

Mexico's Black Eye

The Roots of Indian Rebellion in Chiapas

In January, 1994, an army of Indian guerrillas launched a bloody uprising in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Though the initial violence has subsided, the crisis is far from resolved. At issue are land ownership and the endemic poverty suffered by the Indians—problems that have existed throughout Mexico's tumultuous history.

by Ian Jarvie

Just hours into 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation declared war on the Mexican government. An indigenous peasant guerrilla movement named after Mexican Revolutionary icon Emiliano Zapata, the Zapatistas seized the city of San Cristobal de las Casas and three other towns in the highlands of the Mexican state of Chiapas. They demanded action to end the grinding poverty of Mexico's Indians, and the resignation of Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari followed by "clean" democratic elections.

These demands brought the 65-year-old single party rule of Salinas' Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and accusations of systematic electoral fraud into the global limelight. By timing their uprising to coincide with the official implementation of NAFTA (which they bitterly oppose), the Zapatistas attracted maximum international attention, shattering the image cultivated by Mexican leaders of a country fast becoming a member of the first world.

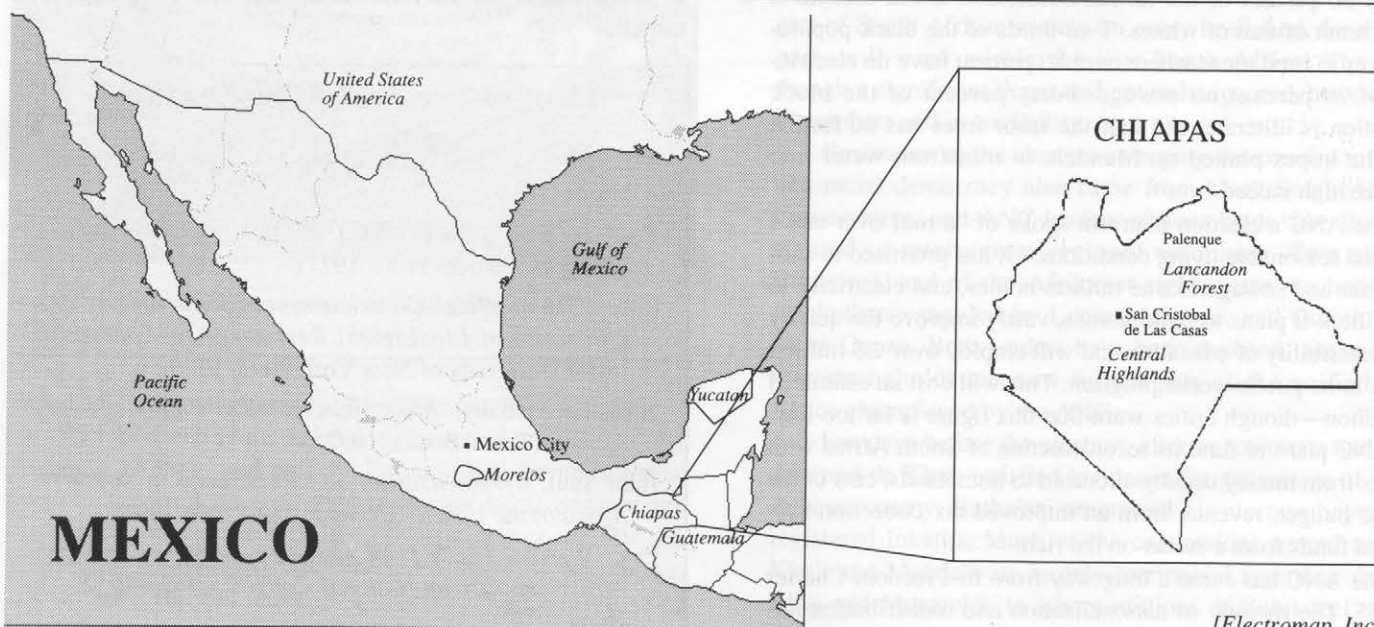
As Mexican intellectual Jorge Castaneda recently wrote in regards to the Chiapan uprising, "Mexico has not been, nor will it be soon, the modern, lily white, middle class and democratic society its rulers and their friends in Washington want it desperately to be." At a critical moment in Mexico's economic

and political development, the country's elites are being reminded that large sectors of the Mexican population are being left behind, or else remain as they have always been—marginalized.

Enormous Poverty Amidst Great Wealth

Chiapas is Mexico's southern-most state, bordering Guatemala to the east. It is home to one of Mexico's largest indigenous populations: of the 3.5 million inhabitants, over one million are Indians. They comprise thirteen different ethnic groups, by and large descendants of the ancient Mayan civilization that reached its apex between AD 200 and 800. Until 1830, Chiapas was a part of Guatemala, and has since resembled its neighbor more than the rest of Mexico. With Chiapas' stunning topography, production of cash crops, impoverished Indian population, feudal land relations and repressive political control, it is easy to draw comparisons with Central American countries.

The state of Chiapas is home to impressive natural resources as well as to some of the highest degrees of destitution and economic disparity in Mexico. It is the nation's top producer of coffee, and a principal supplier of corn to the coun-



[Electromap, Inc.]

try's state food distributor (CONASUPO). Some of the finest woods in Mexico are extracted from Chiapan jungles—much to the consternation of environmentalists. Chiapas' fishing and dairy industries, along with cattle ranching, represent Mexico's largest sources of protein. Chiapas also plays a large role in meeting Mexico's energy needs. Pemex, the national oil monopoly, extracts 92,000 barrels of crude oil daily from the Chiapan subsoil, and 516 million cubic feet of natural gas a year; half of Mexico's hydro power is also drawn from Chiapas.

In spite of the fact that Chiapas is resource-rich, its Indian inhabitants live in poverty: approximately 80 percent of the population lacks electricity, and 50 percent cooks with wood and coal. Chiapas also ranks lowest among Mexican states in per capita caloric intake, literacy and availability of clean drinking water. Severe malnutrition, malaria, tuberculosis and intestinal disorders are common in Indian communities, and infant mortality rates in Chiapas are the highest in Mexico.

Of late, the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) has promised to improve living conditions, and more money has been earmarked for new schools, health clinics, nutritional programs and other public works. According to the government, social welfare expenditures in Chiapas have increased by over 1,000 percent since 1989. However, the tensions that result from the vast disparity in wealth between peasant Indians and large landowners are so acute, that targeted social spending alone will not break the vicious cycles of Indian poverty and neglect. While these conditions contributed to the Indian Zapatista rebellion, the current unrest is best understood as the product of centuries of turbulent Mexican history.

Colonial New Spain and Post-colonial Mexico

Mexico's colonial period lasted 300 years, beginning with the Spanish conquest in 1519. As was typical of most colonial activity, the indigenous population of Mexico—then New Spain—was exploited and relegated to the lowest strata of society. The fear and contempt with which the Spaniard viewed the Indian increased throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as Indian unrest flared up in various regions of New Spain.

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In southern Mexico, for example, the Tzeltal Indians revolted in 1712 in response to years of mistreatment, and a 1761 Mayan rebellion in the Yucatan region was further proof that Indians did not accept their lot passively. A nationwide movement of indigenous resistance never materialized, however, because of the great linguistic and cultural differences between the fifty or more ethnic groups in New Spain. Yet, though they suffered most, the Indians were not the only people alienated by the Spanish.

Creoles (Spaniards born in New Spain) deeply resented the fact that only *peninsulares* (Spaniards born in Spain) could hold positions in colonial government. By 1810, creole discontent developed into outright insurgency against Spanish rule. The struggle with the Spanish colonial government led by these liberal creoles raged for ten years. Independence was not achieved, however, until 1821, when more conservative creoles, responding to threats posed by a liberal revolution in

Spain, revolted as well. Their desire was to prevent the implementation of liberal Spanish reforms in Mexico, which they feared would undermine their privileged position as wealthy landowners in the colony.

Mexico's first half century of nationhood was characterized by instability. The weak national government's inability to assert centralized control over the whole country meant that remote regions like Chiapas enjoyed considerable autonomy. Within Chiapas, factional struggles between wealthy elites of the Central Highlands and the Central Valley dictated the course of economic and political development. At stake was ownership of the land and control of Indian labor.

The Thorniest Issue

The most pressing concern of Indian communities in the nineteenth century was land. The lower classes and Indians, many of whom had been the cannon fodder for the wars of Independence, enjoyed neither the redistribution of land nor income that accompanied freedom. To the Mexican and Chiapan elite, the Indian was a cheap source of labor—and not much else. As in the past, pockets of Indian resistance did arise. In southern Mexico, the Caste War of 1839 in the Yucatan state raged for ten bloody years as Mayan groups rose up in arms against *hacendados* (large landowners) and came very close to driving out Yucatan's creoles.

In the sixteenth century, Indian communities had been granted *ejidos* (communal land holdings) by the Spanish



Descendants of a great civilization: will the Chiapan Indians succeed in securing a better future for their children? [Scarboro Missions, Toronto]

crown, to be used for subsistence farming. After Independence, with no authority in place to protect the Indian *ejidos*, these lands were usurped with impunity by wealthy creoles. Ironically, the only full-blooded Indian to hold the office of Mexican President, Benito Juarez, helped to facilitate such accumulation of land at the expense of the Indians.

In 1856, his liberal administration enacted the Reform Laws that barred the Church and Indian villages from owning land. In Juarez' view, Indian communal land holdings were an impediment to economic modernization. The intent was to break up the land owned by the Church and Indian villages and create a nation-state at the base of which was a rural middle class with small land holdings. Dismantling the Indian communal land system, the liberals believed, would also integrate the Indian into modern Mexican society.

The plight of Mexican Indian communities worsened during the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz (1876-1911), an era known to Mexicans as the Porfiriato. A *mestizo* (of mixed Indian and creole descent) known for his military prowess, Diaz installed himself as President of Mexico by force of arms in 1876, and established one of the longest personal dictatorships in Latin American history.

The Porfiriato brought Mexico its first period of sustained political, social and economic stability since Independence, due in large part to Diaz' iron-handed rule. Peasant and labor unrest were effectively suppressed by his rural police forces; political opponents were jailed or murdered if they resisted being co-opted into the Diaz regime. Diaz' rule also ushered in Mexico's age of "laissez faire" capitalism. The prime beneficiaries of this period were Mexico's elites, some sectors of the middle class and foreign investors.

A powerful clique of intellectuals, businessmen and other professionals, known as the *Cientificos*, formed Diaz' inner circle. They supported the notion that only economic development directed by Mexico's white elite would lead the country towards modernization. The inherent racism espoused by the *Cientificos* was directed at Mexico's mestizo lower classes and Indian population, for these groups were regarded as inferior, and thus unable to "raise the level of civilization" in Mexico.

To the detriment of Indian communities, concentration of large private land holdings increased dramatically during the Porfiriato. In 1883, the government began to actively encourage the privatization of any land in Mexico that lay unused. Legal authorization was given to private companies to survey rural Mexico; in return, these companies received one-third of

any vacant land surveyed. The rest was auctioned off by the state to the public. In 1894, however, new legislation required land owners to possess legal title to their land if it was not to be declared vacant and thus subject to expropriation. Many Indian villages could not produce legal titles for lands that had been granted to them by Royal Spanish decree hundreds of years before. As a result, all over Mexico, Indians were further impoverished as they lost their *ejidos* to land speculators and *hacendados*.

In Chiapas, the Mexican government vigorously enforced the law that required the privatization and division of all communal lands—in the name of modernization. The Chiapan land measure called *El Reparto* (The Distribution) severely affected Indian communities. Some villages disappeared completely as large landowners, desiring to extend their properties, incorporated entire *ejidos* into their holdings. Legions of Indians were forced into laboring on coffee, sugar and cotton plantations.

Word Watch

Creole: Spaniard born in New Spain (colonial Mexico).

Peninsulares: Spaniards of New Spain born in Spain.

Hacendados: large landowners.

Ejidos: Indian communal land holdings.

Mestizo: Mexicans of mixed Indian and creole descent.

Cientificos: "the scientists", a clique of intellectuals, businessmen and professionals who formed the inner governmental circle during the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz (1876-1911), the era known as the Porfiriato.

El Reparto: "the distribution", the process of privatization and division of Chiapan communal lands enforced by the Mexican government in the name of modernization.

"Pan, Tierra y Libertad" (Bread, Land and Liberty)

The Diaz dictatorship was toppled in 1911 with the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution (which was to last, through various phases, until 1929). The conflict initially began over the question of presidential succession. In a widely publicized 1908 interview with an American journalist, Porfirio Diaz expressed his intention to retire at the end of his current term of office. He claimed that Mexico was ready for democracy, and said that he welcomed the participation of an opposition party in the upcoming Presidential elections, scheduled for 1910. Many middle-class Mexicans believed Diaz, including Francisco I. Madero, the son of a

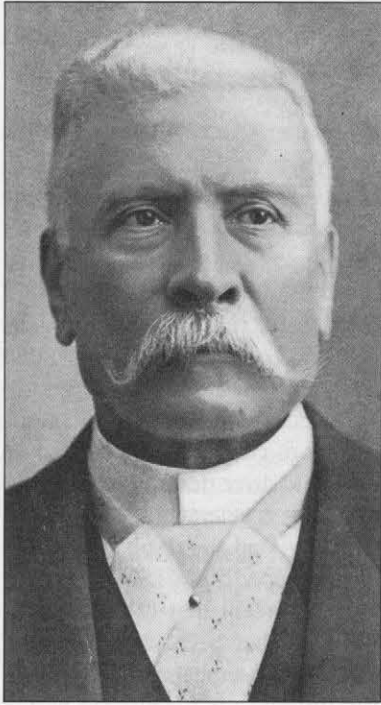
wealthy northern family, who aspired to gain political power.

However, Diaz ultimately decided to run for re-election, regardless of what he had promised in 1908. Madero hoped to be made Diaz' vice presidential running mate. When Diaz passed him over, Madero declared his own candidacy for the Presidency. Angered by the challenge, Diaz had Madero arrested, and went on to "win" the 1910 election unopposed. Soon after, upon his release from jail, Madero fled to the U.S., where he called for a mass Mexican uprising to oust Diaz from office.

In response to Madero's call to arms, rebellions flared up in various northern states. In the South, followers of Emiliano Zapata, the popular peasant leader of a community in the state of Morelos, also rallied behind the revolutionary banner. Zapata's small band of armed villagers soon attracted to their ranks several thousand peasant fighters from across the state. The

Zapatista battle cry, "*Pan, Tierra y Libertad*" (Bread, Land and Liberty), expressed the desire for land reform that fueled the revolt of the Morelos peasantry.

At the time, Morelos was one of Mexico's most fertile regions and the country's largest producer of sugar cane. For years, the concentration of land in the hands of only 17 wealthy creole families had been facilitated by liberal and Porfirian land laws. With the construction of railroad systems during the Porfiriato, national and foreign markets opened up to Morelos sugar barons. Expanding sugar plantations required more land, increased irrigation, and larger pools of cheap labor. In order to meet these needs, the plantations forced peasant farmers off their lands, which in the process freed up labor for the sugar mills—a situation similar to that faced by Chiapan Indians during *El Reparto*.



Porfirio Díaz: one of the longest dictatorships in Latin American history.

In May, 1911, Díaz relinquished power in the face of nationwide uprisings, and Madero assumed the Presidency. Meanwhile, the Zapatista movement continued to grow. When Madero delayed promised land reform—the issue over which the peasants initially rose up—Zapata rebelled and issued his movement's political manifesto, the *Ayala Plan*. In the *Ayala Plan*, he declared that the lands, forests and water sources that had been usurped by plantation owners and other elites should be returned to their rightful owners. The Zapatista revolutionaries proceeded to implement the *Plan* in Morelos, and in so doing succeeded in forcing land reform onto the national revolutionary agenda.

In 1913, Madero was assassinated by a reactionary element in the Mexican army. General Victoriano Huerta, who had been responsible for overthrowing Díaz, was himself deposed a year and a half later by an alliance between Zapata and the forces of two northern revolutionary strongmen, Pancho Villa and Alvaro Obregon. The leader of the alliance, Venustiano Carranza, a former governor of a northern state, became the new President. Yet, Carranza was a large landowner himself, and not surprisingly, like Madero before him, resisted the Zapatista pressure for total land reform.

Impatient with Carranza, Zapata split with the alliance, as did Villa, and the bloody Revolution continued as civil war erupted between 1913 and 1915. Carranza eventually subdued Villa and Zapata: having isolated Villa in the North, Carranza unleashed the full fury of his armed forces on the state of Morelos in an attempt to defeat the Zapatistas. Carranza's

forces eventually killed Zapata in 1919.

Chiapas was generally immune to the social upheavals that swept through the rest of Mexico at the beginning of the Revolution. Chiapan elites did not share the grievances of Mexican liberals like Madero about the presidency, and the coercive labor system and feudal political structure specific to Chiapas effectively maintained control of the state's peasantry. According to historian Thomas Benjamin, the only effect the Revolution had on Chiapas in 1911, was to revive intra-regional struggles between wealthy elites, as a power vacuum was created by the overthrow of Porfirian dictatorship.

In 1914, when revolutionary forces invaded from the North and attempted to institute land reforms, Chiapan landowners succeeded in preventing any significant changes to the state's land tenure system. Chiapas' Indians, caught in the middle of the struggle between distant revolutionaries and a strong Chiapan landowning class, gained little from the Revolution.

The Constitution of 1917

Amidst the years of fighting, in February, 1917, the new Mexican Constitution was written and ratified by Mexico's recently formed Constituent Assembly. The drafters were predominantly members of Mexico's emerging urban, professional middle class. With the 1917 document, they created the blueprint for a capitalist Mexico that paid somewhat more attention to social justice than the laissez-faire Porfiriato ever had.

An important feature of the Constitution was Article 27, which addressed land reform. Article 27 incorporated some of the important aspects of Zapata's *Ayala Plan*: it returned lands to Indian communities that had been taken under old laws, it gave the state the power to expropriate large land holdings where it deemed necessary, and once again it extended legal protection to the *ejido* land system.

On paper, Article 27 balanced the desire of Mexico's peasantry to own land, with the desire of middle and upper classes to preserve their right to own private property. Yet, even with one of the world's most progressive Constitutions in hand, the Mexican government failed to implement many of its reforms. In fact, the revolutionaries that emerged after 1920 once Zapata was dead cared little for Article 27. In Chiapas, elites bitterly opposed to land redistribution still succeeded in holding on to their fiefs.



Peasant leader Emiliano Zapata: icon of the Mexican Revolution.

A Bridge to Modernity: The PRI and National Development

Instability plagued Mexico throughout the 1920s, as regional revolutionary leaders continued to challenge the central government in Mexico City. Then, in 1929, the Partido Nacional

Revolucionario (PNR) was created to end the leadership crisis that existed between competing generals. The Party's architect, President Plutarco Elias Calles, persuaded the revolutionary Generals vying for the Presidency to amalgamate themselves into one political party that would represent their interests and mediate their conflicts. Calles proposed that within this organization, their joint political predominance in Mexico would be solidified. This consensus also provided the mechanism for peaceful and orderly Presidential succession.

Calles' successor, General Lazaro Cardenas, renamed the party the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and broadened its popular base by co-opting civil servants, peasant leagues and labor unions into the party. This tripartite corporate structure made up of the National Popular Organizations Confederation (CNOP), the National Peasant Confederation (CNC), and the Mexican Workers Confederation (CTM), forced its members to channel their demands and dissent through the PRI.

This consolidation of power in the hands of the President provided the peace and political stability that allowed the cen-



A never-ending cycle of poverty: the desperation of Chiapas' Indians has been passed from generation to generation. [Scarboro Missions, Toronto]

tral government—the PRI—to control the resources of Mexican society in order to achieve the goals of Mexico's political elite—namely, the creation of a modern Mexican industrial economy. World War II provided the impetus for growth, and the state protected and stimulated domestic industry as it began to produce the goods that were no longer available for import due to the war overseas. State investment in infrastructure included the provision of low-cost energy, transport, irrigation, and communication services. Price controls and subsidies kept food prices down, and state funding of education helped slash illiteracy by 50 percent between 1940 and 1970.

Between 1940 and 1982, Mexico experienced rapid economic growth, at an average annual rate of 6.3 percent—the “Mexican economic miracle.” In 1982, however, Mexico experienced the dramatic failure of its post-war model of state-led economic development. By the end of President Luis Echeverria's administration (1970-1976) Mexico's economy was already suffering: the national treasury was empty, and the public sector debt seemed uncontrollable. The discovery of national oil reserves during the late 1970s only served to delay the inevitable collapse of Mexico's economy.

The 1980s: Crisis and Restructuring

A sharp decline in world oil prices, extensive borrowing, the increase in world interest rates and the subsequent debt crisis, runaway inflation, and the flight of capital out of the country all contributed to Mexico's economic crisis of 1982. In the aftermath, a clique of technocrats led by President Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) began the process of restructuring that forced open a traditionally closed Mexican economy.

Reform of the Mexican economy in the 1980s entailed reducing the state's deficit. This was facilitated by removing subsidies on basic consumer goods and services, cutting the size of the government bureaucracy, promoting productivity through the deregulation of industry, opening the Mexican market to direct foreign investment, and privatizing almost all state-owned corporations. In 1986, Mexico joined the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) and de la Madrid began the process of market liberalization. Barriers to foreign goods and investment were reduced, in the hope that domestic entrepreneurs would become more competitive and that an influx of foreign goods would drive down inflation.

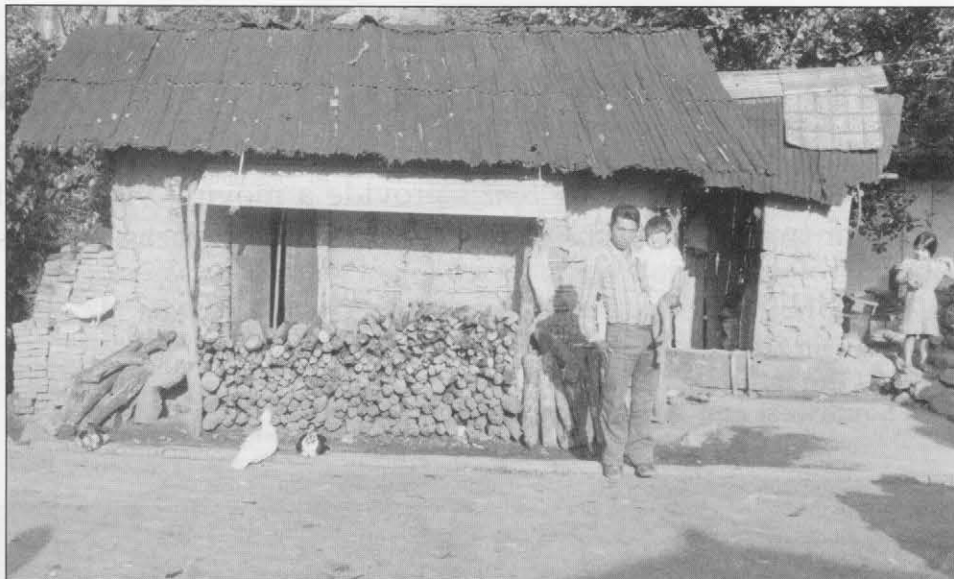
Current President Salinas accelerated the restructuring of the Mexican economy, and the results have been remarkable. Inflation has dropped from 159 percent per annum to an estimated 19 percent in 1991, the public deficit as percentage of GNP has been virtually eliminated and Mexico has achieved annual growth rates of up to five percent. Still, this success is only one part of the story.

Chiapas: Ripe for Conflict

The areas in which the Zapatistas have been active, the central highlands and eastern Chiapas, have experienced serious problems over the past few decades. These, coupled with the severity of the 1982 economic crisis and subsequent restructuring have created the powder keg of political unrest that is Chiapas today.

Taking precedence, as always, has been the centuries-old struggle for land. In 1985, large landowners constituted only one percent of all Chiapan farmers, yet they controlled 45 percent of the land. At the same time, 35 percent of Chiapas' farmers—many of them Indians—owned only one percent of all arable land. Though Indian communities did see some land redistribution during the Presidency of Lazaro Cardenas in the 1940s, since then the interests of Chiapas' Indian peasantry have for the most part been ignored. The federal government has for years allowed Chiapas' political system, characterized by the concentration of political and economic power in hands of *caciques* (strongmen or political bosses), to protect the interests of wealthy landowners.

Indians charge that cattle ranchers and large-scale commercial farmers have, over the last two decades, illegally seized Indian communal lands to make room for cattle pastures and farming operations. The recently replaced Interior Minister and former governor of Chiapas Patrocinio Gonzalez Garrido, an owner of large tracts of ranchland, has for years been the target of Indian accusations that he has allowed fellow ranchers to drive them off their ancestral lands. As a result of these land losses, dispossessed Indian peasants have joined the



Surviving in the poorest corner of Mexico.
[Scarboro Missions, Toronto]

growing pool of cheap labor that competes for jobs on large cash crop plantations—a trend reminiscent of the nineteenth century.

Social tensions in Chiapas only increased in the 1980s with the influx of some 80,000 refugees from the Guatemalan civil war. The presence of these refugees was a cause for concern for the government as well as landowners, as they feared that leftist, revolutionary elements from Guatemala would cross over the Chiapan border.

In response to these pressures, new grass-roots social movements emerged, seeking to improve the living conditions of peasant communities. For example, dissatisfied teachers who had struggled to democratize the government-controlled teachers union forged alliances with peasant movements in Chiapas, while progressive elements within the Catholic Church fully supported a variety of reform proposals.

In the 1980s, cattle ranchers, local authorities and the army attempted to suppress those elements in Chiapan society that threatened the status quo. The murders and arrests of Indian leaders and farmers were widely documented by international human rights organizations. When peasant groups attempted to seize back land which had previously been theirs, they were violently evicted by hired thugs, state police or army units. Between 1982 and 1988, land disputes were responsible for close to 1,000 deaths, mostly of peasants.

Economic changes in the last five years have also made life harder for the Chiapan peasantry. Key sectors of the state economy—timber, coffee, cattle and corn—experienced dramatic downturns as international commodity prices declined, in turn increasing unemployment.

Small peasant coffee producers were hit especially hard by a plunge in the international market price which fell by 50 percent between 1989 and 1993. At the same time, in line with prescribed austerity measures, government assistance that previously provided technical and marketing support to Indian coffee cooperatives and other small coffee growers, was withdrawn.

What Lies Ahead

No easy conclusions can be drawn in respect to the recent unrest in Chiapas. As economic and social pressures have consistently denied Chiapan Indians of land, it is easy to see why many feel they have little to lose by taking up arms. Centuries of exploitation, worsened by the developments of the last twenty years have led many to suggest that it would only be a matter of time before a rebellion of the scale seen in Chiapas would erupt.

The current situation is still very tense. Negotiations between the government and the Zapatistas, which had to take place because of the media spotlight on the plight of the peasants, were suspended after the (unrelated) assassination of PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colossio at the end of March.

In the meantime, tensions between cattle ranchers and the rebels are mounting. The Zapatistas remain in control of areas where cattle operations are situated, and the government decision to declare a cease fire and to reign in the Mexican army only 11 days into the Zapatista uprising angered the ranchers. Many of them believe that the only solution to the current conflict is to exterminate the rebels by force, and the threat that ranchers will take it upon themselves to wage such a battle with the Zapatistas is not to be ignored.

The official government stance has been, thus far, to recognize the concerns of Chiapas' Indians and to try and solve their problems. If, however, the Mexican government is contemplating any renewed military action against the Zapatistas, it certainly will not move before Mexico's federal elections in August. With the world watching and the sensitivities of the Mexican electorate heightened by recent developments in the PRI and the continued hope for legitimate elections, any repressive action by the military would undermine the PRI's already tarnished image along with its chances of holding on to power in August. Thus, armed and ready in the depths of the Lancandon rain forest, the Zapatistas await the outcome of national elections. ●

Suggestions for Further Reading

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