

Who is Comandanta Ramona?

A frail, peasant woman-turned-revolutionary, has now become a role model and beacon of hope to millions of Mexican women, particularly the indigenous people of Chiapas.

by Terry Wolfwood (Third World Resurgence No. 84, August 1997)

TOURISTS visiting San Cristobal de las Casas, the picturesque old colonial town of the Chiapas highlands, are often besieged by street vendors selling local handicrafts. Many sellers will be offering Ramona Dolls. Cloth dolls of women dressed in local indigenous dress have always been staples of these vendors, but the Ramona Doll is a new version, a peasant woman, wearing a black balaclava or a red bandana to hide her face, carrying a gun, a baby or both. My favourite is Ramona on horseback.

Comandanta Ramona of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) is the model for these figures; the male version is of Sub-commandante Marcos. Ramona is a Tzotzil, one of the many indigenous groups that form the majority of Chiapas citizens. She is part of the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee that directs the EZLN. Subcomandante Marcos, the leader that the Western media and the Mexican government have singled out for attention and 'stardom', speaks publicly for the EZLN as directed by this committee.

The EZLN uprising on 1 January, 1994 took Mexico and the world by surprise. Nobody expected poor peasants to organise brilliant military manoeuvres, let alone organise thousands of peasants marginalised by centuries of poverty, isolation and illiteracy - at least in Spanish - into an instantly world famous liberation force that understood the effects of NAFTA on all the poor of Mexico; that NAFTA would lead to loss of their communal lands, sustainable self-sufficient agriculture and any form of self-government and cultural integrity.

Ramona is one of seven female comandantas on that committee which directs an army which comprises one-third women. In 1993, during the formation of the EZLN, thousands of indigenous women came together to create the Revolutionary Women's Law that asserts women's right to self-determination and equality in society, at home and in the ranks of the EZLN. Ramona was one of the drafters of that document that gives credence to the EZLN statement, at an international meeting for humanity in 1996:

"We are not gathered here today in order to change the world...we are here with a more modest proposal.. which proposes to create a new world."

Corporate power

The EZLN in solidarity with many civil groups continues to work towards that new world with peaceful means - organizing strikes, demonstrations, meetings with other Mexican social justice groups and supporters around the world, continuing to emphasize that all their struggles are in common against corporate powers that plan to control resources, production and the lives of people everywhere.

Throughout Chiapas, in spite of the overpowering military presence of the well-equipped

Mexican Army, people are working within their own communities to increase resistance to the repressive complicity of the Mexican government and international capitalism and to strengthen their own commitment to a self-determined life of dignity and independence from corporate control.

Ramona's strength lies in her commitment to her own people and the realization of their ancestors' prophecy of the native people of the Americas uniting to claim their freedom. Not a prominent speaker or public representative of the EZLN, she speaks simple Spanish and prefers to work among her own; however, she gained attention when she addressed a crowd of thousands in the main square of Mexico City early this year. With her face covered by a mask, she was the first EZLN leader to speak in person publicly in the national capital. She called for solidarity, strength, and courage to the millions of Mexicans who saw her there or in the media. Her slight frail presence was transformed into a gigantic icon of hope for the Mexican masses. The response gave lie to the Mexican government claim that the EZLN is only relevant to a small rural ethnic group.

"The great global power has not yet found the weapon capable of destroying dreams. As long as it does not find it, we will continue to dream, in other words, we will continue to triumph.." (EZLN statement)

At the end of her speech the Zocalo, with the Presidential Palace on one side and the cathedral built of stones from an ancient Aztec temple on another, resonated with the chants of 'Ramona, Ramona, Ramona, Ramona'.

This appearance carried a high price. Ramona was near death from kidney failure when the Mexican government granted her immunity (there is a death sentence on the life of every EZLN leader) to travel for medical treatment. She is recovering from surgery now and when she is able, with the aid of medication for the rest of her life, she will return to her people in Chiapas.

Although the government has reneged on the San Andreas Agreement in which it accepted the principles of self-determination, land rights and cultural integrity for the people of Chiapas, the EZLN and its civil partners are still willing to negotiate a peaceful settlement; even as they elude military pursuit and help communities resist crimes by the army and paramilitary groups including murder, rape, abduction and harassment.

International capital

In NAFTA the Mexican government agreed to open up traditional communal lands in Chiapas and the rest of Mexico to commercial agriculture and resource exploitation. Under the new Multilateral Agreement on Investment, the Mexican government will lose much of its power to grant autonomy to communities because it will commit Mexico, as our government will commit Canada, to sweeping new powers for international capital and corporations that will override national jurisdictions.

Mexico is also a member of APEC, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, which is developing new means to permit a freer flow of capital and resources in Pacific Rim countries. (APEC will meet in Vancouver in November and many alternate events are planned by citizen groups.)

If she were not an EZLN leader, Ramona would be dead. Few Chiapas peasants have access to expensive surgery and medication. In fact, Ramona used to be a street vendor, selling the mother dolls, that were transformed into Ramona Dolls, to tourists on the streets of San Cristobal. Street vendors are still too poor to receive specialized medical treatment.

Her transformation from street person to revolutionary leader has given hope and inspiration to thousands of poor women. She has given them a dream of possibility - the possibility to transform their lives and to dare to dream of transforming society. She has become a symbol to many other Ramonas struggling now and yet to be born.

When next you walk downtown or if you are ever a tourist in San Cristobal, remember the EZLN words when you turn your gaze downward before a street person, '...find there, not a victim, but a brother or a sister.'

Her name may be Ramona.

Terry Wolfwood is a Victoria activist who was a human rights observer in a Chiapas community this year with the 'Building Bridges' program. She is President of The Barnard-Boecker Centre Foundation and producer of the video 'Weaving the World Together', an account of women's activism around the world.

Legendary Zapatista Leader Comandanta Ramona Has Died

Andrew Kennis

January 7, 2006

TONALÁ AND SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS, CHIAPAS, MÉXICO: After a decade-long bout with cancer of the kidney, Zapatista leader Comandanta Ramona died early yesterday morning. Choking back tears and with a wavering voice, Subcomandante Marcos made the public announcement of Ramona's death in the midst of the Chiapas segment of the nationwide six month Zapatista led "Other Campaign."

"I want everybody to listen to what I am about to say without any interruptions. Comandanta Ramona died yesterday... The world has lost one of those women it requires. Mexico has lost one of the combative women it needs and we, we have lost a piece of our heart," said Marcos. The self-nicknamed "Delegate Zero" went on to say that the activities planned for the next few days would be cancelled and that the Other Campaign delegation would be immediately travel to Oventic for funeral activities that were closed to the public. The emotional announcement came around 4pm central time yesterday, after an abrupt hour-long pause to a nearly six-hour long town-hall like meeting in the small coastal town of Tonalá.

An advocate for women's rights and artisanship, Ramona woke up yesterday feeling weak, but still traveled from Oventic to San Cristóbal de las Casas. During the course of the trip, she passed away.

The last public appearance by Comandanta Ramona came this past September, when she spoke in front of the plenary sessions that were held to plan the Other Campaign deep in the Lacandon Jungle, in the heart of Zapatista territory.

Ramona was the first member of the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee (CGRI), the leadership body of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), to have died since the end of



Comandanta Ramona, 1959-2006

their uprising twelve years ago. Her struggle with cancer was a long one, in which she received a kidney transplant in 1996 after extensive grassroots fundraising. Most sympathizers consider the transplant as having brought her an extra decade of life. As a result of her illness, Ramona made few public appearances since the Zapatistas came into the public eye following their uprising, but she nonetheless made her mark in a number of ways within the influential indigenous rebel group and far beyond, with its supporters.

In 1993, Comandanta Ramona, together with Major Ana María, extensively consulted indigenous Zapatista communities (back then, still underground and not public) about the exploitation of women and subsequently penned the Revolutionary Laws of Women. On March 8 of that year, the Revolutionary Laws were passed.

Ramona was a petite, soft-spoken woman charged with significant responsibilities, such as having been entrusted with the military leadership in San Cristóbal during the uprising in 1994. In February of that year and after the Zapatistas called a cease-fire to the twelve-day long uprising in response to mass peace marches, Ramona was the first Zapatista representative to speak during peace talks with the government. Two years later, when the Mexican authorities forbade the Zapatistas from participating in the National Indigenous Congress in Mexico City, the frail and ill-struck Ramona was asked to represent the Zapatistas. The plan worked as the government conceded to Ramona and she went on to represent the Zapatistas, speaking in front of 100,000 supporters in Mexico City's Zocalo during the important nation-wide indigenous gathering.

The Mexican government, baffled by the popularity of a poor indigenous woman, made numerous attempts to undermine her influence. In 1997, it went so far as to state that the rebel leader had died and when she made public appearances that proved otherwise, authorities accused the Zapatistas of having used a "double."

Ramona's death is reflective of a health care crisis that the impoverished indigenous communities of Chiapas continue to suffer from. In the highlands of the southeastern Mexican state, where most of Chiapas' indigenous residents live, there are no hospitals. The state government has promised for years to build a hospital in San Andrés Larráinzar (the same town that peace accords between the Zapatistas and the Mexican federal government were signed in 1996 but never implemented). However, the promise to build such a hospital has not been acted upon and Chiapas continues to lack crucial health care resources in its remote regions. Only in San Cristóbal, which is anywhere between two and twelve hours away from most indigenous communities, can women access preventative studies that could save the lives of women with early detections of cancer. In addition to the lack of hospitals, medical costs are often prohibitive to many of Chiapas's poor and infirm.