



Photo: Peter Robertson

Chiapas: Massacre in Acteal

by Crystal Echolhawk

The Nightmare and Hope for Tomorrow

"Acteal is the symbol of a war of extermination, the true government response to the just demands of the Indigenous peoples of Mexico. But Acteal is also the symbol of the struggle of two efforts: that of the government which seeks to make impunity and forgetfulness triumph; and that of civil society, which demands true justice and refuses to forget the worst crime of the last 30 years. And the struggle for memory and justice is the struggle for a just peace."

-Communique from the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee-General Command of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, January 12, 1998

These words from a recent Zapatista communiqué succinctly sum up the situation in Chiapas since the December 22, 1997 massacre of 45 Tzotzil Indians in the village of Acteal. What is clear from these few lines, and recent evidence, is that the massacre at Acteal was not an isolated incident, nor was it the product of inter-community conflict as the Mexican government would like us to believe. It was a carefully planned act executed by the hired gunmen of local PRI bosses, and in complicity with state and even federal authorities. Despite all their rhetoric, the Mexican government cannot hide the truth that Acteal was the outgrowth of a larger framework of violence and terror created by the more than 60,000 Mexican troops in Chiapas, and by government sponsored paramilitary groups who have acted with impunity for more than 3 years. The sole intention of the Mexican government's campaign since 1994 has been to repress Indigenous peoples and their rights and hopes for a new Mexico.

Despite the silence of mainstream media outside of Mexico, the blood of the Indigenous has not stopped flowing, nor

has the terror and military stranglehold on the communities in Chiapas ceased. The Mexican government's low-intensity war that has already claimed the lives of more than 1500 people since 1994, continues. Thirty-three Zapatista communities have born the brunt of at least 44 armed and illegal incursions by federal troops since December 22nd. In all of these cases, soldiers ransacked homes looking for weapons, interrogated and even tortured some residents in their search for the Zapatista leadership and insurgents. On January 12th, State Security police opened fire on protesters in Ocosingo, killing a 25 year old Indigenous woman and wounding her baby. In addition three Zapatista sympathizers were found hung weeks later. For all the government rhetoric regarding the efforts to bring the guilty of Acteal to justice, one must ask why the federal army insists upon terrorizing Indigenous communities under the pretext of looking for weapons, when the pro-government paramilitary groups and the Mexican military remain free and are allowed to conduct the business of dirty low-intensity war as usual.

The answer is clear-while the Mexican government talks peace it makes war. It makes war because it can not and will not implement the San Andres Agreements on Indigenous Rights and Culture. These unfulfilled peace accords, signed by both the Zapatistas and the Federal government in 1996, pose a tremendous threat and contradiction to the current reality of power and economic globalization in Mexico under the PRI. The implementation of the San Andres Agreements, the product of the dialogue and consensus of representatives of the fifty-six different Indigenous nations in Mexico and the Zapatistas, would give the more than 12 million Indigenas in México the right to self-determination and autonomy. It would represent a historic and unprece-

dent step towards redefining the relationship of the Mexican state to Indian peoples, and would give Indian peoples the right to implement their own forms of self-governance. Such rights would inevitably lead to broader participation of Indians peoples in the policies that affect their communities. The agreements would also give Indian peoples the right to control their lands and the resources within them, as well as the right to retain and nurture their diverse cultures, histories and languages. Finally it would open the door to broader and more profound changes within the nation as a whole and allow for the possibility of a new Mexico, in partnership with the Indigenous and all Mexican peoples.

The San Andres Agreements were designed to end the continued oppression, marginalization and exploitation of Indigenous peoples that colonization brought to the Americas. Yet it is clear that the Mexican government has too much to lose by acknowledging the legitimacy of the Zapatistas demands for a life of dignity in Mexico-land, housing, work, food, education, health care, autonomy, democracy, liberty, justice and peace.

First it would be an admission that neoliberal economic policies, codified in NAFTA, have not helped the extreme levels of poverty and misery suffered by the majority in Mexico. Secondly, the Mexican government would jeopardize its ability and access to strategic natural resources within rich Indigenous lands, such as those in Chiapas. For example, Chiapan oil accounts for 81.2% of Mexico's crude exports, 68.6% of its petroleum derivatives and 90.6% of its petrochemicals. Chiapas also produces 55% of Mexico's hydroelectricity and contains 20% of its bio-diversity in the Lacandon jungle. Finally, to justly meet the demands of the Indigenous peoples would not mean making minor adjust-

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dimensions into environmental impact assessment processes of research institutes, multilateral institutions, governments, etc.

6. Develop standards and guidelines for the protection, maintenance and development of indigenous knowledge, which: a) facilitate the development of sui generis systems of protection for Indigenous knowledge according to indigenous customary laws, values and world view b) recognize the concept of the collective rights of Indigenous Peoples and incorporate this in all national and international legislation c) take into account and incorporate existing Indigenous Peoples' political and legal systems and Indigenous Peoples' customary use of resources d) recognize traditional agricultural systems of Indigenous Peoples e) involve Indigenous Peoples in the development of research guidelines and standards

7. Develop standards and guidelines for the prevention of biopiracy, the monitoring of bioprospecting and access to genetic resources: a) affect a moratorium on all bioprospecting and/or collection of biological materials in the territories of Indigenous Peoples and protected areas and patenting based on these collections until acceptable sui generis systems are established b) affect a moratorium on the registering of knowledge c) recognize the rights of Indigenous Peoples' to access and repatriate genetic materials held in all ex-situ collections, such as gene banks, herbariums and botanical gardens.

8. Ensure the sharing of the benefits derived from the use of indigenous knowledge includes other rights, obligations and responsibilities such as land rights and the maintenance of Indigenous cultures to facilitate the transmission of knowledge, innovations, practices and values to future generations.

9. Ensure that relevant provisions of international mechanisms and agreements of direct relevance to the implementation of article 8j. and related articles, such as the Trade Related Intellectual Property agreement of the World Trade Organization, the European Union directive on the patenting of life forms, the Human Genome Diversity

Project, the Human Genome Declaration of the UNESCO, the FAO Commission on Plant Genetic Resources and national and regional intellectual property rights legislation under development, incorporate the rights and concerns of Indigenous Peoples as expressed in the ILO Convention 169, the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Kari Oca Declaration, the Mataatua Declaration, the Santa Cruz Declaration, the Leticia Declaration and Plan of Action, the Treaty for a Life Forms Patent Free Pacific and previous statements of Indigenous Forums convened at previous CBD/COP and intersessional meetings.

10. Provide material and non-material support mechanisms and incentives to Indigenous Peoples for capacity building initiatives towards: a) the development of sui generis systems based on indigenous customary laws for the protection and promotion of Indigenous knowledge, innovations and practices b) institutional strengthening and negotiating capacity c) locally controlled policy, research and development strategies and activities for the maintenance and development of Indigenous knowledge

11. Require the revitalization and maintenance of Indigenous languages as part of the implementation of article 8j. and related articles and support the development of educational systems based on indigenous values and world view, including the establishment of an Indigenous university.

12. Require that research and development activities in the realm of Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, practices and innovation systems are given the same financial and policy support as "formal scientific" research and development activities.

13. Provide material and non-material incentives for maintaining and enhancing biodiversity, including land rights and the recognition of achievements by Indigenous Peoples in protecting biodiversity. ♣

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ments and reforms to the Mexican state, rather it would be admitting that what is needed is a radical transformation to the corrupt structures of power in Mexico that have been dominated by the more than 70 year old PRI dictatorship. It would mean allowing for not only the Zapatistas, but all of Mexican civil society to have the right to transform the government into something that would govern by obeying the needs and consensus of the Mexican people, rather than continue to be mediator of elite global business interests and an instrument of repression.

Unfortunately Mexico acts with the reassurances of its trade partners, the United States and Canada. The only thing standing in the way of Mexico's unacceptable policy towards Indigenous peoples is civil society both in Mexico and globally. Civil society through both its political will and actions can put an end to this genocidal war. The Indigenous people are clear that the solution will come from nowhere else, nor can they do it alone. "Neither peace nor justice will come from the government. They will come from civil society, from its initiatives, from its mobilizations. To her, to you, we speak today." ♣

Crystal Echobawk is a member of the Pawnee Nation, who works for the National Commission for Democracy in Mexico. She attended the University of Sussex in Brighton, England where she completed both a Bachelors in History and a Masters in Social and Political Thought, and wrote her thesis on the Zapatistas. In September 1996, she was asked to join the North American Indian Delegation to the United Nation's Working Group on the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Geneva. In December of that year, she traveled to La Realidad, Chiapas, Mexico and produced a comprehensive briefing report regarding the situation in Chiapas. Since she has been working with NCDM, Crystal has traveled nationwide to raise consciousness and mobilize people around the Zapatista struggle, especially focusing on organizing North American Indian communities to support the struggles of Indigenous peoples in Mexico.