

## Chiapas: The Reconquest of Recuperated Land

Written by Mary Ann Tenuto

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The farm truck pulled off a dirt road into the ruins of an old and very large former plantation. It parked on the expanse of crumbling tile patio. Twelve Chiapas Support Committee delegation members, plus the driver, climbed out and entered a building painted rust and turquoise for a meeting with members of San Manuel's autonomous council, staff of the Compañero Manuel Grocery Warehouse and two municipal education promoters.

The former plantation, or finca, was claimed by indigenous rebels belonging to the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) during their January 1994 Uprising. The rust and turquoise building was just one end of the plantation owner's jungle mansion, now used as a grocery warehouse by the Zapatistas of San Manuel autonomous county. A new farming community called Nueva Arena has been established on the land. The Zapatistas refer to the land claimed in 1994 as "recuperated land." Chiapas NGOs estimate that campesinos from several organizations recuperated between 250,000 and 300,000 hectares of land in 1994. That translates into somewhere between 600,000 and 750,000 acres of recuperated land.

It is precisely this recuperated land that is now in dispute between the government (fronting for corporate interests) and the Zapatistas. This was the dominant theme throughout the time I spent in the state of Chiapas, Mexico from March 16 to March 30, 2010, with a delegation of twelve people.

### "It's All About Territory"

Once everyone arrived, we began to receive educational briefings from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in Chiapas. Our first talk was at the Center for Economic and Political Investigations for Community Action (CEIPAC, its Spanish acronym). The CEIPAC analysts focused on how one part of the current counterinsurgency strategy is aimed at re-claiming the land recuperated in 1994. The government wants the land back in order to

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implement the Mesoamerica Project, a massive development plan stretching from southern Mexico to Colombia, which proposes a re-colonization of the land by transnational corporations. "It's all about territory," one analyst told us. For example, February 20th (20 de Febrero) community illustrates one method of reclaiming land.

February 20th is located in The Canyons region of the Lacandón Jungle, in Ricardo Flores Magón autonomous Zapatista municipality. Its inhabitants belong to different organizations. Some belong to the EZLN and they occupy 100 hectares of land. Others belong to the Organization for the Defense of Indigenous and Campesino Rights (OPDDIC, its Spanish acronym). Still another group belongs to the Association of Rural Collective Interest (ARIC, its Spanish acronym). OPDDIC and ARIC members jointly occupy 130 hectares. The folks who occupy the 130 hectares went to the government's Agrarian Reform agency and said they occupy all 230 hectares of land. The government gave them title to all 230 hectares for a new ejido called Nuevo Oxchuc. Why? Because they agreed to enter the ejido into the land-titling program called PROCEDE, a program for privatizing ejido land titles so that individuals can sell, or otherwise alienate, their land. Prior to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), ejido land could not be alienated (sold, or taken by a bank for default on a loan). According to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, ejido land was communally owned, a result of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Article 27 was changed in preparation for NAFTA so that ejido land could be privatized. The Zapatistas refuse to enter into PROCEDE and they are defending the 100 hectares in question with an occupation by supporters from other communities.

Something similar is happening in Bolom Ajaw, a community with land adjacent to a virgin waterfall that connects to the Agua Azul Cascade tourist area. Bolom Ajaw is a Zapatista community on recuperated land. A former ranch, it was claimed as a result of the 1994 Zapatista Uprising. Approximately 200 Zapatista support bases have occupied Bolom Ajaw since 2001. They have been continuously harassed and attacked for the past four years or so by PRI members from the adjacent Agua Azul ejido. On January 21, 2010, 57 PRI members invaded Bolom Ajaw land, carrying pistols, machetes and radios. They began to construct 3 cabins. That was just the beginning.



Several weeks later, on February 6, PRI members from Agua Azul ambushed a group of Zapatistas in Bolom Ajaw. The Chiapas Attorney General reported 1 PRI member dead from a

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bullet wound and 11 injured by bullets. The Zapatista Junta in Morelia reported 1 Zapatista shot and gravely injured, while the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center (Frayba) reported 3 Zapatistas injured by bullets. The PRI members are suspected of still belonging to the Organization for the Defense of Indigenous and Campesino Rights (Opddic), a paramilitary group, although they claimed having left that paramilitary grouping in a much-publicized media show more than a year ago. The state Attorney General believes the Zapatistas fired weapons, thus violating the 15-year truce. The Zapatistas are claiming that they were not armed and say that the PRI death and injuries were caused by friendly fire. According to a detailed report now available from Frayba, PRI members were in several parts of Bolom Ajaw and were shooting from different positions. It states that some PRI members were caught in the crossfire and injured by the flying bullets, as were 2 Zapatistas. The government has responded by heavily militarizing the area around Bolom Ajaw, thus protecting the PRI members who remain on the property. The intent of the PRI members from Agua Azul is to take over Bolom Ajaw's recuperated land (which becomes more valuable every day), privatize it, and then sell it to resort developers.

An elaborate plan to convert the Agua Azul area into a "world-class resort destination" shows the importance of the Bolom Ajaw property. The government plan includes a Boutique Hotel, a European 5-Star Hotel, a Conference Center with golf course, and a Lodge overlooking the waterfall on Bolom Ajaw's property. But of course, one would have to helicopter into the Lodge due to its remoteness! (The Lodge has a helipad.)

Norton Consulting, which advises governments on the market possibilities for resort and real estate development in North and Central America, South America, the Caribbean and Europe, actually has photos of the spectacular Agua Azul Cascades region on its web site (See, <http://www.nortonconsulting.net>). Norton advised the Mexican government's National Fund for Fomenting Tourism (Fonatur) and collaborated on these very elaborate plans with EDSA, an architectural firm in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Simply stated, the Mexican government wants to turn the Agua Azul region into a world-class resort destination as part of the Mesoamerica Project and the Zapatistas of Bolom Ajaw are in the way.

## The San Cristóbal-Palenque Toll Road

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The key to Agua Azul's development as a world-class resort destination is the San Cristóbal-Palenque Toll Road. Absent a super-highway between San Cristóbal, Agua Azul and Palenque, the Boutique Hotel, 5-Star European Hotel and the Lodge with helipad will all be empty. However, the toll road has become a flashpoint of conflict between pro-government communities (in favor of the toll road) and pro-Zapatista communities (opposed to the toll road) located along its anticipated trajectory. Although no road construction is yet visible, the controversial project has already generated two deaths, numerous injuries, political prisoners, death threats, displacement and torture.

One of the communities taking paramilitary abuse because of its militant stand in opposition to the toll road is Mitzitón, an ejido that borders on both the current highway to Agua Azul and the Pan American Highway between San Cristóbal and Comitán. The highway to Comitán is being widened and that construction, also part of the Mesoamerica Project, is well underway. Mitzitón's ejido assembly voted to join the EZLN's Other Campaign and also voted to resist the passage of the toll road through its land. Other Campaign members in Mitzitón have experienced non-stop paramilitary activity, including murder and torture. It would not be surprising if an attempt were made to take their ejido land by fraud, with government complicity.

We were in the offices of the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center as yet another chapter in the Mitzitón saga unfolded. One of the ejido's council members, Manuel Díaz Heredia, had been detained the night before and taken to a state prison by the Mexican equivalent of the FBI on old and false charges. The ejido assembly voted to hold 2 state police and 3 state government employees as hostages in response. They also voted to put up a roadblock on the Pan American Highway demanding their compañero's release. Frayba staff members were in Mitzitón, where negotiations with the government were taking place, as well as at the state prison checking up on the ejido authority's situation. The Frayba Center has decided that it will accompany communities in their decisions as to how they want to deal with situations of conflict. If the community wants the Center's participation in negotiations or conflict resolution, then they will help resolve situations in accordance with traditional justice. If a community decides to mount a militant response to a conflict situation, the Frayba Center will accompany them in that decision and its consequences. Manuel Diaz Heredia was released from prison the following day after a judge ruled there was a complete lack of evidence against him.

## The Jungle

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Our delegation also received a presentation from Miguel Ángel García Aguirre and Moisés Hernández of Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste, an NGO that emphasizes ecology with social justice and focuses on La Selva (The Jungle) and its several parts: the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve, Las Cañadas (The Canyons), the Lacandón Community and Marques de Comillas. The Lacandón Jungle is an important "lung" for carbon exchange in North America. It is also enormously rich in biodiversity. In fact, Mexico ranks fifth in having the most biodiversity in the world. Mexico ranks sixth in the world for cultural diversity, having a population approximately 40% indigenous. Corporations covet land in the Jungle for: genetic material (bio-prospecting), spectacular beauty (tourism), vast expanses of land (mono-crop agriculture), plentiful sources of sweet water (bottling) and its oil.

The re-occupation of recuperated lands is also happening in the jungle, but the tactics vary by region. February 20th community, where PRI members obtained title by fraud, is in the Canyons region of the Lacandón Jungle. In the Montes Azules Biosphere, under the guise of "conservationism," a cabal from Profepa (the federal environmental prosecutor's office), the state police and various federal police agencies are green-washing the forced displacement of indigenous peoples. Not only do they remove them from their lands and homes at gunpoint, they burn their houses, crops and belongings, leaving them with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Any money found in homes or community stores is stolen. Harvested crops are confiscated or burned. The most recent of these forced displacements occurred on January 21 and 22, 2010 in the communities of Laguna San Pedro and El Suspiro (also known as El Semental), both in the Montes Azules. I cannot erase the image photo of police setting fire to the humble thatched-roof house in Laguna San Pedro from my mind!



The history of land ownership in the Montes Azules is already long and twisted, but most recently, the government gave title to the Montes Azules and a surrounding area known as the Lacandón Community to a group of 66 indigenous families whose origins are in dispute and called them Lacandóns for convenience. In their most recent request, the Lacandóns asked for the eviction of 8 communities and the government has agreed. Laguna San Pedro and El

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Suspiro were the first two of the eight. The plan is to develop eco-tourist facilities on these lands to become part of the Ruta Maya, a mega-tourist project within the Mesoamerica Project. The Ruta Maya (Maya Route) is a plan to connect archaeological sites and places of natural beauty throughout Mesoamerica by developing roads and lodging for tourism. We're talking massive tourism here! While in San Cristóbal, one can see the huge tourist buses packed with folks from other parts of Mexico, or from Europe or Japan. Some say that the Palenque airport, currently undergoing a major expansion, will accommodate direct flights from Europe when completed.

### Co-existence of Autonomy and Counterinsurgency

The CIEPAC analysts described the construction of Zapatista self-government (autonomy) in 38 autonomous municipalities (counties) and the 5 regional Good Government Councils. The development of autonomous government implies developing schools, education promoters, health promoters and health programs, clinics and income-producing projects to support the new government structures and institutions. Although sometimes difficult to conceive, the construction of autonomy is taking place amidst the resistance to counterinsurgency. This was dramatically driven home during our meeting inside the rust and turquoise Compañero Manuel Grocery Warehouse.

The Grocery Warehouse was an economic development project supported by several solidarity organizations. Its purpose is to bring grocery items from the city and make them available to residents of the outlying rural areas. By purchasing in large quantities and having a place to store the items, they can buy at wholesale prices. The warehouse then sells to the little community stores for a small profit. The community stores raise the price a little and rural farmers still save money because they don't have to pay for transportation into town to buy their needed items. Profits from the Warehouse support the functioning of the municipal government. It has been very profitable at times and modestly profitable at others. A government warehouse now competes with it.

The warehouse staff explained to us that the warehouse was supplying free food to the rotating guard in Casa Blanca, a disputed piece of recuperated land that campesinos belonging to the PRI would like to take over. In September 2009, PRI members from an adjacent ejido attacked Casa Blanca in an attempt to take it over. They were armed with guns, machetes and clubs. In the confrontation that followed, one PRI member was killed, 8 Zapatistas were injured, 8 Aric

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members were injured and 7 Zapatistas were taken prisoner. Those taken prisoner were brutally tortured for 36 hours. After this attack, San Manuel mounted a plantón (occupation) with 250 Zapatistas to guard the land. That guard has now been reduced to 25. The problem this presents to the warehouse staff is that there is no money from sales to replenish their stock. They are looking for a way to expand the line of products carried by the Warehouse in order to compensate for the counterinsurgency's drain on its profits.

It is not clear what the government wants with Casa Blanca. It is located in the Las Tazas Canyon, which is the valley of the Upper Jataté River. At one point, as a project within the Plan Puebla-Panamá (before it was renamed the Mesoamerica Project), the government had plans to dam up the river and convert the corn farmers into fish farmers. But archaeologists raised a fuss (there are remnants of archaeological sites scattered along the river) and it seemed like those plans were dropped. Perhaps those plans were not cancelled, just put on the back burner until the fuss died down. What is certain is that the government wants something in this canyon. It has fostered and protected paramilitary groups for at least the last eight years and there were once 4 military camps guarding just this one canyon. There are only two military camps now. The other two pulled out when they believed that they had trained enough paramilitaries to keep the Zapatistas under control.

The Jataté River is a white water river, perfect for kayaking. It is beautifully portrayed in Sacred Monkey River, a book by Christopher Shaw describing his kayaking experience on the Jataté. Perhaps the Las Tazas Canyon is wanted for tourism. A brand new two-lane highway to Monte Líbano is currently under construction. It passes by the turnoff for the Las Tazas Canyon. On the other hand, perhaps the canyon is coveted for its abundance of sweet water (unpolluted fresh water). In addition to the river, there are natural springs, aquifers and, according to some, an underground river, making it very attractive to corporations that monopolize water sources so they can bottle water for a profit. Thus it's hard to predict whether corporations envision a Jataté Hilton Lodge and Kayaking Club in the Las Tazas Canyon or a Ciel bottling plant. (Ciel bottles and sells purified water in Mexico. Coca-Cola owns it).

### Rural Cities?

As the counterinsurgency continues its efforts to re-conquer land recuperated by the Zapatistas, it would seem appropriate to ask where the indigenous people will go if the government is

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successful in obtaining this land for corporate exploitation. The government and the World Bank have just the answer: Sustainable Rural Cities (SRC). Remember the "model cities" in Guatemala and "strategic hamlets" in Viet Nam? The Chiapas version of these counterinsurgency mechanisms is already under construction in Los Altos. The SRC of Santiago El Pinar is being built on the slopes of a mountain, right next to San Andrés Sakamch'en de los Pobres, the autonomous Zapatista municipality in which the Caracol of Oventik is located. Another SRC is planned for the Jungle and a third in the Northern Zone. They are intended to compete with the Zapatista Caracols and their eventual result, if successful, will be to remove the indigenous peasantry from its territories and disrupt its way of life and production, thus giving indigenous land to corporations and making the peoples dependent on those corporations to maintain a new urban way of life.

Virtually unreported in the mainstream press, human rights abuse and repression go unpunished in a low-intensity war to re-conquer recuperated lands and displace indigenous peoples. Some analysts with whom we spoke stated that the Lacandón Jungle is the starting point for the Mesoamerica Project, which will then affect Central American countries and Colombia. Throughout both hemispheres of the American continent and the entire world, megaprojects involve the four wheels of capitalism: plunder (theft), repression, scorn and exploitation.

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*Photos from [SIPAZ](#).*