

## Factionalism and Counterinsurgency in Chiapas: Contextualizing the Acteal Massacre

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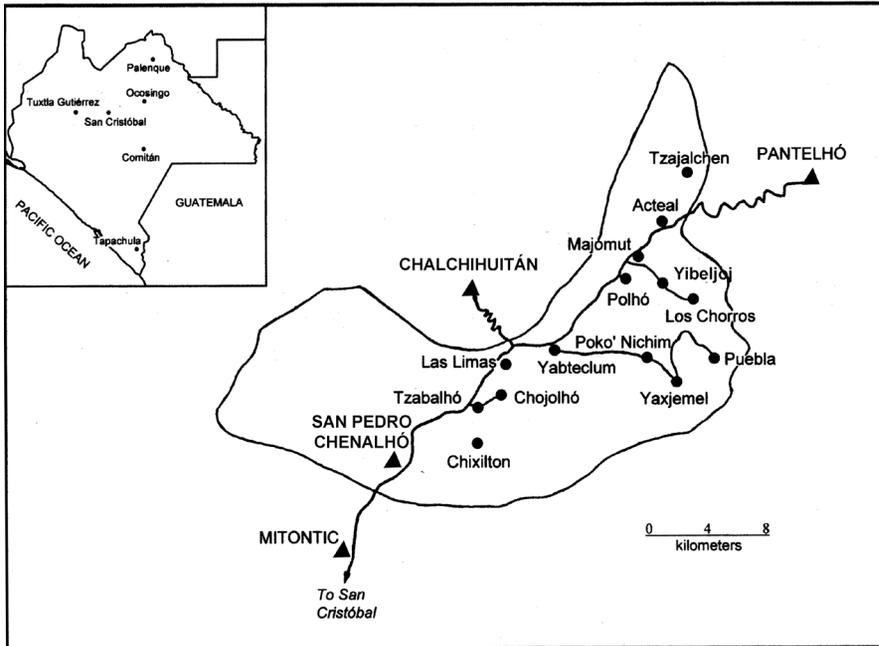
Late in 1997 almost four years after the start of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, forty-five unarmed people were murdered in the community of Acteal. The victims were all members of the civil association Las Abejas and killed for their support of the Zapatista demands. The massacre was the culmination of escalating activity by paramilitaries that had driven thousands from their homes. It caused national and international indignation. That the massacre could happen in the vicinity of stationed police forces lead to questions concerning the involvement of the Mexican government in spurring the violence in Chiapas. Various reports indicate that the paramilitary groups received active governmental and military support as part of a strategy of low-intensity warfare, aimed at undermining the support for the EZLN (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*). Since 1994, Chiapas is the most militarized state in Mexico with a presence of possibly up to 70,000 soldiers, constituting one third of the Mexican armed forces (SIPAZ 2001a).<sup>1</sup> In addition, there are at least twelve documented paramilitary groups, of which *Paz y Justicia* and MIRA (*Movimiento Indígena Revolucionaria Anti-Zapatista*) are among the largest (CDHFBC 1998a).

This article focuses on the events leading up to the massacre and addresses the war of counterinsurgency in Chiapas. Using the example of the municipality of Chenalhó, it illustrates how paramilitary groups have come to exploit the factionalism that developed in indigenous communities after the Zapatista rebellion, with disastrous consequences for the indigenous population.

### **Opposition and factionalism in Chenalhó**

The Zapatista uprising, which began in January 1994, dramatically increased political protest in Chiapas and led to severe factionalism among indigenous groups. Although the Maya communities in Chiapas had formerly been strongholds for the ruling party PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*), they had shown growing opposition to the government since the 1970s. Land shortages caused by demographic growth, the economic crisis and the ensuing cuts in governmental support to the rural areas led many Mayas to break their former allegiance to the PRI, and demand a different government (Rus *et al.* 2003). After the 1994 uprising, great numbers of Mayas stopped voting in favour of the party. As a result the PRI lost a part of its power base in Chiapas and saw its control of the indigenous municipalities weakened.

Other groups of Mayas, however, rejected the Zapatista uprising and opposed its use of arms and open confrontation with the federal government. Instead, they favoured a continued loyal attitude towards the ruling party, which has been re-



The municipality of Chenalhó. Adapted from the map by J. Rus, in J. Rus, R. A. Hernández Castillo, S. L. Mattiace (eds) *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias: The Indigenous Peoples of Chiapas and the Zapatista Rebellion* (2003) page 136.

warded with a large increase in allocated resources. These divisions have led to bitter factionalization within the indigenous communities. Mayas have come to categorize each other according to their political and religious affiliations, defining their neighbours and relatives as either allies or antagonists (Leyva Solano 2003; Nash 1995).

This development could also be seen in the municipality of Chenalhó. At the time of my fieldwork in Chenalhó, 1995-96, factionalism had permeated all aspects of life (Moksnes 2003). The majority of Pedranos – the inhabitants of the municipality – openly opposed the PRI government. Their opposition was also directed at the native municipal government, governed by the PRI and seen as illegitimate and co-opted. The PRI-base included both convinced party supporters and those who remained with the party out of what some villagers described as tradition, with many alienated and worried by the oppositional factions. At this time, the PRI government was also supported by most Pedrano Presbyterians, who sought support for their right to practice their religion.

The most militant opponents to the federal and municipal governments were the members of the Zapatista base groups. The first base groups in Chenalhó were formed during the year after the uprising, and they grew rapidly in number and adherents. In contrast to other municipalities, there appear to have been no Zapatistas in Chenalhó prior to the uprising. During 1994, however, villagers who had shown interest in the movement received visits from representatives of the EZLN and began to discuss whether to join the ranks. Gradually, I was told, Zapatista base groups that were connected to the wider EZLN structure were formed in the municipality. In April 1996, the Zapatistas declared their own autonomous munic-

pality in Chenalhó, and chose as its capital the village of Polhó, located in the north-eastern section of the municipality. The governing structure partly reproduces that of the official Pedrano municipality, with similar officials at the village and municipal level, including rural agents and a municipal government (Eber 2003, 146).

The other important political bloc of opposition in the municipality consisted of the diocese-adherent Catholic community, and included the political association *Sociedad Civil/Las Abejas*. The Pedrano Catholics<sup>2</sup> had become divided after the Zapatista uprising since they did not support the use of violence. As a consequence, those who had joined the Zapatista base groups in Chenalhó parted with the diocese, while the remaining members of the Pedrano Catholic community have continued to act in close alliance with the pastoral workers and the bishop. The association *Sociedad Civil* was formed in 1994 as part of a diocese-wide initiative called the Process of Peace, aiming to promote a peaceful solution of the conflict. In Chenalhó, the Process of Peace initiative eventually merged with the Catholic activist organization *Las Abejas*, created two years earlier. In daily speech the association was referred to as the 'Sociedad Civil'.<sup>3</sup> Initially, Pedranos joined the *Sociedad Civil* to find protection against attacks, whether from the federal army or the EZLN, since they learned that UN regulations prohibited military aggression against unarmed civilian population. To signal their identity they put up poles with white flags on their houses and painted signs on the house walls that said 'Civil Society, Peace, Neutral Zone'. These signs, I was continuously told by Pedranos, would protect them against military violence. In bringing a certain sense of safety, the association also attracted Pedranos who were not Catholic and even villagers supportive of the PRI government. However, the majority of the members of the *Sociedad Civil* were Catholics, and they were the ones who directed the political line of the association.

Increasingly, *Sociedad Civil/Las Abejas* became identified, both by its own members and other villagers, as oppositional to the government and as advocating a public, pacifist support of the Zapatista demands, in line with the posture of bishop Samuel Ruiz. Because of their shared political objectives, the Zapatista base groups and *Las Abejas* attempted at times to coordinate their political actions. These efforts failed repeatedly, however, as the Zapatistas opted for a clear-cut and militant opposition, while *Las Abejas* argued for a more careful diplomacy and mediation.

A third oppositional group in Chenalhó at the time was the militant party *Frente Cardenista de Reconstrucción Nacional*, the heir to the former PST party which had been the first oppositional group in the municipality.<sup>4</sup> After the uprising in 1994 the Pedrano Cardenistas were easily attracted to the Zapatista base groups, which were perceived as even more militant and having the potential to make a substantial political impact. Within a short time span, the Cardenistas lost most of their members to the Zapatistas. Until the fall of 1996, the remaining Cardenistas identified politically with both the Zapatistas and *Las Abejas*, but took distance from them later. Certainly, there were also a number of villagers who chose to remain outside any political adherences. Some of these, known as 'independents', regarded themselves nevertheless as part of the opposition to the government (Eber 2003).

These divisions in Chenalhó and the fact that the actual municipal power remained in the hands of a group loyal to the PRI, representing only a small minority

of the Pedrano population, were in themselves sufficient to create a precarious situation. In addition, factionalist politics proved highly susceptible to the ongoing conflict between the major antagonists in the broader political arena, of which Chenalhó had become an intrinsic part.

### **The escalation of paramilitary terror**

By the early fall of 1996, the relationship between the various factions in Chenalhó had become highly polarized and conflictive. Villagers were forced to declare a position in the escalating conflict and to demonstrate loyalty towards their own group. This polarization reflected the growing political tension in the state since the breakdown of the negotiations between the EZLN and the federal government. Militarization in the region increased, and primarily in the northern region of the state, a number of paramilitary groups had begun to appear that terrorized villagers who were critical of the government. There were rumours that paramilitary groups would soon spread to other regions as well. Chenalhó was not an unlikely target. It was the only highland municipality besides San Andrés that had an autonomous Zapatista municipality and, in addition, the presence of a large pro-Zapatista civil association. However, few could have foreseen the unprecedented violence that paramilitary activity would lead to.

The increasing antagonism in Chenalhó initially took the form of struggles among the different factions for their respective spheres of control.<sup>5</sup> In August 1996, the Zapatista autonomous municipality claimed a 'sand bank' in the village of Majomut as part of its territory. They declared that anyone else trying to exploit the gravel would be arrested. This area had been occupied since 1994 by the Cardenistas, who had formed an association and bought the formal rights to the territory. However, since part of the land was located within Polhó, the capital of the autonomous municipality, the ownership rights could be debated. With the construction of the paved road to Pantelhó that was then going on, the sand bank, located just off the road, was a highly lucrative property.

In response to this Zapatista takeover, the Cardenistas in Majomut turned for support to the ejido of Los Chorros, place of origin of several of their members. Since the 1970s, the ejido had been trying to gain rights to the Majomut territory, since there was not enough land for the new generations of villagers. The Zapatista claim to the sand bank was thus offensive not only to the Cardenistas in Los Chorros, but also to the PRI-istas. Now an unusual alliance was formed between PRI-istas and Cardenistas against the Zapatistas and their autonomous municipality, which they saw as far too presumptuous and intrusive. Soon, this aggression was directed towards members of Las Abejas as well, and came to affect villages throughout the north-eastern section of the municipality.

The friction between the two opposing groups grew during the spring of 1997. In May, the Zapatistas in the ejido of Puebla refused to contribute money to the construction of a new road. This resulted in the detention of three Zapatistas, and during the ensuing ambush of the Zapatista commission on its way to liberate the men, one commission member was killed. Fearing that they too would be attacked by the PRI-istas, several hundred Las Abejas villagers fled to two neighbouring villages (CDHFBC 1998b). At the request of the PRI-affiliated municipal authorities of Chenalhó, more police forces were sent to the municipality to ensure order. The federal elections on 6 July 1997 created more turmoil in Chenalhó. The

autonomous Zapatista municipality called the elections a mockery and burned forty election booths throughout the municipality, demanding that the San Andrés Accords between the EZLN and the federal government be complied with before they would trust the government (Balboa and Henríquez 1997).

By early fall of 1997, paramilitary groups were being formed throughout the north-eastern section of the municipality where there was a strong presence of the PRI or the Cardenista party. Soon they were present in seventeen villages, with an estimated cadre of 250 men (Aubry and Inda 1997). Increasingly, the paramilitaries began to persecute PRI-oppositional villagers. Already in July at the order of the municipal president, lists had been drawn up for each village indicating who were adherents of PRI and who were not (Bellinghausen 1997). The primary target were the members of the Zapatista base groups. However, as they were identified as having a pro-Zapatista stance, the members of Las Abejas were also affected. From mid-September, the paramilitary groups started demanding 'war-taxes' to pay for their expenses such as ammunition. Those who refused to pay were beaten and arrested. Villagers were also forced to participate in the harassment of Zapatista neighbours.

The paramilitaries were principally recruited among young landless men in the villages who were frustrated by their lack of stable means to support their families. Economically and socially marginalized, these men found both prestige and income as paramilitaries with the 'right' to extract both 'war-tax' from all villagers and to loot the houses and fields of those who were driven from their homes (Aubry and Inda 1997). Equipped with weapons and dressed in black uniforms, the men received training in the use of firearms by persons from outside Chenalhó (CDHFBC 1998b).

Now began what eventually was to become a mass flight of villagers belonging to either the Zapatista group or Las Abejas. Some were driven from their homes at gunpoint. Others left in fear of attacks, or to escape forced compliance with the paramilitaries. Although there was some armed response from Zapatistas, the majority left without physical resistance. Gradually, villages located in the north-eastern part of the municipality were emptied of villagers who were identified as pro-Zapatista. On 17 September, a large group of families fled from Los Chorros, fearing for their safety. On 15 October, almost five hundred villagers were driven from Tzanembolóm, and two weeks later, twelve hundred villagers fled from C'anolal (CDHFBC 1998b). In November 1997, the violence reached Yibeljoj, the village where I had conducted fieldwork. Paramilitaries from a neighbouring village demanded that each family pay 335 pesos as a 'war-tax', or they would be evicted. A week later all villagers of Las Abejas and the Zapatista base group were driven from their homes, including my extended host family.

By late November 1997, the municipality had been transformed into a war-zone, where the multitude of looted or torched houses signalled the 'political cleansing' that had been executed. The number of displaced villagers could be counted in the thousands. Some had found shelter in San Cristóbal and others in the homes of relatives in safer villages. The majority, however, had escaped to villages in Chenalhó with a strong presence of their own faction, where improvised camps were organized by the respective group members. With the incessant rains and lack of food the situation for the displaced families was rapidly becoming precarious, and appeals for external help were sent out.

In early December, the situation of the refugees received national attention

through newspaper and television coverage, and NGOs and individuals began to mobilize aid to the refugees, most of it channelled through Catholic Caritas. In addition, the state government, which had previously denied that there were more than six hundred displaced persons in Chenalhó, also offered humanitarian aid for the displaced. The municipal president of Chenalhó, Jacinto Arias Cruz, stated there were an additional two thousand displaced PRI-istas in need of assistance.<sup>6</sup>

The leaders for both the PRI-istas and the Zapatista autonomous municipality agreed to meet for negotiations at the beginning of December. Representatives of Las Abejas acted as observers, together with several human rights organizations. However, there was little prospect that the negotiations would succeed since both sides contributed the problems to actors outside Chenalhó: on the one hand the Public Security Police and the state governor, and on the other, the EZLN leadership, the Catholic diocese and the Catholic Human Rights Centre 'Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas'.

The negotiations soon broke down due to mutual accusations of violating the initial non-aggression agreement. In spite of warnings from the Human Rights Centre of the risks for increased violence, there were no further attempts at negotiation. Police forces were now stationed in about ten villages, but critics accused them of harassing pro-Zapatistas while protecting PRI-istas who were harvesting coffee in fields that belonged to the displaced (Petrich 1997).

Preceded by ever stronger rumours, the terror in Chenalhó reached its culmination a few days before Christmas in 1997. On December 22, sixty to eighty men, in uniforms borrowed from the Public Security Police, entered the village of Acteal. Their explicit intention was to kill members of Las Abejas and the Zapatistas who both had camps of displaced in the community (CDHFBC 1998b, 52; PGR 1998 73, 79-80). However, warned by the rumours, the Zapatistas had already left the community. The group of Catholics of Las Abejas, however, including both native villagers and displaced, had decided not to let themselves be driven away. When the attackers arrived at around 11 a.m., the Catholics were gathered to pray in the chapel of the church group. When they heard the shots, panic broke out, and men, women and children tried to escape, many stumbling down the steep hill towards the river. The attackers were not interrupted by the Public Security Police, who were stationed only a few hundred meters down the road, and the shooting continued all day. When the last of the assailants left the village in the late afternoon, those who had hidden successfully found bodies littered everywhere. In all, forty-five Catholics were killed. Twenty-one were women, nine were men, and fifteen were children. About twenty persons were injured.

The massacre transformed Chenalhó into a society under siege. By 27 December 1997, the government had installed twenty military camps in Chenalhó with two thousand soldiers. There were several checkpoints along the main road to control all incoming and outgoing traffic. Even more so than before, Chenalhó was now a society of displaced persons. After the massacre, an additional four thousand villagers fled their homes in fear for their lives. For almost four years, one-third of the Pedrano population, or around ten thousand persons, lived as displaced persons in camps, the majority inside Chenalhó. By maintaining a continual presence of visitors and peace observers, the displaced have striven to protect themselves against renewed paramilitary attacks.

## Chiapas after the Acteal massacre

The violence in Chenalhó was an embarrassment for the Mexican government. The massacre gained international attention and ignited discussions concerning the political state of the country. The violence was condemned by governments and human rights associations, which raised questions about whether the paramilitary aggression was orchestrated by higher-level state authorities. Acteal was seen by many as the extreme result of the counterinsurgency strategy of the government.

However, the government rejected all accusations of involvement, holding that the massacre was the outcome of purely internal feuds. In a report released by the Attorney General's Office, the paramilitary groups were called 'security and vigilance committees', and said to 'safeguard order and protect themselves because of the presence of EZLN supporters in the municipality' (PGR 1998, 76). Consequentially, no official authorities have been prosecuted or sentenced for involvement in the massacre, only Pedrano men. Instead of taking steps toward creating peace in the state, the federal government increased its military control of the conflict zone, strengthening the coordination of the Mexican Army, the Public Security Police and federal and state police. During the spring of 1998, this coordination led to a series of massive police-military operations directed at Zapatista autonomous municipalities and other areas of 'unrest'. Furthermore, through the coordination of police, military and the National Migration Institute, the government intensified the efforts to hinder the presence of foreigners in the conflict area, expelling a large number of European and US human rights observers and activists.

In 2000, there was certain hope for change, with the historic defeat of PRI in the presidential elections by Vicente Fox and his *Partido de Acción Nacional* and the victory of Pablo Salazar as state governor in Chiapas. Salazar was elected with a coalition of eight parties in opposition to the PRI and with the support of around two hundred non-governmental associations. Initially, there was a period of relative calm in Chiapas. President Fox ordered the dismantling of 53 military checkpoints and the withdrawal of seven military bases, in response to the conditions put by the EZLN for resuming negotiations (SIPAZ 2001b). Fox also stopped the expulsion of foreigners. Governor Salazar, in turn, prosecuted or fired a large number of officials and members of the police that were corrupt or involved in repressive actions. However, the peace dialogue with the EZLN has not been resumed, since the government has yet to fulfil other prerequisites presented by the Zapatistas. In the summer of 2001, there were again reports of increasing militarization and human rights violations for which both the federal government and state governor Salazar are partly held responsible (CIEPAC 2002a). Salazar has today lost support from a large part of the indigenous and broader civil movement in the state and is accused of not wanting to address the structural causes of the conflict.

Conflicts have also been increasing within the indigenous movement in Chiapas. The EZLN especially has been very critical of associations which have collaborated with the Salazar state government, defining them as traitors. Others have been condemned for cooperating with and accepting funding from federal state institutions. Consequently, organizations that previously had a more or less functioning relationship with the EZLN, such as the CIOAC (*Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos*) and the ARIC-*independiente* (*Asociación Rural de Interés Colectivo*), are today defined as enemies. This has led to schisms and confrontations among the members of these organizations and the Zapatista base

groups (CIEPAC 2002a), in addition to the ongoing antagonism with those villagers supporting the PRI or the new PAN government.

Indigenous society in Chiapas is threatening to disintegrate. The increasing tensions and use of violence all through the state continue to generate distrust and enmity, tearing to pieces a dense social fabric. Some claim that the conflicts between the EZLN and civil indigenous organizations are propelled by the Salazar government to continue the marginalization of the Zapatistas. A member of a Zapatista base group commented, 'PRI or Salazar, it doesn't seem to make any difference. The low-intensity warfare against us continues, that's what we can see after a year and a half with the new government' (Kalpazidou 2002). In contrast, groups affiliated with the PRI have requested military presence so that social and institutional order can be re-established (SIPAZ 2001a). There are various initiatives for reconciliation, but advances are few. The apparent posture of the EZLN is that local negotiations only distort the real conflict at hand (CIEPAC 2002b). In Chenalhó, the Zapatistas have consequently refused to participate in any negotiations, and most of the Zapatista villagers displaced since 1997 remain in camps. Las Abejas, however, decided to enter a series of negotiations with the municipal government, and almost all the displaced members have since returned to their original villages.

Nevertheless, the conflict in Chiapas has also opened new political and social arenas. The Zapatistas as well as civil organizations such as Las Abejas are today forming translocal communities that reach far beyond the local villages, and their political agency involves a global arena of actors, including the United Nations (Moksnes 2003). For the members of Las Abejas, the Acteal massacre has strengthened their identity as subjects of oppression in a struggle that is defined as just, not only by Christian values, but also by international regulations, and they call upon a global civil society to support their demands for change.

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## Notes

1. The SIPAZ document quotes the publication *Siempre cerca, siempre lejos: Las Fuerzas Armadas en México*, published by Global Exchange, CIEPAC and CENCOS in 2000.
2. There are also 'traditional' Catholics, referred to as '*costumbre* practitioners'. In keeping with local definitions, I use 'Catholic' only to refer to those who have become members of the Bible-reading village church groups under guidance of the diocese.
3. The name Las Abejas was principally used when acting outside Chenalhó. Since 1998, the formal name of the association is Sociedad Civil Las Abejas, and it is mainly referred to as Las Abejas.
4. *Partido Socialista de los Trabajadores*, which appeared in Chenalhó in 1979.
5. For descriptions of the process of escalating persecution, see also CDHFBC 1998b, Eber 2003 and Hernandez Castillo 1998.
6. I have not seen this number confirmed, but have heard accounts that PRI-istas had been driven from their homes, presumably by Zapatistas. Some, however, held that those displaced were PRI-ista vil-

lagers who were driven from their homes by the paramilitaries because they did not agree with the use of violence.

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