlier statement by Governor Ruiz Ferro that the only armed group in Chenalho was the EZLN. Shortly thereafter it was revealed that Ruiz Ferro and Tovilla Cristiani had directed \$650,000 US in state social development funds to Paz y Justicia. The document directing the monies in three payments between August 1996 and May 1997 was also signed by Mexican Federal Army General Mario Renan Castillo of the 7<sup>th</sup> Military Region in Chiapas which includes Chenalhó.

These events offer just a taste of the reign of terror that existed for seven months prior to the massacre in Acteal. Each was reported in the Mexican national press while the state and federal governments did nothing to restrain the death squads they had financed, armed and trained.

## **The Strategy of the Dirty War**

The activities of the government-directed death squads are part of a counter-insurgency strategy aimed at destroying the Zapatistas. And the timing of the recent escalation is no accident—it coincides exactly with the coffee harvest. While Zapatista sympathizers were fleeing into the mountains, their houses in flames, the paramilitaries seized their livestock and crops, most importantly the coffee beans ready to go to market. Refugees have been fleeing to more secure Zapatista communities which are now overwhelmed by legions of hungry mouths to feed.

Documents from the Mexican Ministry of Defense exposed in the January 4 issue of the newsweekly *Proceso* clearly spell out the government's strategy. One document authored by General Antonio Riviello Bazan and 7<sup>th</sup> Military Region Commander Miguel Angel Godinez (now a member of the House of Deputies), explicitly calls for the government to create paramilitary organizations, force the concentration of the Zapatistas' bases of support and deprive them of life's necessities in order to destroy their morale and break their support for the EZLN.

The deliberate concentration of refugees in a handful of Zapatista communities bears a chilling resemblance to the "Strategic Hamlets" of US counter-insurgency strategy in Viet Nam. If the people are the sea within which the EZLN swims, the government is out to drain that sea.

## **Political Crisis**

The Acteal massacre was the natural outcome of the government's counter-insurgency strategy, but it also testifies to the weaknesses of that strategy. The massacre has precipitated a profound political crisis in Mexico. While the government has insisted on its innocence, its obvious involvement has caused upsets within its own hierarchy. The powerful Secretary of the Interior, Emilio Chuayffet and the unelected Governor of Chiapas Julio Cesar Ruiz Ferro were both forced to resign by the scandal surrounding the massacre.

The massacre and the increasing militarization of Chiapas have sparked renewed national and international interest in the situation in Chiapas. Every day has brought new demonstrations in different parts of Mexico. Zapatista supporters have maintained a presence at the Monument de Angels in Mexico city since the Acteal killings and a series of demonstrations there have grown

progressively larger. On January 5 youth from the Zapatista National Liberation Front (the FZLN, a civil organization that supports the EZLN) took over the Stock Exchange and two radio stations in Mexico City. Demands for a serious investigation of the massacre came from heads of state including Bill Clinton, while a rising tide of protests in the streets in Europe and North America demanded the demilitarization of Chiapas, compliance with the San Andres Accords and an end to US military aid to Mexico. On January 2 demonstrations were held in at least 20 US cities. January 12 has been called as a national and international day of protest against the massacre.

## **Military Moves**

In the days following the massacre the EZLN warned that the government was going to use the massacre as a pretext for moves against the Zapatista communities. The government dismissed these accusations and insisted that they were determined to bring those responsible for the massacre to justice and that the 5,000 additional troops being sent into Chiapas were going to be used to protect the communities from the paramilitaries. To emphasize this point the Army was instructed to carry out "Social Work" among the refugees by distributing food, clothing and medicine.

The Zapatista communities forcefully demonstrated their strength and determination when the refugees—hungry, cold and sick—refused the government aid. They insisted that the government was behind the massacre and the paramilitaries' reign of terror; they would not be used to cover up this fact.

On January 3 the EZLN's predictions of renewed military action against their communities came true. That morning the Mexican Army encircled La Realidad, the headquarters of the top military leadership of the EZLN. The soldiers told residents that they were going to capture Subcomandante Marcos. One campesino was tied up and beaten by soldiers with rifle butts for refusing to answer their questions. His testimony to the press the next day was given in sign language and interpreted by his daughter as he is mute. Refugees from the community of Guadalupe Tepeyac, which was occupied by the Army in its offensive against the Zapatistas in February 1995, fled from La Realidad into the mountains.

Over the next several days similar scenes were repeated in Zapatista communities across Chiapas. Oventic, another regional center of the Zapatistas, was evacuated when the military approached. Soldiers attempted to enter Morelia on the January 3 and were chased off by women and children with sticks and stones. Two soldiers were separated from the main troop and surrounded by women from the community. They surrendered and handed over their weapons to the women of the community (which were later retrieved by the military). In the town of Xoyep in Chenalhó 200 refugees surrounded a newly-constructed military encampment and after a four hour confrontation forced the dismantlement of the encampment. On January 5 soldiers entered the community of the 10<sup>th</sup> of April and seized property after residents fled to the mountains. On January 6 soldiers entered seven communities in the municipality of Mitonic. On January 7 soldiers entered the community of La Union and attempted to detain two international observers. They were prevented from doing so when the members of the community appeared with machetes, sticks and stones and threatened to attack the soldiers. On January 8 soldiers entered Sibacja and searched peoples' houses. On January 9 soldiers entered Patihuitz and Galeana.

All of these actions have been carried out under the pretext of enforcing the Federal Firearms Law. After a token search for weapons in a few paramilitary strongholds in Chenalhó the Army has directed all of its efforts against Zapatista communities. This is in such blatant violation of the Federal Law passed to promote the dialogue between the EZLN and the government, which prohibits military actions in the Zapatista communities, that the new Interior Secretary Labastida was forced to insist that the Army wasn't trying to disarm the Zapatistas. The supposed arms caches found in these searches have either been crude plants or comically puny. The government sought to justify the 17 hour encirclement of La Realidad on the basis of an arms "cache" discovered in a house outside the community. When the nature of the "cache" was revealed it turned out to be a single .22 caliber rifle, several boxes of .22 ammunition and some green hats.

The EZLN has accused the government of attempting to provoke a military confrontation that would serve as a pretext for even more aggressive military action. Accordingly they have responded by attempting to avoid such a confrontation while still asserting their control over their own communities. In many communities this has meant that the majority of the men have fled the communities into the surrounding mountains leaving the defense to the women and children. This puts the Army in a very awkward position. It has also demonstrated the peoples' depth of commitment to the Zapatista cause. The courageous actions of the women and children, armed with sticks and stones, against M-16 toting Mexican Army soldiers has had a powerful impact on public consciousness in Mexico.

## **Conclusion**

As of this writing the situation here in Chiapas is still in flux. The increasingly aggressive posture of the Army could lead to open warfare. At the same time the political crisis that is unfolding could reach even higher and seriously destabilize the Zedillo government. International protests against the massacre have had a profound effect and have given the movement in Mexico the kind of support it really needs. In either case the situation cries out for a powerful and militant international solidarity movement that will keep the pressure on the Mexican state and the international institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that are behind the neo-liberal policies that have precipitated the current crisis.

The EZLN has built a kind of genuinely democratic counter-power that is not to be found anywhere else on earth. They have reinvigorated the idea of revolution and demonstrated that the New World Order of global capitalist domination is not a sure bet. Their example is an important inspiration to all the millions of victims of neo-liberalism around the world. We must join in solidarity with our Zapatista brothers and sisters. We must not allow the martyrs of Acteal to have died in vain. We must build as broad and militant a movement as possible to fight for the following demands:

1. Stop US aid to Mexico.
2. Demand the implementation of the San Andres accords for indigenous autonomy.
3. End the militarization of Chiapas.

This article is dedicated to all those murdered or wounded in Acteal on December 22, 1997.



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