

# All Powers Against Zapatista Autonomy

by Jorge Alonso, Envío.

Mexico's oppressing powers want to stop Zapatista autonomy from surviving and propagating. The illegitimate presidential power of the National Action Party (PAN), the power of the army, the powers of the government-promoted paramilitary groups, the power of the Democratic Revolution Party-run Chiapas state government, the local powers of both the PRD and the Institutional Revolution Party (PRI) and the media powers have all joined forces in an offensive to wipe out the Zapatista autonomous communities. They calculate that this is the prior strategic step necessary to crushing the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) and its liberating project.

## The current assault

In *envío* we have been noting the many attacks against the Zapatistas, with the anti-Zapatista offensive turning more aggressive so far in 2008. The following is not an exhaustive list, but rather a few examples of the current assault.

Since the beginning of the year, Zapatista grassroots leaders in several communities have received death threats and many communities have suffered threatening incursions from paramilitary groups that have stolen their animals and other belongings. In January, the new municipal mayors in took office in Chiapas state, with many of them announcing they would evict the autonomous communities from their territories. In Zinacantán the problem caused by a Zapatista community being dispossessed of a water spring persists. The Zapatista communities announced that they would defend their lands, even if it meant being jailed or killed.

In February, a brigade from the Federal Electricity Commission cut off the electricity to various Zapatista grassroots families at the instigation of paramilitaries. Municipal police attacked autonomous communities, and it was charged that a Zapatista had been intentionally run over and killed. Paramilitary groups that carry out highway assaults tried in vain to blame their misdeeds on the Zapatistas. That same month, grassroots Zapatistas held a man for several hours who claimed to be a reporter but was actually an agent of the federal government's Investigation and National Security Center, whose espionage work is supported by the state police. The "Heart of the rainbow of hope" Good Government Board denounced that women who had gone to bathe had been attacked by state police and the community had had to defend them. Many autonomous communities have reported helicopters constantly buzzing overhead and have been subjected to constant police and army patrols. It was also again charged that social programs are being used as part of the counterinsurgency plans.

## Receiving only conflicts and pain from the government

In March, the civil organization Las Abejas accused both the federal official responsible for the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples and the Secretariat for Social Development of having entered the Acteal ceremonial center without its authorization. "They want to

deceive us and buy our consciences to keep us quiet and say we have relations with and trust the government,” it said. This organization pointed out that both the federal and state governments were waging a media campaign to deceive and confuse public opinion. That same month, the Zapatista Caracol number 5 felt obliged to issue a communiqué drawing civil society’s attention to the various problems the Zapatistas are suffering as a result of attacks on their autonomous progress. “The bad government wants to continue ignoring us and stripping us of our right to live and enjoy what mother earth gives us,” it stated, also expressing its opposition to the high electricity costs and taxes levied on the land, “which should belong to those who work it.”

The Zapatista communities are being pressured in many different ways to abandon their resistance. The “bad government” filled the paramilitaries with hatred so they would try to snatch away the Zapatista’s right to the land. Recalling that the Zapatista struggle has brought advances for everyone, both indigenous and non-indigenous, the Caracol members recognized that the Zapatista struggle is receiving only “conflicts and pain” from the government.

In April, several Caracoles commemorated the memory of Emiliano Zapata through community events, while pressure by cattle ranchers looking to take the Zapatistas’ lands away from them increased that same month and the federal government decided to put an end to the Coordination for Dialogue and Negotiation in Chiapas, arguing that it was unnecessary. The three levels of government (federal, state and municipal) have proposed penetrating Zapatista territory under the pretext of ecotourism projects. One Zapatista community complained about negligence and racism in a regional hospital that resulted in the death of a 72-year-old woman. It was also charged that the Government Secretariat had tried, unsuccessfully, to use indigenous grassroots Zapatistas to locate EZLN leaders.

## **Threats and provocation**

At the end of April, some 500 armed men entered a Zapatista community, kicking down doors and flattening dwellings. They kidnapped several Zapatistas, who were later released following actions by human rights organizations. That same community also suffered at the hands of the police. Although the threats of dispossessing people of their land multiplied, Zapatista responses to defend them increased. The attacked communities described degrading treatment and deliberately-started fires.

In May, several Good Government Boards announced it was time to defend what belonged to them and that they had already begun to do it. They assured that the autonomy process was continuing in the autonomous municipalities despite the counterinsurgent aggression. The “Altos de Chiapas” Good Government Board exposed maneuvers to take away part of the territory in one of its towns, in a case that revealed how the federal authorities’ application of agrarian programs created conflicts among the communities.

Toward the end of May there were charges of other police/military incursions into Zapatista communities, with helicopters buzzing over and incursions by several vehicles from different corporations carrying people bearing large-caliber weapons who raided houses without a judicial order. Las Abejas accused the prosecutor of the Acteal case of threatening its leaders. In other communities, groups linked to the PRI attacked Zapatistas over a dispute about water and electricity. Officially the incident was referred to as a confrontation, but the “Heart of the rainbow of hope” Good Government Board rejected the claim that the Zapatistas had responded to the aggression. They said the Zapatistas had tried to negotiate, but that the PRI sympathizers were intransigent and provoked them.

## **Danger of a confrontation**

At the end of May the Zapatistas informed civil society of military incursions in at least three regions of Chiapas. The aggression was intensifying. The Federal Environmental Protection Ombudsperson's Office evicted peasants in Montes Azules, with federal police support. Meanwhile, the "La Garrucha" Caracol condemned a military operation in its territory. The military claimed it was looking for marijuana crops despite the fact the Zapatista authorities have demonstrated that drugs are neither grown nor used in their territories.

At the beginning of June, the Oventic Good Government Board predicted regrettable events if the aggression continued and complained about increased harassment from PRD sympathizers. But the harassment strategy and the military incursions against Zapatista communities did not stop. In El Carrizal women kept the army from passing, shouting that they wanted liberty, justice and democracy, not soldiers. The soldiers, however, threatened to return in a few weeks. The Zapatista authorities said they were particularly concerned because the provocation was quantitatively and qualitatively greater than before and the danger of confrontation was increasing. The Zapatistas decided to organize better surveillance and resistance in response to the threat of the military returning to their towns. Meanwhile, army patrols continued on a daily basis on the outskirts of the Zapatista communities.

## **The case of Huitepec Hill**

Another serious conflict took place in the municipality of San Cristóbal de las Casas. Last year, the Zapatistas declared an area of 102 hectares on the Huitepec Hill a community ecological reserve. This year, the new PRI mayor threatened to evict the Zapatistas from that zone. In May, the "Central heart of the Zapatistas in front of the world" Good Government Board issued a communiqué to disseminate the news that "supposedly unknown" people had poisoned a well supplying a suburb of the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas. The board recalled that the Zapatista grass roots had been protecting the Huitepec ecological zone, but that the "bad government" had increased its harassment and without consulting them had decreed the supposed expropriation of the same land they had declared an ecological reserve in order to create a protected natural area. In April some inhabitants of a settlement had complained that the water from the hill's wells was not being fairly distributed, in that they were not receiving enough water because they were poor even though they had been living there for a long time, while rich people who had arrived more recently were receiving an abundant supply. The Good Government Board told the complainants that the water was inside the Zapatista reserve and they would make sure it was also distributed to the poor.

## **The fight for water**

While doing an inspection, the Zapatistas had found a dozen people around the springs, whose leader aggressively refused to ask the Good Government Board for permission to use the springs. The board's representatives replied that this was no way to work things out and that they had to go before the board before doing any work on the reserve, explaining that it wasn't a question of taking water from them, but rather distributing it to the poor as well. When the head of the group insisted that they didn't care what the board said, the board's representatives realized it was impossible to reach an agreement with them. They called on the poor people living around Huitepec not to let themselves be deceived and repeated that the Zapatistas were fighting for the lives of the poor and of all good and honest people, and suggested they go to the Good Government Board to find a way to distribute the water that sprang from mother earth fairly. Regarding the possibility of poisoning, the Good Government Board

announced it would study what substances had been introduced into the water, which was apparently contaminated with herbicides. PRI supporters from San Cristóbal de las Casas wanted to blame the Zapatistas, but couldn't prove that false accusation. It all added up to just one more provocation.

## **Ecological concerns?**

In mid-June a group from a neighboring PRI municipality tried to enter the Zapatista reserve on the pretext of wanting to plant trees, but with the real intention of taking control of the zone. As the Zapatistas keep up a constant rotating mobilization, the PRI sympathizers couldn't enter the protected area despite verbal confrontations and threats. It has been demonstrated in the press that the mayor's ecological concerns are pure deception, as he's more concerned about fostering exclusive land developments, many of which have threatened the city's aquifers. The Zapatistas, in contrast, have protected the zone with environmentalist ends.

In July the rumor spread that the municipal government would try to evict the Zapatistas from the area with federal support. The mayor was accused of "buying support" to remove the Zapatistas, who declared themselves ready to resist their ejection from lands belonging to their ancestors.

## **Hundreds of political prisoners**

Yet another process shook Chiapas during the first months of 2008. Several dozen prisoners in the state's prisons declared they would go on hunger strike until their rights were restored, as they had been deprived of their liberty without due process and had been subjected to torture and cruel and inhuman treatment to elicit self-incriminating declarations. Many demonstrations supported the hunger strikers in both Mexico and Europe.

Some of the prisoners were released at the end of March, while the others continued their struggle. The Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Committee (CDHFBC) proposed that the provisions included in international treaties signed by the Mexican government be considered domestic rights. The case highlighted the crisis in the Mexican penitentiary system and again spotlighted the case of two Zapatistas unjustly jailed in Tabasco for a crime they didn't commit. These two men, whom the government tried to use to pressure the Zapatistas, also joined the hunger strike. The "Roberto Barrios" Good Government Board then charged that the two had been transferred from Tabasco to a prison in Chiapas and the CDHFBC demanded their release. At the end of May, human rights defenders denounced the cruel treatment received by the two men, who were qualified as political prisoners.

The two Zapatistas were released at the beginning of June, having unjustly served 12 years in prison. The newspaper *La Jornada* recalled that the governor of Chiapas had recognized at the beginning of his administration that hundreds of indigenous people—many linked to the Zapatista movement—were in prison for political reasons, sentenced in judicial processes plagued with irregularities. He had promised to review hundreds of cases identified as examples of repression, but had done so only partially, and very slowly. In July, the CDHFBC, as one of the defenders of political prisoners, suffered persecution, aggression and death threats from paramilitary elements.

## Support for the “indigenous autonomous laboratory”

The Zapatistas are not alone. Mobilizations have been organized to support them in various European cities. In Athens, an international Zapatista meeting declared its opposition to the Mexican government’s assault on the Zapatista communities and demanded that the San Andrés Accords be honored and political prisoners released. Anarchist groups issued a communiqué declaring that the Zapatistas’ struggle “against the oppressive and exploiting state of affairs, both in Mexico and the rest of the world, is an example of an indigenous autonomous laboratory where true democracy is exercised by everyone for everyone.” They considered the Zapatista’s fight an expression of the global social war at many levels against all forms of exploitation and domination and against the decomposition of everything human.

On its sixth visit to Mexico, the International Civil Commission of Human Rights Observation (CCIODH) analyzed the threats against the Zapatista communities. It sustained that there was governmental responsibility for the Acteal massacre, despite which no justice had been done after so many years, allowing the impunity to continue. It confirmed that Zapatista peasants had been attacked and tortured and on presenting the report of its sixth visit warned of the “extremely critical” human rights situation in Mexico. It also expressed its profound concern over the police and military incursions into Zapatista communities. Meanwhile, other human rights organizations demonstrated that the military mobilization in Chiapas was of a magnitude not seen in years.

## The military siege is beginning to squeeze

The Chiapas Center for Political Analysis and Social and Economic Research (CAPISE) specified that the greater militarization and attacks on the Zapatista grass roots is the government’s response to the Zapatista’s decision to organize the Other Campaign across Mexico to build alternatives to the prevailing situation. It confirmed that the offensive against the Zapatista towns had increased and *Subcomandante* Marcos had gone back into hiding, with the army increasing its presence in the Zapatista territories under the pretext of fighting drugs. Finally, with the exception of *La Jornada*, the government had achieved media silence on the militarization and constant attacks on Zapatista communities.

Since President Felipe Calderón took office, 79 military camps have been established in Chiapas, 56 of which are in indigenous territory, 90% of them containing special troops supported by paramilitary elements. The paramilitaries consist of indigenous people, with the idea of facing them off against the Zapatistas to make it appear that the problems are caused by inter-community conflicts. The government has launched military operations against civilian Zapatista authorities and is closing its pincers with the construction of new highways to further squeeze the Zapatista zone by a military siege. The government strategy also includes the “smoke screen” of environmental protection. Meanwhile, civil organizations supporting the Zapatista communities have worn themselves down with campaigns to free political prisoners, only some of whom have been freed. According to CAPISE, the deployment of military forces has been alarmingly redefined against the Zapatistas. The tactical and military deployment responds to a logic of regular and irregular war, and is penetrating into free zones in which “a supposed enemy” is moving. The army is violating the free zones, closing off the space for free movement that should exist in times of truce and peace, blocking the space for civil and peaceful

struggle proposed by the Zapatista towns and proving itself intransigent against peoples building a comprehensive project around indigenous self-determination.

We are thus seeing the true face of an imposed government that represses and dispossesses with scandalous impunity. The new offensive focuses very specifically on the EZLN, the Zapatista civil authorities, their grassroots support and the Other Campaign.

## **The smell of war**

*La Jornada* journalist Luis Hernández Navarro has written about the new government provocation against the Zapatista movement. Although the government has tried since 1994 to discredit the Zapatistas by linking them to drug trafficking, it has failed because the Zapatistas prohibit the planting, trafficking and using of drugs. They don't even allow alcohol to be drunk or sold in their territories.

The new, crude attempt by the country's governors to link the Zapatista movement to organized crime seeks to exploit the wave of national resentment against drug trafficking, trying to erode the currents of favorable opinion toward the Zapatistas and then deal them a definitive blow. The Zapatistas have told the government that dishonest people, terrorists and drug traffickers are not in the Zapatista zones, "but are mixed up with the bad government."

Hernández Navarro reported that the army mounted one of its most dangerous provocations in a site that had just been visited by *Subcomandante* Marcos. From La Otra Jovel, Eugenia Gutiérrez sent out an article she titled "The Subcomandante's sense of smell." Half a year after Marcos said he could smell war, the aggression against the Zapatistas and the whiff of war have greatly increased, as all the above sources and others have documented and videotaped. But even though they are expecting a real military offensive, the communities go on with their daily life.

## **A year of abuse**

In May 2008, the CDHFBC published its annual analysis of human rights in Chiapas, covering the period from March 2007 to March 2008. It records forced evictions such as in Montes Azules, where aggression against communities that had been settled there for various decades was documented. It tells not only of evictions, but also of murders, displacement, material damages, the disappearance of whole village populations and the social fragmentation of the organizations that possessed the land. All of these actions were perpetrated by government officials. It documents the criminalization of social protest and notes that the institutional machinery provokes nonconformity, protest and resistance, then modifies the penal legislation and harasses social fighters, violating the most basic human rights. The government equates social fighters with criminals and opposes those who defend human rights.

The struggle of the political prisoners to demonstrate their innocence has revealed the inefficacy and politicization of the justice system. However, the fact that several did achieve freedom with support from civic mobilizations shows that acting in solidarity can counter the criminalization of social protest. The CDHFBC drew up a long list that shows how human rights violators are recycled into new political power posts and how those responsible for the genocidal policy in Chiapas continue to be concealed.

## **They are not isolated acts**

There's a new offensive against the population to guarantee the right conditions for the economic powers to accumulate greater wealth. Amid human rights violations the new political class has betrayed the democratic will in order to favor a few at the cost of the majority.

Following its report, the CDHFBC registered a record number of military and police incursions into communities in Chiapas, responding to a counterinsurgency logic in which a mixture of military, police and local actors operate in tactical deployments against territories with a civilian population organized around just social demands. The testimonies mention raids and physical and verbal aggression. The now numerous documented operations show the intensification of the counterinsurgency plan with the discrediting of organizations and communities in order to win support for the government from the civilian population, establishing a climate of psychological harassment through territorial deployment and reconnaissance, which also allow observation of the population's capacity to respond to such operations. The military incursions are assisted by federal, state and local actors and aren't isolated acts. They respond to the logic of an offensive against indigenous populations in resistance.

In June, retired Supreme Court Justice Juventino Castro y Castro said he could see a revival of the crime of "social dissolution." Meanwhile, a public manifesto from social fighters and personalities pointed out that the government and the Right are trying to criminalize solidarity, conscience, critical thinking and social research to proscribe and destroy the long tradition of brotherhood that has characterized the Mexican people.

## **Solidarity of the MST**

Gustavo Esteva, an academic committed to grassroots struggles, drew attention to the fact that the situation had reached its limit: faced with the aggression towards its communities, the Zapatistas were being left no other option than armed defense. Indigenous law specialist Magdalena Gómez considered that the recent operations by the army and various police forces in the territory occupied by the Zapatista Good Government Boards demonstrate the decision to break down the arena for indigenous government that has been constructed. She insisted that civil society has to question why there are no arenas for dialogue at any level. Congress' Concord and Pacification Commission is little more than a moldy old relic, so there's no reason for civil society to wait with its arms crossed while the Zapatista communities are brutally attacked.

At the beginning of July, the Rural Landless Workers Movement of Brazil expressed its indignation at and total rejection of the military incursions into the Zapatista communities. This social movement fears that the Mexican state will declare open war and try to legitimize it, while its real objective is to destroy the Zapatista National Liberation Army. Movement spokespeople warned that if the government continued attacking the Zapatista communities, their important movement would use all means available to generate mobilizations in solidarity with the Zapatistas and in repudiation of the Mexican state's military and repressive policy. The Brazilian Landless demanded that the Mexican government withdraw its armed forces detached to the conflict zone in Chiapas.

Meanwhile, over 200 groups from different parts of the world demanded that the Mexican government cease its aggression against the Zapatistas and lamented the Mexican media's conspiratorial silence. A group of democratic lawyers in Mexico delivered a letter to the embassies of France, Italy, Denmark and Germany calling on those respective European Union member governments to recommend that the Mexican government respect the law and stop using the army to attack and harass the Zapatista

communities. They pointed out that such harassment violates the Law for Dialogue, Conciliation and Dignified Peace in Chiapas approved by Congress years ago, as well as the different international human rights instruments.

## **The new way of doing politics**

Gilberto López y Rivas, who has many years of experience studying autonomy, has reflected on the proposal for a new democracy through autonomy. He's convinced that the Zapatistas have transcended and intensified self-government based on "commanding by obeying"; rotating positions of authority; revoking mandates; planning programmed participation in which women and young people participate, not just male adults; equitably and sustainably reorganizing the economy; adopting an anti-capitalist political identity; and seeking alliances. The Zapatistas have introduced a qualitative change into autonomies, taking control of their territory by extending the power from below, implying a rupture with the old ways of doing politics.

The Zapatistas view politics as something so serious it can't be placed in the hands of professional politicians, so have created another collective way of doing politics. They promote a multiethnic network of different communities, regions and peoples and concern themselves with reaching beyond inter-community conflicts over boundaries and resources, providing united responses to the pounding they receive from states and capitalist organizations. They are creating an autonomous subject that guarantees internal cohesion through consensus-building and a truly participatory, authentic democracy, attempting to overcome ethnic and political divisions and fighting corruption and the state's attempts at cooption. This new subject propels the mobilization of peoples and communities in defense of their rights and demands.

López y Rivas stresses that this kind of autonomy is a long way from the stereotypes of autarchy that some have tried to saddle the Zapatistas with. Autonomous processes produce substantial changes, reject the modernizing acculturation and traditionalist withdrawal and genuinely defend the common good, solidarity and respect for nature, reaching beyond the limits of ethnicity. That is the autonomy that the powerful, with the Mexican state at the head, would like to completely destroy by attacking the Zapatistas.

## **The Zapatistas constantly seek the peaceful way**

Philosopher Luis Villoro has insisted that the Zapatistas are seeking a democracy that has no room for violence or repression. And they have effectively been consolidating a project to build a world in which we all fit. With a cry of "Enough is enough!" they broke onto the scene through military action in 1994, but soon accepted the call from broad sectors of national and international civil society to make space for an exchange of words instead of letting their weapons do the talking. They set out on the road of dialogue, achieved the signing of the San Andrés Accords in 1996, but were betrayed by the government. They tried out all of the institutional paths until 2001, when the whole of the Mexican state—with the agreement of the executive, legislative and judicial branches and all the main political parties—betrayed them via the deceitful Indigenous Law, which turned its back on the essential points of the San Andrés Accords.

Since then, they have opted to build their own spaces of autonomy. With the exception of the first few weeks of January 1994, the path they have taken has been wholly peaceful. Their decision has been

radical by building a new social conscience that respects dignity, ensures participation for everyone, achieves in-depth democracy and seeks justice.

The Zapatistas have been heroic in adopting the peaceful way, but we all know that there is such a thing as legitimate defense. The oppressing powers have been attacking them and pushing them into a corner until their only way out is legitimate defense. The situation is very critical, but we can still stop that vital plant that is the Zapatista movement from being uprooted from the earth.

## **Time is running out**

The objective of this whole summary has been to increase awareness among those interested in human rights and concerned with preventing the violation of human dignity so they can find ways to stop the serious aggression being unjustly suffered by the exemplary Zapatista communities.

If they were to be massacred, the historical reversal would be very severe and would open the way for a cruel repression of attempts to provide a better life for the majority of people. The predatory project of the oppressive powers has to be stopped by raising our voices, exposing them to the whole world, and imagining and implementing actions that guarantee the peaceful expression of Zapatista autonomy. And we have to hurry, because time is running out.

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