

## **Interview with Major Ana Maria of the EZLN**

*This text was transcribed from an interview with Major Ana Maria of the EZLN, recorded inside of the Cathedral at San Cristobal during the Feb. 94 dialogue.*

February 28, 1994

**Ana Maria** - The thing is that we are interested in getting information about our struggle published at a national and international level. We want the whole world to understand what we are. Until now, the Mexican government has not wanted to recognize us a real force. They think that we are a little group, as they have called it, of "transgressors of the law" or "delinquents." But we know that we are not. We are a people that is organized and wants to be heard, wants its demands to be met. This is something that has not been done for many years. We have been struggling as human beings, as Mexicans. So far, the government thinks that we are a group of foreigners, that we are from other countries, and they think that it is only a small group tricking the people, pulling the people into an armed struggle like this. That is what the government thinks. But we say: But who is it then, if we are all the people who are here? Right now, for example, the Committee is here. They are those who command, those who give orders. Well, not those who give orders but those who lead us, the leadership. It is the people, the campesinos, the Indigenous people who are here.

There are some ladinos who are here. They are those who are helping the ones who understand. For example, Subcommander Marcos is a ladino. But they are not foreigners. We know where he is from. We are not being fooled by anyone. It is us, the campesinos and the Indigenous people who think that this needs to be done, what we did in January. It was already necessary, because we could not find any other way out of this situation. We had spent years struggling peacefully, we held marches, we had meetings, we went to the municipal palaces and the Government Palace, and we went to Mexico [City] to the National Palace of Mexico to shout, to ask, to agitate in front of the government. They never paid attention to us. They always gave us papers full of promises. Then, what good is a piece of paper, filled with promises, to us? And we would look at that paper when we went back to our towns. We would read the papers and the promises and nothing ever came. Or, with that Pronasol they sent some things, they ordered a clinic built, but they left it half-built. They left buildings with no medicine, no doctors. What good is a building, a house like that, to us? Or, for example, we asked for schools. The only thing they did, that work of the government scheme called *Solidaridad*, was that they sent paint and they painted the school, and they painted "Solidaridad" on the wall. But they did nothing else. They didn't send teachers,

they didn't send materials - teaching materials are necessary for studies. None of that came. They gave nothing but promises.

So then we got together, the campesinos and the Indigenous people...

**Q:** When did you begin to get together?

**AM:** About 10 years ago. We started slowly, to get together, to talk and to understand: Why is the situation like this? Why does the government not resolve our problems? And when we wanted to do something, when we go and we take farms, for example, because the land is there, where we live. It is like our mother that takes care of us and feeds us. Without the land, we can't live, we would die. But since they never give us lands, they never have, we started to organize legally, without arms or anything, peacefully, and they went and took a farm, an abandoned farm. Since not all of the farmers live there, some leave them. We are told that that land belongs to so-and-so, and we don't even know them. But we see, there is the land, and we work on it. If the owner is not there, we work on it. We went in there, the campesinos went in there, to work the land. They built their houses there and took the land. It's been called an invasion; we invaded the land. And then they sent the Public Security forces, since that is what the government does, send its security forces, to burn the houses that had been built, to evict the people with sticks and beat the people. They grabbed our leaders. They put them in jail. They dragged them along with horses to torture them. That is how the government responded.

**Q:** Then all of this has been happening for the last 10 years?

**AM:** Yes, over the last 10 years all of this has been happening. And so we took up arms. We cannot do this peacefully. The government has its army. It is not true that the army operates with military autonomy. That it's job is to defend the Mexican people, defend the nation; this is not true. They are in favor of a few. It is not just. It is not just that the Army massacres its own people, its own race, the same people as they are. So we said, "No, to defend ourselves we have to take up arms, as well." If not, how? They will continue killing us like that. They kill us with hunger. And if we struggle to survive, we look for land that is not being used, they order us killed by the Public Security, who are the ones that come the most often. So this people said, "We have to unite. Unite and get arms and fight, too... If the government does not pay attention to us peacefully, then we will make them pay attention to us with force."

**Q:** I heard that there is something written called the Women's Law. How did you put this together?...

**AM:** Right now we could not bring anything. We do not have it here. But if you have patience to wait for the next one, because we know that this time the dialogue will not be completed because there are many things that the government will not approve of that are on that paper now. As they have always done, they give you a ton of paper, which is

what they have done until now. The government has committed itself to meeting 50% of the demands that we have. But they are leaving off the most difficult ones, like the last one, which is about democracy and justice and land, for example. So there are still some points left there. And more than that, about democracy, because they tell us that we cannot, that this problem cannot be fixed at a state level. It has to be looked at at a national level. So that is where we are up to now.

And we think that if they do not accept our demands, as we ask them to, the dialogue will not be completed this time. We will have to go, consult with the people, ask the people if they agree with what the government commits to, and come back again, to say "yes" or "no."

**Q:** Are you also part of a group of women?

**AM:** Yes. I am part of the Zapatista National Liberation Army. Within the EZLN there are insurgents, and I am an insurgent, a military person. Then there are a group of militias, which are our compan~eros who live in their towns. But when it is necessary for them to prepare with their arms, then they prepare with their weapons and they go and fight when they are needed...

**Q:** Women?

**AM:** No, I was speaking in general. Then I will speak to you of the women, how the Women's Law came about. So that is the make-up of the Zapatista Army. Then there are other people as well. They are what we call bases, bases that support the combatants, give us food. So with all of that, we form the Zapatista National Liberation Army.

About the Women's Law, well there are many women within the Zapatista Army; there are insurgents, who dedicate ourselves to military life, we prepare ourselves with weapons...

**Q:** But do any of you have families? For example, do you have children?

**AM:** No, I don't.

**Q:** But you are married. I can see the ring.

**AM:** [laughs] Yes.

**Q:** You're young?

**AM:** Of course.

**Q:** How old are you?

**AM:** I am 25 years old. When I was very young, I joined the Zapatista Army. I saw

almost the whole process of this organization, of how it moved forward. I was one of the first women who was part of the ranks of the Army. We were a few compañeros, men and women, and we began to work, and then we began to go out to the towns, to the communities, and explain our struggle. And also to see what they thought, what they felt needed to be done. We saw that the life that we were living there was too unjust...

So, then in our work, since I was a woman, an Indigenous woman, a campesino. Even though I have light skin, but it is a family thing... But just for that we do not stop being campesinos, or Indians. They saw that I was a woman, and they saw that women can also do things. That women can organize themselves, and that they can do things other than what they do in their houses and their homes. Women have the capability of doing other kinds of work as well. And then women started to enter into the Army. Women started to get together and organize themselves, and they started to join the ranks of the Army. And then other women did not join, but organized themselves into women's groups, women alone. They organized themselves. They formed ranches of pigs. They did collective projects such as baking and sewing, and that is how they started to organize themselves as women's groups. And also many, many women started entering our organization. For example, for each family, for each man that entered into the struggle, and said, "Yes, I agree with the struggle and I want to struggle," many people came to look for us alone. And we would accept them, help them, because that is what we were there for. They would join with all of their family, and within the families were women: women, children, old people, everyone. We integrated them all into the Army. And that is another way that women entered the struggle. And some went to be insurgents, others stayed in their towns as civilians doing political work, organized in women's groups. Then, when we were many people, a very large organization, we said, "We now have the necessary force to fight. Now we will make the government know what we are, to see if this way, with arms, they will pay attention to us."

**Q:** Where do the arms come from?

**AM:** That I do not know. Only our command knows that. But I can tell you that these arms were obtained by the people with their own efforts. They took their little money...

**Q:** You saved your money to buy them? This was your own....

**AM:** Yes, their own effort. Where they got them? That I don't know.

**Q:** There are rumors that you bought them from the federal forces that took arms from the drug traffickers [mispronounced in Spanish]...

**AM:** Drug traffickers [laughs]. Yes you can see the corruption...

**Q:** Yes that, and they thought that you would sell them again to the drug traffickers. But instead of this you kept them. I don't know if this is a rumor, or whether it has been written, but this is what they told me. Taking advantage of corruption...

**AM:** Yes. That is how we went gathering arms, but it was with the sacrifice of the people. Little by little, it took many, many years, that sacrifice. And now they tell us: "Hand over your guns." And we say, "No. No, because it is ours, it is something that belongs to us." How can they say that? It would be a humiliation to hand in what is ours, what was gotten through so much sacrifice. So now we say, "No, we will not hand in our arms until we see our demands being met, and all of what we need, which is what we ask for. All of our principal demands, and also the demand of the Mexican people for democracy." So now we say, "No, we cannot hand in our arms."

So, that is how the people started to get together. That is also how the women got organized. So now there are women who represent the women as well. And not just women, but we represent all of our people as well, women, children, everyone.

**Q:** There are many rumors. I heard that there was, in the group of women, in one of the manifestations, the women said that they would be in charge. "We will pick our partners, we won't stand for the abuse any more."

**AM:** This is part of the Women's Law, something that I was going to tell you about. The Women's Law was born when we had already started to think: "There are now many of us, and we are armed. We have enough weapons, and now we are going to vote to see if people are agreed that now is the time." We asked all of the people, but the people were demanding, "It is time to fight, we need to fight, because we can't stand this situation any longer." And they were demanding this of us. And so what we did was find out the opinion of everyone. And everyone said that they agreed and that they thought it was important to make our laws. And so we decided that we should make our laws. Let's put on paper what we want to demand of the government. A general law was made, but there was no women's law. And so we protested, and said that there has to be a women's law when we make our demands. We also want the government to recognize us as women. The right to have equality, equality of men and women. And that they respect and recognize what we are. And so there was a law where we ask that they give us the right to freely choose our husbands, without being obligated to, because within Indigenous life we are obligated to get married even when we don't want to. Another is to have children, the number of children you want to have, but not to have to have so many children that your hormones run out. We have to choose, to decide. That is the petition that we made.

**Q:** This interests me, and this explains a lot. In other underdeveloped countries as well, and in traditional cultures, it is also true that women don't have any rights. Their fathers

can order them, and can even choose who [they marry]... Was this the same for you, before?

**AM:** In Indigenmous campesino life... A young man comes who wants to get married, wants to ask permission to marry someone. He comes, but he asks the father, he doesn't ask the opinion of the young woman. And then what happens is that the father accepts, many of them accept without asking the opinion of the young woman, whether she likes him or doesn't like him. And so they sell her.

**Q:** They sell her?

**AM:** Yes, that is, in exchange for the young woman marrying the young man he has to pay some money... Women do not like this. Many times they do not even know the man, what he's like. They cannot live with him because there is no time spent as partners, nothing like that. They ask for you, the father gives you, and when the time comes to get married, you get married. Many women go crying, because they don't want to. That is why this came out in the law, that they give us, that we should have the right to choose, that they can not sell us like the land. That they can not obligate us to get married, to have many children. This is very difficult, very difficult for women. We think that women suffer more than men. Of course, they suffer the same exploitation, and the children as well, the same exploitation, the same misery, the same injustice. But in addition to that, women are also dominated. This is by the same ideology that we have, that all of us have. Of course, we do not place all of the blame on men. It is from the same ideology, the same condition that we live in in our country. There is mistreatment of women.

In addition to this, suffering this injustice, suffering this misery, they suffer to see their children die of hunger, of curable diseases. And this is why this law was born. And another thing is that in the Women's Law we demand that there be respect for women. We demand respect. Many times, they don't respect us. They think that women are something worthless. So this is also why this law came out, demanding respect, demanding that we be respected. And it demands punishment for men that rape, that grab by force. This has happened many times, and more among Indigenous women, campesin women. They see her all fucked up, and all of that, that she'll let them, and they grab her. Here in San Cristo'bal, for example, many women have been raped. They just grab them. Servants and all of the women that work in the houses of the ladies, they grab them and rape them. Many times these rapes are not publicly known, they are not published, they are not told of, they do not accuse them of all that happens.

And another of the demands in the law is that women do have the capacity, if they are taught to do other kinds of work, not just grind the corn, make the

tortillas and the food, take care of the children, sweep the house, go get firewood when the husband is not home. This is the work of Indigenous women in the home. But it is not taken into account that if women are given studies, education, they can do others kinds of work. We realized this when we started to enter this struggle. That if we are going to do many of the thing that men are doing, we can study, we can be leaders. I am the leader of a unit. And that we can be representative of something big. For example, Ramona, a compan~era who represents several women and who is a leader of a group of women. But before, this did not exist. Because people always thought that women couldn't do anything.

**Q:** For how many years have women been in positions of power? You said that you have been struggling for over 10 years. Can you calculate for me how many years women have been leaders?

**AM:** Yes, since we started to enter into this struggle. Since we started to form part of the struggle. Yes, we had opportunity to participate...

**Q:** There are Indigenous people in the [Federal] Army. There may be a point at which people say, "Enough, that is enough..."

**AM:** We know that not all of the [Federal] Army is so stupid as to do all of that massacre, like they did in Ocosingo, for example. We know that many of the soldiers do not like to do that, because they are Indigenous people, too, of the same campesinos. We know that there is a lot of discontent in the Army. They are not happy that they are ordered to kill, because they are killing their own race.

**Q:** Have there been any soldiers that left the Army?

**AM:** Yes.

**Q:** Did you know them? Did you speak with them?

**AM:** No, others told us about them. There were some...

**Q:** Rumors...

**AM:** No, they are not rumors. They are real. Because we have people who tell us what is happening with that. These are real things. Several soldiers who deserted got to one town and said that they were not in agreement with what was being done. They send the new troops in front and they send them with 30 bullets! According to that report, they send them with 30 bullets. In other words, they send them like meat, so that they confront us and they are killed first so that these officials can defend themselves. We know this and we know that not all of the Army is ready to kill their own people. There are people who do have hearts. For this reason, at the beginning, when we began the

war, we asked them to surrender. We also know that many people [in the Army] are Indigenous people, were campesinos. We asked for their surrender so we would not fight against them....

**Q:** How do you feel, as a woman, learning how to handle a rifle and then feeling the capability of killing... Do you understand my question? You do not appear to me to be a violent person. Well, you speak very quietly....

**AM:** Yes, taking up a gun, that is something very, very important. I am proud to being able to do that. Of course, we do not like to kill. We kill, not out of taste, but out of need. They have obligated us to take up guns and kill to get what they have never given to us. But I, as a woman, feel good. I don't feel like a delinquent. I don't feel like a transgressor of the law, as the government has been calling us. I don't feel like that because I know I am representing a people. A people who struggle, a people who are doing something just and something necessary. Even if we do not kill, if there is no war, it is as if there is, because day by day our people are dying. Our children are dying of hunger and of curable diseases. We cannot do anything else, because we have absolutely nothing. There are no hospitals, there are no schools, there is no food, there is nothing. Our children are dying, our people are dying. Because of this our struggle is just, it is just that we have taken up arms. And for women, it is just that women take up arms to defend themselves. That is what we have arms for, to defend ourselves. We are not delinquents. We don't like to kill. [...]

We have been attacked. The Mexican Army complains that we attacked them in Rancho Nuevo. But what happened during the past years when they came, when they attacked us in other places, when they evicted us? They don't take this into account, what they have done to us. We have been attacked. They don't say what they did when we were not even armed. When we weren't even prepared. They attacked us. But we know the history of our Mexico, our country, and we grab onto these roots. We have roots. It is the same people who have killed throughout history, that do this now. It is the same Army, the same governments of always. Even though they change, they act in the same way...

**Q:** I think that if I were threatened, I would be able to kill someone, too. I don't think I would like to do it. I would rather avoid any problems.

**AM:** That is what we are trying to do now. That is why we have sat down to dialogue. We do what the people ask. The people have asked that we try this way, and we are going to try it. We are going to try it, because we don't like to kill and we don't like to make war. Because of that, we have sat down to dialogue, to see what we can get out of it. But if things are not resolved this way, we will have to continue what we have set out for ourselves.

