

The Politics of Massacre: Acteal, Low Intensity Warfare and NGOs

by George Caffentzis, January, 1998

I. The Acteal Massacre

The shooting started at 11 AM on Monday, December 22, 1997 in the outskirts of Acteal, a small village in the Chenalho municipality of Chiapas. But no one was killed just then.

In fact, it was a typical morning in the highlands (Los Altos) and in the North of Chiapas in late 1997. Gunmen of the local paramilitary groups, armed and aided by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) officials, were becoming bolder in their intimidation of the growing dissident movement composed of Zapatista sympathizers, "Abejas" (anti-PRIistas committed to non-violence) and supporters of the opposition Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD). The paramilitaries would regularly try to terrorize the dissidents by a firing random shots into their homes, by provoking murderous brawls, and even organizing ambushes. They had largely been responsible for nearly 1500 deaths since February 1995. But they had not committed a massacre, yet.

December 22 was different. Instead of abating, the automatic weapons fire went on for hours into the middle of the afternoon. Slowly the refugees who had been terrorized enough to leave their houses in Acteal and neighboring villages in the previous weeks and were camping in makeshift shelters about 50 meters down a hill from the main road were corralled into the camp. They huddled under the palm leaf covered shelters or in a small wooden chapel they had built. By that time they were mostly women and children and as the shooting and anger of the paramilitaries increased in intensity, they must have known, at least by 4:30 PM, that something terrible was about to happen.

They were not alone in this knowledge. Many others who were not in Acteal knew what was to happen. Zapatista sympathizers from the nearby town of Polho went to Acteal earlier to warn the refugees about a coming massacre and they managed to convince some to leave the area. Members of the Fray Bartelomeo de las Casas Human Rights Center (FBCHRC) and of the San Cristobal Diocese had also received word that something terrible was going to happen in Acteal on Monday, December 22, They telephoned the Governor of Chiapas that morning and throughout the afternoon to demand that he intervene to stop the massacre. But all they got were the reassuring words of the Governor's Secretary who replied all throughout the day, "Don't worry, Father," and "Don't worry, counselor, all is well in Acteal."

The paramilitaries had completed their enclosure of the people at about 4:45 PM and night was approaching. Many of the people were in the chapel praying, so they began to shoot into it, killing some and when the remainder tried to run out, they were shot or

hacked with machetes at the entrance. Many more were killed than wounded and most of the forty five murdered ones were women and children. After the massacre, the killers stripped and mutilated many of the bodies. The killers threw the corpses down an embankment into a tangle of coffee bushes. They apparently also tried to dig a couple of ditches to bury some, but they seem to have abandoned the effort as night was coming on and word of the killing was spreading. Indeed, within a day it was international news, sending a message from Chiapas, to Mexico and the world.

But what was that message? What is the appropriate reply? In this article I will place the Acteal massacre as a turning point in the Low Intensity War (LIW) the Mexican government (with the open assistance of the U.S. government) has been carrying out against the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Chiapas. I will also discuss the politics of the humanitarian emergency caused by the creation of a refugee population after the Acteal massacre. Finally, I will briefly examine the various demands that the Zapatistas and human rights groups like FBCHRC are putting forward.

II. Massacre and Low Intensity Warfare (LIW): The dilemma of the EZLN

(a) LIW from February 1995 to December 1997

After the Mexican government failed to militarily crush the EZLN in February 1995, it turned to LIW strategies suited to the particular terrain of Chiapas and social composition of the rebellion. The strategies were organized according to three different geographical regions:

- (1) the Selva,
- (2) the Altos and the North;
- (3) San Cristobal City. All these strategies had one purpose: to gradually wear down the EZLN and its support structures without provoking direct confrontation with the Mexican Army.

The government's strategic point in the Selva was to literally drown the EZLN in soldiers, roads and money. Between thirty to fifty thousand troops were poured into a relatively unpopulated region of Mexico until there was a ratio of one soldier for every two residents. The military encampments were constructed immediately adjacent to all the openly declared EZLN villages. These camps often housed more troops than residents in the villages they were to intimidate. An ambitious policy of road building was launched by the army in order to make motorized warfare possible throughout the year, especially during the rainy season, when roads were previously impassable. Finally, any non-EZLN community in the Selva was amply rewarded with government funds and construction projects like schools and hospitals while Zapatista villages were financially starved.

The EZLN was not present in highlands and the North outside of the Selva. But an ever growing number of EZLN social bases, and a new dissident sector, the "Abejas" (the Bees), who agreed with the Zapatista goals, but were committed to non-violence, were

located there. The LIW strategy in the Altos and the North was to use paramilitary groups to harass and kill these dissidents or force them to physically leave the area.

The city of San Cristobal was the headquarters of the Diocese, the various NGOs (including CONPAZ until its recent dissolution) and the FBCHRC. These elements of Civil Society were seen as crucial for the Zapatista movement for they kept information about the rebellion alive, they investigated human rights abuses and they took up the all important job of providing some tools for social reproduction during a period when the government was systematically denying them to the Zapatista communities. Direct killing and physical attacks had to be limited in the urban setting (although there were exceptions, e.g., the recent brutal attack on Bishop Ruiz's sister), so a more sophisticated campaign of psychological terror (death threats and kidnappings) as well as break-ins and arson assaults on organizational headquarters was launched.

(b) Successes and Failures of LIW

Over the last three years of the Mexican Army's LIW operation has seen some successes and some failures. A prominent success was the Mexican government's avoidance of a full-scale confrontation with the EZLN in Chiapas. Another success was the Mexican Army's ability to physically penetrate the depths of the Selva. Finally, though the EZLN was able to project its words throughout the planet and to physically march to Mexico City in October 1997, militarily it was bottled up in the most southern portions of the Selva and could not develop itself through the acquisition of new weapons or the training of new cadre. It had become an army whose weapon was the word.

The failures of the LIW included the inability to terrorize and neutralize the San Cristobal network of support for the EZLN and the larger dissident movement in Chiapas. But the most crucial failure of the LIW strategy was in the North and Altos and in general in the rural areas of Chiapas outside of Selva. Even though the bulk of the killing in the last three years took place there, even though a highly organized network of paramilitary groups, closely integrated with the PRI local and state government and with the Mexican Army, was organized, the Zapatista movement continued to expand there (from the formation of openly declared Zapatista villages, as in Oventic, and autonomous villages like Polho, to the creation of the "Abejas" movement, and, even more ominously for the PRI, to the spread of Zapatismo beyond the Altos and the North to areas previously considered safe like the Pacific coast and the Mexico-Guatemala border zones outside the Selva).

(c) Massacre as a tactic in LIW

One of the open secrets of LIW is the commandment: Avoid Formal Battles. Another secret is the importance of carefully staging massacres. Like executions, massacres not only physically eliminate enemies; they also have a meaning, and different massacres have different meanings. The meaning of the Acteal massacre is to punctuate the Chiapan LIW. It is meant to put an end to one phase of the LIW and to open another. On

the one side, its planners recognize the paramilitaries' failure to stop the dynamic expansion of Zapatismo in the Altos and in other areas outside the Selva, and on the other, they introduce a new phase of the militarization of the conflict outside the Selva. The men, women and children of Acteal have been used as the commas, periods and exclamation points of a diabolical plan of war.

The Acteal massacre, which was so clearly organized from the lowest to the highest levels of government, has been the pivot by which the Mexican Army has moved its troops into the Altos. The job of these troops is to restore a law and order that the government and the army has industriously been destroying since February 1995. The apparent Hobbesian war of paramilitaries against Zapatistas is now to be replaced by the Leviathan, in the form of the battle-ready soldier marching through the villages ironically sporting a yellow patch on his shoulder exclaiming that he is on a mission of Labor Social. The soldier now becomes a social worker who is to disarm both sides and bring back social peace. Not surprisingly, within a week of the massacre arms caches attributed to both to the paramilitaries and the Zapatistas were found by these social workers in their sweeps of the villages.

The Acteal massacre does not mean the replacement of the paramilitaries by the military, of course. Rather the Mexican Army is there to supplement the paramilitaries. The Army is turning the region outside of the Selva into a rural Northern Ireland, with the Army continually coming in "to restore an order" continually disturbed by the confrontations between the EZLN and the paramilitaries (according to the government's story)

But though the paramilitaries are there, the EZLN is not. Indeed, the massacre and the consequent militarization of the Altos puts the EZLN in a dilemma. If it responds militarily to the massacre and accepts it as a provocation, it will legitimate a massive Mexican Army armed attack on its bases in the Selva. If the EZLN does not respond militarily to the massacre, its role as an Army, the "E" in its Spanish name, is put into crisis. For the Mexican Army and the state police are putting on a show of neutrality by arresting some of the paramilitaries (although many are still moving freely around the villages in front of the survivors of the massacre!) while the EZLN is unable to physically project itself on to the scene in the Altos in order to protect Zapatista men, women and children.

III. NGOs, LIW and Neoliberalism: the dilemma of Enlace Civil and the FZLN

The Acteal massacre had a message, but it also had an effect. Before the massacre, many Zapatista sympathizers, Abejas, and other dissident groups in the Altos had left their homes in fear, but they still tried to keep close to their land by forming ad hoc camps near their villages. They apparently hoped that their concentrated numbers would protect them and allow them to remain tied to their land. For if the Zapatista slogan is "Land to the Tiller," what right did one have to the use of the land if she or he did not till it?

The Acteal massacre forced many to decisively change their calculations. Many who were pushed literally to the margins of their villages, finally left them and became displaced—a terrible condition for people who have made living in their place a vital condition of existence. A large refugee encampment in Polho and many smaller ones as far away as San Cristobal were formed almost immediately after the massacre and with them has come a new politics of humanitarian crisis and a new set of players in the midst of revolutionary struggle: the Non-Government Organizations (NGOs).

This politics has a contemporary ring, since it has only been in the last decade or so that domestic NGOs have become important in Mexico and in LIW campaigns throughout the world. Their recent development in Mexico was due to the harsh cutbacks in government funding for social reproduction, ordered by the World Bank and IMF after the 1982 Debt Moratorium. These cutbacks created a demand for non-state organized forms of social assistance. Moreover, with the increasing illegitimacy of the Mexican state as an object of social and class compromise, many groups began to operate in a new social terrain that had previously been dominated by the organs of the PRI party-state. The dramatic failure of the Mexican state to respond to the disastrous 1985 earthquake and the creation of hundreds of neighborhood and civic associations that effectively and democratically provided material aid to the millions hurt in the earthquake gave these NGOs enormous prestige. This network of groups was called "Civil Society" in Mexico.

The Zapatista uprising put this network into action and into a crisis, however. For it is essential to the NGO that it does not take a revolutionary position. An NGO politics must be vague and abstract; e.g., it can claim at best to defend basic human rights like the rights to life, education and health. If an NGO took an explicit political position, then such an entity would either be a "pre-governmental organization," prefiguring the way society would be reproduced under a revolutionary power, or it would simply be a governmental organization masquerading as an NGO. However laudable the aim of an NGO, it has a constitution that must make it autonomous of both the state and the political interests of the individuals it is helping to socially reproduce. As long as the state and the individual form the poles of society, there is a clearly demarcated space for the NGO and civil society to occupy.

Once a revolutionary movement appears, however, this space quickly begins to implode, partly because the state increasingly militarizes and overtly politicizes the intermediary space, and partly because the revolutionary movement also demands the end social reproduction for the state. A revolutionary group therefore puts the very constitution and space of NGOs and Civil Society into question.

Although the Zapatistas have glorified Civil Society and the NGOs that compose it, the EZLN's presence inevitably puts enormous pressure on these NGOs and their autonomy. The Zapatistas are very conscious of this tension and have been anxious to set up their own aid and support organizations, for the NGOs' effort to demonstrate their autonomy

from either the revolutionary movement or the state can result in short-changing or even ignoring the social reproductive needs of the EZLN and the Zapatista communities. Thus the EZLN has urged the formation of the Zapatista National Liberation Front (FZLN) and the Enlace Civil (Civil Linkage) which would put the needs of the Zapatista movement first.

Often, however, humanitarian crises and emergencies like a famine or epidemic are strategically created by the planners of LIW so that the very organizations responding to it will serve, either wittingly or unwittingly, their political purposes. This was shown time and again in Mozambique and Angola in the last decade where some international NGOs have become proxy agents for U.S. government or World Bank policies. The Acteal massacre can function in a similar way, since it brings both domestic and international NGOs on the scene and puts the Zapatista organs like the FZLN and the Enlace Civil in a dilemma. For if the Zapatistas respond to the needs of the displaced people in a partisan way, demanding, e.g., loyalty oaths and other signs of political allegiance, then the Zapatistas will lose much of their legitimacy. And if they make cooperation with other groups in the emergency contingent upon political conditions, then they would also lose much of their legitimacy. On the other side, if they operate in a totally open way, their resources will be so small that they will have to make alliances with extremely problematic national and international NGOs. It is one thing to turn away a Mexican Army truck filled with food from a refugee camp, but what of the International Red Cross, Oxfam, Caritas, Care, etc.? This is a field of viperous choices indeed.

IV. Escape from the Horns of the Dilemmas

The Zapatista movement is anxious to end the humanitarian emergency situation as quickly as possible in order to leap over the horns of the dilemmas that the Acteal massacre has thrown up. Their demands--Justice, Return, Disarmament--must therefore be understood in their full political context. Let us take them in turn.

Justice. This is not merely a call for the arrest, trial and punishment of the perpetrators of the killings at Acteal on December 22, 1997. Those responsible for the Acteal Massacre must be arrested, tried and punished as well. The Governor of Chiapas at the time of the massacre, Ruiz Ferro, is definitely at the top of this list. For he definitely knew of the massacre before it happened and did nothing to stop it. Indeed, his three year rule in Chiapas has been one in which the members of the PRI have been given impunity to intimidate and kill dissidents in the Altos and the North. It is only with his punishment (not simply his resignation) that the massacre machine he helped create will be dismantled.

Return. Clearly, the return of the refugees without justice would be an invitation to a repetition of the killings, but more is required. A system of adjudicating differences within the villages is necessary and such a system already exists in the indigenous

communities of Chiapas. The San Andreas Accords, which recognize this system and give it power, must be put into action in order to make real return possible. These Accords are an anathema to the present government leaders not because of their commitment to the sovereignty of the Mexican state, as they often claim. Zedillo and Salinas have been more than willing to deliver up Mexican sovereignty to the U.S. government and foreign investors. Rather, the transformation of the San Andreas Accords into law would mean that political, religious and economic differences within the indigenous communities could be settled internally and would not provide endless opportunities for the police and Mexican Army to intervene.

Disarmament. This demand does not simply involve taking AK-47s from the paramilitaries. Automatic weapons per se are not crucial here, as those paramilitaries in the Acteal massacre who hacked people to death with machetes show. What is crucial is the paramilitaries' impunity. This is their most powerful weapon and this impunity must be disarmed. Its source is the Mexican Army and its U.S. trainers and suppliers, for it is the Army that has given the paramilitaries a place and a meaning in the LIW it is carrying out against the Zapatistas. For true disarmament to be carried out the Mexican Army must be taken out of Chiapas and the U.S. government's supply of weapons, training and intelligence to the Mexican Army must be stopped.

Do these demands appear impossible? Are they any more impossible than that more Acteals?

Note: This article was written in San Cristobal, Chiapas on January 6, 1998 and it reflects the situation at the time as best as I could interpret it. I relied on two publications of the FBCHRC: "Camino a La Massacre" (December 1997) and "We Will Not Forget" (November 1997). For more information on the current situation connect to <<http://www.eco.utexas.edu/Cleaver/zapsincyber.html>>

by George Caffentzis
Department of Philosophy
University of Southern Maine