

A DAY IN ZAPATISTA LAND

by Mark Lucey



The author is an American who has been traveling, studying, and supporting human rights work in Mexico and Central America for the last six months. In January this year, he joined a Civilian Encampment for Peace, popularly called peace camps, *in Morelia, an area controlled by the Ejercito Zapatista Liberacion Nacional or Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN). The following is his account of how the Zapatista women and children in this village faced an army blockade, a military action that is becoming terrifyingly common in many Zapatista villages in Chiapas.*

The Civilian Encampments for Peace began in Chiapas in March of 1995 after the February offensive against the Zapatista communities by the Mexican military. The peace camps are meant to establish a continuous international presence of "neutral" observers to deter the army from acting against the communities and to monitor and record the military's presence in the communities. Among the groups that coordinate sending people to spend time in the peace camps are Global Exchange (a human rights organisation based in San Francisco that builds people-to-people ties between First and Third World nations), Enlace Civil (an organisation in San Cristobal that promotes sustainable development in indigenous communities), and the Fray Bartolome de las Casas Center for Human Rights (also based in San Cristobal).

I turned to Chris as we walked along the dirt road leading out of the village of Morelia in Chiapas. The Mexican sun was blazing down on our necks and I was squinting despite the best efforts of my baseball cap. I

was still holding the plastic cup of morning java that I had forgotten to put down in the sudden rush out of the cement building where we Peace Campers stay. A man from the village had shown up at the door, out of breath, and said, "El

Ejercito viene!" (The army is coming!) I had shaken Chris from his slumber in his hammock and the ten of us campamentistas had grabbed our cameras and raced out the door to join the community in blocking the army from entering the town.

The evening before, we had attended a memorial for three members of the community who had died during the offensive of January 1994 when members of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) had announced their presence to the world by militarily taking over the local governments of several of the larger cities in Chiapas. The fighting gave over to peace talks between the EZLN and the Mexican government, but not before numerous soldiers had died, including three from Morelia. Toward the end of the memorial service, several men had rushed into the building and announced that they had received word that the army was coming. I followed the running crowd of people out the door and down the road to the entrance to the village when I suddenly realised that the men had all disappeared.

Only women and children had gone out to blockade the army!

I saw that a few of the women had gone into the woods by the side of the road with machetes and were cutting branches off of trees with which they were arm-

ing the other women. The children were collecting little piles of rocks. One of the leaders of the group, a woman named America, asked if a few of us *campamentistas* would go up the road a bit to be a lookout. Chris and I volunteered.

As we walked up the road in the increasing darkness, I thought to myself, "Do I really want to be the first to encounter the military when they get here?" But I pushed that thought behind me. A young boy and his even younger brother came running up to us.

"Tienes miedo?" (Are you afraid?), the boy asked excitedly.

"NO!" Chris said as emphatically as he could muster and asked the boy in return, "Are you afraid?"

"NO!" the boy answered, equally emphatic.

"NO!", his little brother echoed, looking as brave as a four-year-old can.

We waited there as the sky grew black and the view of the 60 women waiting in the road 100 meters behind us with sticks in their hands faded into the darkness. Eventually a man came by and told us that the army had turned around and that we could go back to the village.

That was the night before. This morning the same call had come. We marched down the road and reviewed what we, as Peace Campers, were supposed to do. We were not to become involved in the confrontation in any way. We were witnesses and photo takers, and we were an international presence that would hopefully deter the military from any sort of violence. Our job was to just be there.

But as we waited in the heat with the women and children, it seemed that it was another false alarm. Soon the people from the village left to go back to their daily chores and I stayed at the lookout spot with several of the other Peace Campers and a few children. I lay down in the rubble at the side of the road, pulled my cap over my eyes, and dozed off to sleep.

"THE ARMY'S HERE!" I sat up and looked around. Was it true? Indeed, up the road another 100 meters was a line of military trucks filled with soldiers. I jumped to my feet and saw two of the children running toward the village, yelling at the top of their lungs. I turned back toward the military convoy and saw that they had stopped. A man was climbing out of the front vehicle and was checking us out through a pair of binoculars.

Seemingly out of thin air, the women appeared. I can think of no better way to describe this than to say Angry Moms. Anyone who has ever seen her mother react to one of her children being treated unfairly has a sense of what I'm talking about. Multiply that by 100. A mother's rage is incomparable.

They came up the road wielding sticks and clubs and shouting with a ferocity that I was completely unprepared for. A crowd of children was at their feet, carrying sticks and rocks.

"KILLERS! ASSASSINS!"

"DEVILS!"

"WE DON'T NEED YOUR ARMY HERE!"

"GO BACK TO YOUR BARRACKS! MORELIA IS NOT YOUR BARRACKS!"

As they arrived at the crest of the hill where we were waiting, they came to a halt and fortified their ranks, waiting for others to catch up. I looked back toward the army and saw, to my surprise that they were turning their trucks around and starting to drive off! When the women saw this they surged forward and the fire seemed to flare up even stronger within them. They charged ahead.

At that point, all there was for me to do was to stay with them. That was my job. That is what I was there for and I had no choice but to go along for the ride. My senses told me that it was probably not the safest idea to go running after the military with sticks and rocks, but I had gotten myself into this situation and now I had a responsibility to be there.

My pale face would likely deter the soldiers from opening fire or beating anybody up.

I started to run with the surging crowd, as did the other ten Peace Campers and as we came upon the trucks the shouting grew louder and rocks began to fly. The soldiers in the *Cola del Convoy* (Tail of the Convoy) had to shield themselves as rocks bounced off their helmets.

"This is it," I thought to myself. "One of those soldiers is going to get really pissed off and just start mowing people down with his AK-47." As I ran, I kept my eyes firmly on the soldiers looking for one funny motion and scanned the sides of the road, thinking about where I would dive if anybody decided to get a little crazy with their firearm.

I had assumed that the women and children were simply going to run up to the trucks to let them know that they weren't afraid and then let the trucks go. But they had no such thing in mind. They kept right on

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running after the convoy. In the cloud of dust kicked up by the trucks, I looked around me and realized that I was the only Peace Camper in sight. Chain-smoking seems to be the cool thing to do these days for solidarity activists and the effects of that were quite clear. The rest of them were several hundred meters behind us by now, red-faced and sucking wind.

"Stay with us, *campamentista!*", one of the women yelled to me. "We need you to stay with us!" I picked up my pace a bit, just to let them know that I had no intention of falling behind. I looked at these women, 4'5" tall with babies on their backs, little plastic shoes on their feet, and sticks in their hands and said to myself, "If I can't stay up with them, I'm a sad excuse."

After about two kilometers, the army had disappeared ahead of us. The women and children began to slow down. But as we rounded a corner we saw that the convoy had come to a stop again. The women yelled for everyone to catch up and then surged upon the army like a flood. The children launched rocks, many bigger than a baseball, with amazing accuracy, and the women beat against the trucks with their sticks. "You should be ashamed of yourself!", I heard one woman yelling at a timid looking soldier in the last truck. "Your army killed my brother! How can you be an assassin and kill your own people?"

The other Peace Campers caught up, along with the rest of the village and soon there were about a hundred people yelling and screaming. There were 105 soldiers in 10 trucks. Several high-official-looking men climbed out of the trucks and came toward us. I stood off to the side while Chris frantically snapped photos. A man stepped toward us. He looked like someone straight out of a Tommy Lee Jones movie with mirrored sunglasses, a big mustache, a baseball hat, and a coat that said "NARCOTICO." "Where are you from?", he called over to Chris.

"The United States," Chris called back.

"Let me see your papers," the Narcotico ordered.

"Are you Migra?" (*The Immigration Police, whose main duty is to kick pesky international solidarity activists out of the country so that the military can go about its business of terrorizing the indigenous population.*)

"Yes."

"Let me see," Chris challenged him. The man pulled out a badge from his pocket and flashed it quickly, but not quickly enough.

"You're not Migra," said Chris. The man smiled, put his badge away, and went back to the others.

Another military man pulled out a camera and

aimed it at me. I put my head down, hoping that the brim of my cap would cover my face. When I looked up again, several of the men were motioning for me to come over to them. One of them flashed a badge, trying to intimidate me. I gave them my best Thousand-Yard-Stare and didn't budge.

The tension was building up. I watched the soldiers for any itchy fingers while the women and children continued to beat against the trucks with sticks. Soon the high-official-looking guys got back in their trucks and the convoy began to pull away again.

"Maybe this time they'll let them go," I thought to myself hopefully. But no such luck. The villagers ran after the trucks, continuing to hurl insults and rocks. Another kilometer away, the military trucks stopped again and the familiar scene ensued. By now, men from Morelia had decided it was safe to join us. Several of them engaged the high-official-looking guys, who had climbed out of their trucks again, in discussion.

I looked over and saw Chris beside one of the trucks taking a close-up photo of one of the soldiers. Then they exchanged some words. Later I asked Chris, "What did you say to him?"

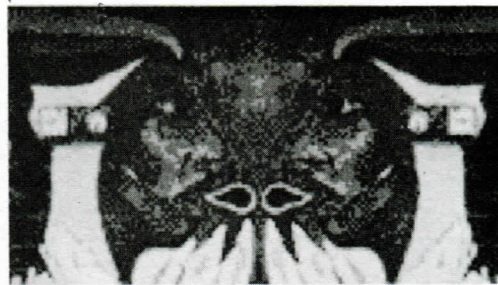
"I pointed at his gun and said, 'That's your gringo aid,' and then I pointed to my camera and said, 'and this is their gringo aid.'"

I sat down with the other Peace Campers in a group by the side of the road and waited to see what would happen. The Narcotico guy came over to us and said, "This is your fault! You foreigners organised this. You are putting these crazy ideas in the Indians' heads."

"He gives us too much credit," I said to the other *campamentistas*. The presence of foreigners in the EZLN villages has created a major impediment to the military's desires to control the indigenous population. Unlike in the past when the military could effectively break up a rebel movement by going into a few villages, massacring a bunch of people, and demoralizing everybody like in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, the presence of Peace Campers has made that option more costly.

Dead foreigners are very bad press. Recently, the Mexican press has been filled with anti-foreigner propaganda, spreading the idea that these crazy visitors are causing all the problems down in Chiapas. The sentiment is catching on. I can feel it when I walk down the street.

Finally, the army climbed back in their trucks and drove off in a cloud of dust. This time the people from



Morelia did not follow. They clapped and yelled a few final insults and then we all turned to walk back to town. A woman came up beside me and said, "So now you've gotten a taste for what life is like for us in the EZLN. We live in constant tension and fear of the military when all we ask for is the right to be treated with dignity."

"Thank you for being here with us today," said a man.

But I could sense that the feelings of victory at having chased off the military were colored by a sense of foreboding. "The military will be back," I sadly said to myself. "They are only testing the ground and trying to wear out the communities with false alarms and probing missions. One of these days things are going to snap. As much as events like this boost the morale of the community, how long can they be sustained?"

What I saw that day showed me clearly that the EZLN struggle is a struggle of life or death for the indigenous Maya who have lived in these mountains for thousands of years and have lived under the boot of colonialism and imperialism for the past 500.

Those women don't fear death; they fear that their children and their children's children will have to live in the same poverty and cruel, undignified social conditions that they have lived under.

YA BASTA! ENOUGH!

PostScript

The attempt by the army to enter Morelia on 8 January 1998 is part of an intensifying campaign of military harassment of Zapatista communities. Since the 22 December massacre by paramilitaries in the Chiapas village of Acteal, the Mexican Army presence in the area has escalated dramatically on the pretext of providing services for refugees and looking for arms caches. There has not been a military mobilisation of this magnitude since February 1995 when international attention and public pressure prevented the federal government from carrying out a push to destroy the Zapatistas.

In response to civil outcry over the Acteal massacre, the Mexican federal government shuffled its cabinet, but the army buildup in Chiapas continues. The governor of the state of Chiapas resigned on 7 January after the Mexican press published evidence that, in the weeks before the killings, he paid \$500,000 to a pro-government, pro-landowner group known as "Peace and Justice," which is notorious in the region for organising paramilitary squads.

On 4 January, the respected weekly magazine Proceso

published a document prepared in 1994 by Mexico's Defense Department, which describes a counterinsurgency plan for Chiapas in language reminiscent of the war in Vietnam:

Key objective: "To destroy the relationship of support which exists between the population and the transgressors of the law...military intelligence services should secretly organise certain sectors of the civilian population...ranchers...small businessmen...individuals...train and support self-defense forces or other paramilitary organizations...in cases where self-defense forces do not exist, it is necessary to create them."

On 7 January the army entered the community of La Union and attempted to take two human rights observers with the Civil Encampment for Peace into custody. They were only prevented from doing so when the members of the community came out with sticks, stones, and machetes and expressed their determination to fight to keep the observers in their community.

On 12 January, the international day of protest against the massacre in Acteal, Chiapas, the Seguridad Publica (state police) shot into a crowd of protesters in the town of Ocosingo. The protesters had been throwing rocks at the police officers and calling them murderers. (The state police were within hearing distance of the Acteal massacre on 22 December and did nothing to stop it.) The shots killed Guadalupe Mendez Lopez and wounded her 11-month old child as well as an 18-year-old man. During her funeral procession in the community of La Garrucha, the mourners symbolically occupied the federal army base outside of their community. Approximately 30 Seguridad Publica officers are "under investigation" for the shooting.

In a message that went out on the Internet on 8 January, the EZLN asked foreign governments to pressure the Zedillo administration to order the immediate demilitarisation of Chiapas through a withdrawal of Army troops from indigenous communities and the dismantling of the paramilitary groups. (Source: Mark Lucey and WomensNet-Chiapas Homepage <http://www.igc.org/igc/womensnet/hg/morelia.html>)

The presence of a PIF officer wearing a NARCOTICO jacket is also significant. The government is attempting to construct grounds for defining its actions against the Zapatistas as anti-narcotics actions. For example, they claim to have found a small quantity of marijuana along with a supposed Zapatista arms cache in Altamirano. As anyone who has visited the Zapatista communities knows, they are probably the most drug-free areas in the Western Hemisphere.

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