

The Zapatista struggle against NAFTA: Human rights vs. economic hegemony

Description: An expose of the indigenous people of Chiapas resisting globalization, in this case by NAFTA and its beneficiaries: international corporations and the Governments the USA and the Mexico. The page shows the direct tie between the crimes of colonization and the global economy. It shows the direct complicity of major media with trade policy and government sponsored human rights violations and crimes against humanity. It exposes the violence that the US and Mexican Government continues to use against the people living on land once entitled to them in the Mexican Constitution until NAFTA in 1991.

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The state of Chiapas in Southern Mexico is a land covered by rain forest and mountains with an abundance of natural resources. The Mayan people and their descendants have inhabited Chiapas for over five hundred years. Until the twentieth century, for the most part, these indigenous people lived self-sustaining lives without government intervention. This is no longer the case: today the Mexican army oppresses the Indians of Chiapas with harassment, surveillance, and brutality including killing. Most people in the U.S. are unaware of the injustices occurring in Chiapas. Much of the reported news about Chiapas comes to us biased against the people's rights, while many newsworthy events never see the light of day.

Now, the indigenous people of Chiapas are fighting for the rights to land that has been theirs since the dawn of Mayan civilization. These people, the Zapatistas, named themselves after Emiliano Zapata who led the revolution in Mexico in 1910. In 1914, Zapata, with an army of peasants, took over Mexico City, only to be tricked and assassinated five years later.

Today there are two kinds of Zapatistas; both want freedom to live autonomously from the Mexican government. One kind of Zapatistas is the rebel army, or EZLN led by Subcommandante Marcos. These rebels live in the mountains of Chiapas. The other Zapatista is the indigenous people living in the rural communities of Chiapas, or FZLN.

In 1992, the Mexican government made an amendment to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution: what Zapata worked so hard to achieve back in 1910. The article guaranteed the indigenous people rights to communal land: *edijo*. The 1992 amendment to Article 27 allowed for privatization of these edijos. As a result, the land for the edijo the Mexican government now buys and sells the land to Mexican and multinational corporations. The Mexican government did this in preparation for NAFTA to make their property laws match the United States and Canada. Thus, the Mexican government wants to remove the Zapatistas off their land. The government wants to sell this land to international companies who, in turn, want to exploit the resources of the land. At least one international company with investments in Chiapas has pressured the government. For example, Chase-Manhattan Bank has urged Mexico to banish or dissolve the Zapatistas under threat that the country may no longer have Chase-Manhattan's investment in Chiapas.

On January 1, 1994, the day NAFTA went into effect, the poorly armed Zapatistas rebelled to declare war on the Mexican government. For twelve days, the EZLN fought and managed to take over some of the major towns in Chiapas. On January 12, 1994, the Zapatistas accepted a cease-fire declared by the Mexican government. Although there have been numerous attempts between the rebels and the Mexican government to negotiate, a long-term solution has not been found. Major unrest between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government still exists.

On February 9, 1995, the Mexican government began a huge military initiative to reclaim Zapatista land and to arrest the EZLN's leadership. On February 16, 1996, the Mexican government and the EZLN signed the San Andreas Accords, granting the Zapatistas autonomy and land. The San Andreas Accords states that:

Autonomy is the concrete expression of the exercise of the right to self-determination, within the framework of membership in the National State. As a result, The indigenous peoples shall be able to decide their own form of internal government as well as decide their political, social, economic, and culture organization.

The Mexican government has yet to fully implement the San Andreas accords.

Between March and July of 1997, many murders, abductions, detentions, torturing, and beatings occurred in the civilian communities of the Zapatistas. On December 22, 1997, a paramilitary group raided the town of Acteal, largely populated by Zapatista sympathizers. In this

incident, a faction of bribed paramilitary forces massacred forty-five unarmed people. Nine of the victims were men, twenty-one were women, and fifteen were children. The worst feature of this massacre is that the military recruited troops from that area to perform it. The army entices people to leave their communities, offering them plentiful food and other luxuries. One man, who ran to the woods when the massacre started, said that he recognized some of his cousins underneath the black uniforms and guns.

The Mexican government used the Acteal massacre as an excuse to heighten the military presence in Chiapas. On April 11 and May 1 of 1998, the Mexican government sent troops to violently dismantle two of the thirty-eight Zapatista autonomous zones. After these events, the Governor of Chiapas Roberto Albores Guillen stated, "I will finish off the autonomous municipalities."

Conditions today have not improved: the indigenous people live in fear: the men and women are afraid to go out to farm their fields. The men fear for their lives; the women fear rape by the army. The presence of the military is now greater than ever: low flying helicopters fly over the communities several times a day: military checkpoints along the road now detain every passing vehicle. The military conducts this policy saying that they are searching for drugs and guns; however, that is simply not true.

One man reported that the police had detained him at a checkpoint while his bus departed without him because of the hat he was wearing. The soldiers claimed that it looked "suspicious". When the man protested, the soldiers replied, "You are not leaving because you know about the Zapatista plebiscite".

Many of the helicopters, guns, and money used by the paramilitary came to Mexico from the U.S. to Mexico. The U.S. claims that it sent the munitions to fulfill the commitment that the U.S. has to aid the so-called War on Drugs. In 1996 alone, the U.S. gave over fifty million dollars in military supplies to Mexico. On March 21 of this year, the Zapatistas organized a nationwide *consulta*. This was a vote of the civil population in Mexico concerning issues of Chiapas. There were four questions on the ballot:

1. Do you agree that the indigenous rights should be included with their power and riches in the national project and take active part in the construction of a new Mexico?
2. Do you agree that the indigenous rights should be recognized in the Mexican Constitution and conform to the San Andreas Accords and to COCOPA (Commission of Concord and Pacification) and the Congress of the Union?
3. Do you agree that we should reach a true peace through dialogue, demilitarizing the country with the return of the soldiers to their barracks as the Constitution and laws require?
4. Are you in agreement that the pueblo should organize and demand that the government obey all aspects of the national life?

The vote only had a turnout of three million. The reason this number was so low is that the people of Mexico are afraid to vote in favor of the indigenous people. Ninety-five percent of the people voted yes on question four and the majority of the votes were yes for the rest of the questions. The indigenous people hope that the vote will discourage further rapes, disappearances, and murders. They are hoping that the vote will bring them the rights promised to them in the San Andreas Accords.

The New York Times ran an article about the vote on March 22 with the headline: "Mexican Rebels, Showing Flair for Politics, Hold a Referendum". The first sentence of the article was just as biased as the headline:

Mexico's Zapatista rebels, in a characteristically imaginative but one-sided attempt to put their isolated movement back in the limelight, held a nationwide referendum today on their proposals for peace with the government.

This journalist obviously does not believe in the importance of the Zapatista movement. The author implies "why are they even bothering anymore". The article omits the results of the vote. One can understand that the journalist may not have been aware of the results of the vote at the time that the story went to print; nevertheless, the NYT never did print a follow-up story to the original. Instead, they ran this blurb on March 24:

Immigration authorities ordered two Americans to leave within forty-eight hours, accusing them of violating their tourist visas by taking part in a political march in Chiapas state. Paul Lebens-Englund, a student from Washington, and Joseph Patrick, 27, cannot return to Mexico for two years. The expulsion came as an appeals court ruled that the deportation of twelve foreign human rights volunteers from Chiapas in 1998 on similar grounds was unconstitutional.

With its typical news media bias, the New York Times puts more importance on the U.S. aspect of the story and little significance in the value of the vote held in Mexico. Yet, the journalist cannot take all the blame for the lack of information in the original story. The Mexican government places strict limitations on foreign journalists. A journalist must obtain a worker's visa from the country. Then the journalist must inform the government where they will be going and what news they will be reporting. The maximum time that a journalist can usually stay is ten days.

In April of 1998, in San Cristobal de Las Casas, one photographer from the Associated Press and another from the Agence France Presse were harassed and beaten with the butt end of rifles by police attempting to confiscate their film. The photographers had covered the expulsion of the twelve foreigners from Chiapas. This story from Reuters, along with pictures, is available on the Web.

One must find it odd that the AP did not run their story along with the photos taken by one of their photographers attacked by the Mexican police. Then again, maybe this is not so surprising.

Last spring an International Day of Action held worldwide featured over one hundred actions across the world showing support for Chiapas. Many of these protests took place in the U.S. of which the AP did not cover a single action. When a group of protesters asked the Montpelier, Vermont branch of the AP why they were not covering the story, the AP branch told them that all of the AP offices had orders to not report the actions. At the time of this writing, the most recent article the NYT printed was this on April 12:

Instead of mobilizing hundreds of troops to teach a lesson to the Zapatista rebels who brazenly defied his authority, Gov. Roberto Albores Guillen did a conciliatory about-face that may signal a major change in government policy toward the Zapatista insurgents.

This article is the most disturbing one. Without surprise, the same journalist who wrote the first blurb wrote this article, too. The bias in this article is apparent. The author: 1) implies that military force should punish the Zapatista behavior and that the governor of Chiapas did an injustice to all Chiapans by not using the military to punish the Zapatistas 2) did not describe the so-called brazen action that the rebels committed. For example, does it refer to their revolt back in 1994 or something more recent?

The government of Mexico censors the events in Chiapas. In the U.S., the bias or blatant neglect of the major U.S. news agencies censor the people's struggle. Thus, the best interest of corporate the U.S. keeps the entire situation in Chiapas cloaked in a veil of secrecy and to cast a negative light on the Zapatistas as the Zapatistas have valuable land: the global corporations want it.

The real situation occurring in Chiapas comes to us via: 1) human rights observers who have come to live in the Zapatista communities and 2) journalists as undercover as tourists. Both these groups help spread the truth of the situation at the level of the alternative press, which is relatively small. The power to report the conditions and events lies with the editors of the major newspapers in the United States. Most of these editors find Chiapas and the Zapatistas less than newsworthy, which means that the region is less than a safe turf.

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