

Canada silent on human rights in Chiapas

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by MARYANN ABBS

**In the walls of the forgotten,
sleep the souls of the free.**
*- Graffiti on a building in San
Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas,
Mexico*

There is a war in Chiapas, forgotten by most of the world, frequently ignored by the press, and not found on the lists of the world's conflict zones. Since 1995, the government of Mexico has been waging a low-intensity war against the citizens of this state.

"I heard a loud noise in the middle of the night coming from the military base; after that I couldn't sleep" said Pablo, from the community of Patihuitz where I worked as a human rights observer. There are 80,000 soldiers stationed in Chiapas. Most of the soldiers are stationed close to communities like Patihuitz (which lies 500 metres from a base) in order to exert control over the civilian population. This is part of the government's strategy to wear down the civilian population through harassment and by restricting food supplies and medicine.

Almost every day, military trucks, hummers and tanks pass the community, often with guns at the ready. Helicopters circle very low over houses in the village and planes fly practice bombing runs overhead. Every child can tell when a military vehicle is approaching by the sound of the motor. Most people in this area have stress-related illnesses, such as headaches and stomach problems. The government hopes that wearing people down in this way will force them to abandon their social justice concerns.

The people of Chiapas have long been the poorest in Mexico. Despite living in the state with the most wealth in natural resources, over 70 per cent of the population is malnourished and very few have access to health care or education. In 1994, world attention was focused on Chiapas when the EZLN (the Zapatista National Liberation Army) burst onto the world stage and demanded social and political rights for indigenous people. The Zapatistas chose January 1, 1994, this being the date that Mexico signed NAFTA. The trade agreement was seen as a death sentence for indigenous people in Mexico, since several parts of the Mexican constitution pertaining to indigenous people had to be changed to comply with NAFTA.

**Globalization means turning the
world into a shopping mall.**
*- Subcomandante Marcos, military
commander of the EZLN*

The government of Mexico started the process of negotiating a peace agreement with the Zapatistas in 1995. In 1996, the first agreement on indigenous rights and culture was signed. Unfortunately, the government has refused to implement the accord, causing a breakdown of the peace process.

Since then, the human rights situation in Mexico has deteriorated. In the states of Oaxaca, Guerrero and Chiapas, torture, illegal detention and extrajudicial executions are common. These incidents are well documented by Amnesty International and, recently, by the human rights committee of the European Economic Union. During this time, there has also been a substantial increase in military assistance from countries such as the United States. This year, for example, over one-third of the soldiers trained at the infamous "School of the Americas" were sent to Chiapas.

The people of Chiapas are, like us, facing globalization and the effects of neo-liberal economics. In Canada we can see the effects on our social safety net and growing inequality between rich and poor. Our government ... eager to trade at any cost ... is silent about human rights abuses in countries such as Mexico. The demands of indigenous people in Chiapas are simple: end the militarization of communities, disarm the paramilitary forces, and comply with the accords on indigenous rights and culture.

HSA Education Officer Maryann Abbs recently spent three months working in Chiapas as a human rights observer with the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Centre for Human Rights.

Groups working on this issue:

Eyes on Mexico ... an urgent action network on issues in Chiapas (604 251 2598).

Chiapas Alert Network (604 215 9190).

Building Bridges ... a program to send human rights observers from Canada to Chiapas (604 877 1223).

Internet links:

[Mexico Solidarity Network](#) - a Washington, DC-based repository of resources and information on Chiapas

[EZLN Official Web Site](#)

[Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Centre for Human Rights](#) (mostly in Spanish)

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180 East Columbia
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website
www.hsabc.org

Telephone 604-517-0994
1-800-663-2017