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Chiapas Revisited

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Dear Peter,

No other Mexican state has the intrigue of Chiapas: the beauty of its Indian women, the variety of its exotic landscape, the violence of its politics. And now trouble is coming across the border to it from civil war-torn Guatemala, in the form of thousands of Indian peasant refugees.

A few weeks ago, I spent eight days in Chiapas with three journalists. Together we visited Guatamalan refugee camps, a municipality embroiled in a land dispute, and several towns where the locals had taken over the town halls last December, to protest electoral fraud in the municipal elections.

I hope these vignettes, woven together, provide some insight into this extraordinary state.

Elections

I had been drawn to Chiapas, in part, because of a strange sequence of events that had occurred there over Christmas. Just days before new mayors were to take office on January 1st, crowds occupied the town halls in more than fifteen municipalities. They claimed that the elections had been fraudulent, and insisted that new elections take place. All this in a state where people have accepted fraud without protest in the past. We visited three towns where elections were disputed to find out why.

One of these towns, Mazapa de Madero, seemed to have more in common with Northern Ireland than it did with anywhere else in Mexico. This small place of three thousand inhabitants, that lies in the cleft of a deep valley, is divided on religious grounds. The Presbyterians live on the west side of town, have their own kindergarden, are slightly less poor than the Catholics, and vote for the government's Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI as it is called here. The

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Catholics occupy the east side of Mazapa de Madero, and vote for the Popular Socialist Party, or PPS. To make things slightly more complicated, a splinter Presbyterian group has also joined the PPS, and has even built its own church. In fact, it was the pastor of this splinter group's church who was supported by the Catholics as the PPS candidate for municipal president.

As to what happened on election day, it depends to whom you talk. I put the question to the minister of the Presbyterian church, Teodoro Mendez Rodas, a rotund man in a tee shirt and dirty trousers.

"Well, the PRI won, but since the others wouldn't accept that fact, they took over the town hall. They occupied it for four days. Then, on January 1st, a PRI party commission arrived to ask them politely to leave the premises. And they did as they were told, without any violence.

"Of course those of the PPS claim they were not allowed to vote. But there are only about ninety PPS followers in town. On the other hand, the PRI has over a thousand. We really had expected violence, but it didn't occur. They just left peacefully. They carried out their protest, but realizing they hadn't won, well... Now all is peaceful here."

The version of events given by Fidel Fernandez, the catequista or lay Catholic leader of the town, was different. We spoke while sitting on a flower-patterned couch in his concrete living room.

"The law says one should be able to vote for the party of one's choice, and that the ballot should be secret. But here, the PRI officials in charge of the voting booths wouldn't give us our ballots. They said we were supposed to tell them who we were going to vote for, and have faith that they would mark our ballots as we indicated.

"Since the PRI officials wouldn't allow the PPS election official into the voting booth to make sure the ballots were being marked correctly, there was no way we could guard against electoral fraud. As a result,at least half the townspeople decided not to vote."

He smiled sardonically as he explained what happened next. Some PPS leaders from the state capital told them to occupy the town hall. After four days, a PPS delegation from Mexico City told them to quit the protest. When I pointed out to Senor Fernandez that, at the national level, the PPS is allied with the PRI, he responded,"Yes, we knew they (the PPS officials from Mexico City) only came here to impress us. But they weren't successful, and we told them as much. We told them that if all they were going to do was play with us, we'd leave the PPS and join the PSUM."

The PSUM - or Mexican Unified Socialist Party - is the largest leftist group in Mexico. It is mostly urban-based, and little known in this area.

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In Motozintla, a nearby town nestling against the mountain range that separates Mexico from Guatemala, the town hall was also taken by the PPS. According to Motozintla's parish priest, Padre Juan, the PPS had won the elections, and everybody in the town knew they had. The PRI's candidate was a well-to-do businessman, who in the words of Sister Luz Maria,a nun living in Motozintla, "neither the rich nor the poor could stand."

Mexico's severe economic crisis has perhaps also made the townspeople less tolerant of the government's high-handedness.

"Here in Motozintla," explained Padre Juan," many people's earnings aren't enough to cover their food costs. Before, in difficult times, the people were submissive. But this economic hardship is more than many of them can take. It is teaching them to stand up to the system."

When the results of the Motozintla election were announced in the state capital, victory was given to the PRI. The PPS siezed the town hall in protest. The local police did nothing, and within two days, the PRI gave way. The government has agreed to hold new elections in March.

Both Matazapa de Madero and Motozintla are in the dry central highlands of Chiapas. The town of Huehuetan is two hours away, in the tropical flatlands of the coast. There the election dispute was between two rival caciques, or warlords. Locals said that the PRI had "always" chosen its candidate for mayor between them. At one election it would be someone from the camp of Lorenzo Nicolas Guzman, who controls the Huehuetan tortilla trade. At the next election, the post would go to a henchman of Mario Alvarado, boss of the local farming cooperative.

But last year, the PRI machine in the state capital chose its candidate from Lorenzo Nicolas Guzman's side for the second time running. Infuriated, Mario Alvarado switched loyalities to the right-wing National Alliance Party, the PAN - and ran his own candidate under its banner.

When the PRI claimed victory, the PAN called fraud. On Wednesday, December 29th, Mario Alvarado and more than one hundred of his men barricaded themselves into the municipal building. According to the town's catequista, Maria Hernandez, the intruders were armed with guns, iron bars, machetes, and grenades.

"On Saturday night, the PRI group decided to take the municipal building by force," she said. They were able to capture some of the Panistas who were standing just outside the building. A battle broke out, and many people were injured by rocks, and by iron bars. When the police started to drag some of the Panistas away, the municipal building's doors opened, and the other Panistas flooded out."

"How many Priistas were there?"

"Counting both the Priistas, and the judicial policemen that were helping them, they were about twenty men. Being vastly outnumbered, they soon realized that they couldn't win, and ran. One of the policemen fell behind, and the Panistas caught him. They were taking him hostage when they were attacked by some other policemen who had come to the rescue. After a fight, the police took several Panistas prisoner.

"Once imprisoned, the Panistas were told that the government would not punish or fine their group for occupying the building as long as they left it immediately. So the captured Panistas were freed to go back to comvince the others. And they did."

With the PRI in control, Maria Hernandez said that life in Huehuetan had returned to normal. The Panistas were still making trouble, however, including a newspaper campaign against the mayor.

"If this new mayor doesn't get busy, doesn't get some public works done quickly, it seems to me, he won't hold his new position for very long," she warned.

The Guatamalan Refugees

On the evening of January 26th, armed soldiers attacked a refugee camp called Santiago, less than one mile inside Mexico from the Guatemalan border. It was the latest in a series of raids on Guatemalan Indians who have run away from the brutal insurgency war in their country. At 9 P.M. the following night, evading Mexico's security forces, I went with my companions to Santiago. It meant a frightening drive through a roadless forest. Finally, we arrived at a small ranch-house, where the body of one of the victims of the attack lay in a coffin surrounded by candles and his mourning family. I spoke to his mother, a small, dark-faced woman. She wore a pink dress, and her hair was pulled back in a knot.

"Can you tell me what happened last night?"

"Yes, the kaibiles - that is, the Guatemalan soldiers - arrived at eleven o'clock. Immediately, we all ran from our houses without even dressing. My son was with me and my husband at the time. He told us that he had to run back to his home, to save his children who were sleeping. But he never reached his house; they killed him first."

"Did you see the kaibiles?"

"Yes," said the mother, "I saw them when they came. They wore military uniforms. They killed my son by beating him with a big stick."

" Yes, beating him, beating him," chanted an emaciated woman who had joined us.

"Did they beat him to death, or was he also shot?"

"Yes, yes, beating him, and also with a pistol," the mother replied.

"It was a rifle," said the emaciated woman.

"Yes, with a pistol, no rifle."

"It was a 22."

"Well it all happened so fast," said the mother. "It was like the blast of a firecracker, one thing happening after another."

"How many kaibiles were there?"

"There must have been at least twenty or thirty," said the mother.

"Oh no!" exclaimed the old woman.

"No, there were about a hundred," said a small, wizened man.

"That's right, one hundred!" said the old woman.

"Maybe," said the mother," but there were a lot. They surrounded us, the entire camp was surrounded."

By now, all the mourners were joining in, and it was difficult to hear the mother's soft voice. A child was wailing in the next room.

"Many of us have nothing more than sticks and machetes with which to defend ourselves," said the old man,"Only a few of us have guns.'

"And do you think that they were specifically looking for your son?"

"No, I was under a jocote tree when they captured him. He was not far away, and I could hear his screams as they beat him, and his cries when they shot him. Even when he was shot, he continued to scream, so I knew it was my son. But I couldn't move any closer to him. I was too frightened. It was my husband who finally went for his body."

"And how did you know the soldiers were coming?"

"Because they were shooting their rifles as they came."

"This was the second time the kaibiles have come here," added the old man.

"Yes," agreed the mother,"But this time they killed my son, and kidnapped my brother-in-law."

"They kidnapped another!" exclaimed the old man.

"They dragged my brother-in-law away, beating him as they went. They had placed a noose around his neck, and they dragged him back to Guatemala."

"They took the other with them," screamed the old woman,"It is a grave sin that they have committed, a very grave sin!"

"And my brother-in-law, they stripped him naked."

As we talked, a new, much stronger voice could suddenly be heard at the doorway of the darkened room.

"Leave here," it commanded, "Leave here now."

The tall intruder was now by my side. His height was increased by a ten-gallon hat, and his bulk by his protruding belly. He held a machine gun. I saw that he was accompanied by five other men, also holding machine guns.

"May I ask who you are?" said one of my friends.

"Isn't this calling card enough for you?" he asked, bringing his machine gun up to chest-level. "Now get moving!"

Outside, we saw the truck these men had come in. It bore the insignia of the Mexican Ministry of Public Works and Housing.

The next day, the refugees told us that the intruders had been security agents from the Ministry of Interior.

The Guatemalan refugees pose a major dilemma for the Mexican government. The problems are both humanitarian and political. In the more remote camps, refugees are reported to be severely undernourished. The government is providing humanitarian aid; but officials say privately that in doing so, they are afraid of attracting other impoverished Guatemalans across the border. The Mexican government has also said that it wants to provide protection for the refugees against repeated Guatemalan troop incursions; it is clear, however, that the government will not militarize the border area for fear of a clash with the kaibiles.

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Santiago - where this incident took place - is one of thirty-two officially recognized refugee camps along the Mexico-Guatemala border. There are many other, smaller ones scattered through the remote jungle of eastern Chiapas. Many of them are inaccessible by road. While the United Nations High Commission on Refugees estimates that 30,000 Guatemalan refugees are living in Chiapas, local relief workers say 80,000 to 100,000 is a more realistic estimate.

Not far from Santiago, there is also a camp called Cuauhtemoc. Most of its occupants are from villages around a small Guatemalan town called San Francisco, where they say the Guatemalan army massacred most of the civilian population last July. These Indians now live in bamboo huts with dirt floors and almost no furnishings. They cook over wood fires, draw water from a nearby river, and wait anxiously to see how much food they'll receive that week from the Mexican government. Only a few of the men have been able to find work in the area - usually as farm laborers, earning much less than the minimum wage. Most of these families' pocket money is made by selling brightly

colored clothes woven by the women.

Throughout the camp, there were crowds of children. I was stopped by a twelve year-old Indian girl, Petrona Paez Perez. She wore her hair in long braids, and carried her two younger brothers , one on her back, the other in her arms. When we met her, Petrona was full of smiles. She knew very little Spanish; one of the men in the camp translated.

"Where are you from?"

"Aguacate."

"Why did you come here?"

Her reply included one Spanish word - ejercito - the army.

"What did the army do?"

"They kill us, that's why were fleeing, because we are terrified.'

"Do you think that one day you will return?"

"No, never. They have already frightened us too much. We now want to live in Mexico."

"Do the Mexicans treat you well?"

"They are good people. They don't bother us. They love us very much; that is, the Mexican peasants."

"And your father, where does he work?"

"He doesn't. There is no work here; here we have no land."

"And what do you eat?"

She giggled, and made a face - as did the many other children who had gathered around her.

"We eat Minsa."

At the mention of the word, all the children began to laugh. Minsa is the corn meal provided by the Mexican government.

"Do you like Minsa?" I asked.

"Yes, it's good the Minsa they give us."

Again, all the children giggled.

"Did you eat Minsa in Guatemala?"

"No, only here."

"Were any people killed in your village?"

"Yes, they killed six."

"Who killed them?"

"The ejercito of the goverment."

"Why did the army kill them?"

"We don't know why."

"Were any of the people killed relatives of yours?"

"Yes, Gaspar was my cousin. He was forty years old when they killed him. It was totally without reason, his murder! They shot him with a bala while he was harvesting his corn."

She used the Spanish word for bullet.

"When did this happen?"

"Six months ago. That time, the army also looted many houses. From our house, they took many things. And since we have been here, they have taken all that we left behind. At least that is what we have been told by our friends who left after we did."

Petrona walked away with down-turned, quivering lips.

The day we visited Camp Cuauhtemoc was cold and windy, and a drizzle fell constantly. Despite my two sweaters, boots, and wool pants, I was shivering. Most of the refugees were barefoot, and wore light cotton clothing.

Wandering through the refugee camp, we noticed several caves dug into the side of a hill. The refugees build small fires inside of them, and then take water in to bathe. Near one of these "baths" was

a man who said he was a survivor of the San Francisco massacre. He was a dark-skinned man, middle-aged, with cropped black hair. He spoke in a near whisper, without bitterness. He was, however, unwilling to give his name.

"In all, they killed twenty-three families. In my case, they killed my parents, my two brothers, my three sisters, my wife, and our children, all four of them.

"Why weren't you killed?"

"I wasn't in San Francisco when the soldiers came. I was away working a patch of land that I own in another village."

"And who did this?"

"The kaibiles."

"How do you know that it was the kaibiles?"

"Because friends of mine who live near the entrance of the town told me that they saw the army enter. And when I returned, the army was still there, burning down all the houses in San Francisco. I watched them from a distance."

"Do you know how the people were killed?"

"First they killed the women and children inside of the church. Then, afterwards, they killed the men, they shot them. Killing all day long, they finished off the people by about six o'clock in the afternoon."

"Have you entered San Francisco since the massacre?"

"No. I didn't want to enter into all that death. I was too terrified to enter. For days I waited on the edge of town to see if any of my relatives would emerge alive. But they didn't. Not one survived."

The people of San Francisco had all worked on the same coffee plantation. On average, they were paid eighty cents a day. They had asked for a raise, but the owner was unwilling. According to a Mexican relief worker who spends a lot of time in the Cuauhtemoc camp, less than a year ago, the leftist guerillas burned down the the plantation owner's house. Believing that the Guatemalan insurgents had done this in league with his workers, the owner told the local military cammander to punish the peasants. All the refugees we spoke with, however, including this man, denied having any contact with the guerillas.

"No, we don't know anything about them. We are very confused. We don't know why the army burned our village down. Only God knows... and the government."

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Venustiano Carranza; the Women's Perspective

The town of Venustiano Carranza stands on the shoulder of a jagged extinct volcano, rising from a broad plain in the center of Chiapas. The violent land struggle being waged there has claimed over ten people's lives in the last decade, and has meant imprisonment for many more. In brief, an Indian group called Casa del Pueblo - or House of the People - is fighting relentlessly to be paid by the Mexican government for 2,500 hectares* of land the authorities expropriated to build a dam, and to win title to more than 2,000 hectares that, according to the Indians, large landowners have illegally occupied in recent decades.

* 1 hectare = 2.47 acres

I had visited Venustiano Carranza once before, last May, when I spoke with some of the men leading this struggle. This time, I spoke with some of the women involved.

Francine is a French Franciscan nun who lives in Venustiano Carranza. During the last six years, she has worked closely with the Casa Del Pueblo. Francine is in her mid-thirties. When I met her, she wore her hair long over a brightly embroidered Indian blouse, and a simple A-line skirt. We talked in an unlit sitting room, which was filled with cheap, unmatching bits of furniture. Mosquitoes buzzed about her while she spoke softly in Spanish with a French accent.

"I would take you personally to the Casa del Pueblo, but I'm a marked woman. It's one thing if I accompany Indian women there. That's O.K. But if I take foreigners there, that's entirely different.'

"You mean the situation is still dangerous here?"

"Here, as in all of Chiapas. You must remember that the Mexican revolution hardly touched this place. There has been extremely little land reform. The situation of social inequity is very much worse in this state than in the rest of Mexico. It's another world.

"For centuries this state has been run by what are referred to as the Chiapaneca families, like the Castellano family, the family of the current governor, Anibal Castellano Dominguez. They are various families that have a great deal of power, and that stand up for each other. The courts, the important political posts, and most industry in Chiapas are all controlled by the Chiapaneca families. So you see, the peasant class doesn't have a chance!"

Her French accent became marked, as she placed emphasis on this last phrase. I asked her what were the main problems in the town.

"For the Indians of the Casa del Pueblo, there are two problems: winning back their land, and winning freedom for their friends in prison."

"What crimes did these people commit?"

"Their crime? Leadership. They organized their people to demand what is legally theirs. That's their crime."

Francine went on to say that those who had taken the peasants' land are loyal supporters of the government party, the PRI. Consequently, the local government officials have found it preferable to imprison the leaders of the Casa del Pueblo than to resolve the land dispute.

"And Arturo?" I asked, referring to a nationally-known peasant leader who had been imprisoned for working with the Casa del Pueblo Indians. After two years in jail, he was freed last December. "Is he still here?"

"No, but when he is, he works clandestinely. He has to. Otherwise, they might kill him. You must remember that he is from the capital; the large landowners consider him, as anyone else who is not from the region, as foreigners. They believe that the struggle here is due to foreign influence. That's why I can't go into the street with you. It would only confirm their worst suspicions.

"Of couse, it is totally false. The Indians may have some outside support, but having spoken to them before, it must be clear to you that they don't need anyone. They're extremely bright and eloquent. They are also well-versed in the Law."

She leaned forward in her chair, and to add weight to her

next words, she tapped her finger on the arm of her chair.

"I have helped them organize cooperatives, but I work for them, doing what they think is best. I do not lead them; they treat me as an equal - not more, not less.

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Sister Francine had two Indian women lead us to the Casa del Pueblo headquarters. We were told to follow them at a distance. They didn't want to be seen with us. Before leaving the parish building, Sister Francine pulled one of my friends aside.

"These two women will lead you there. When you arrive, do not only talk to the men leaders, but also to these women. That one," she said, pointing to a young Indian with her hair knotted over her forehead,"is one of the most important leaders in the Casa. In fact, she has decided to forgo marriage and a family in order to dedicate her life to the struggle. And the other," she added, pointing at the shorter, plumper Indian woman, wearing a purple, polyester shift, "She has suffered a great deal because of her husband's commitment to the cause. He was kidnapped by the authorities over a year ago. Without him, she is finding it difficult to support their six children.'

In the fifteen minutes that it took to wind through the town, only rarely did our guides glance back. The walls of the streets were covered with political graffiti - "Free the Political Prisoners" - "Death to the Large Landowners" - "Today Land, Tomorrow Power." And yet, if one excluded the graffiti, Venustiano Carranza looked no different than thousands of other Mexican towns: rows of small food, clothes, and tortilla shops lined either side of the narrow, paved streets.

The Casa del Pueblo headquarters lay at the very edge of town, in a small side-street full of potholes. I sat on a stone step in the courtyard, and talked with the woman whom Sister Francine said was dedicating her life to the struggle.

She was a thin woman, in her mid-twenties, with a somber face. Her white blouse was heavily embroidered with large orange and pink flowers. She wore a dark blue Indian skirt, no jewelry, and no shoes. She was unwilling to give her name, and hesitant to talk.

"Who do you work with?" she asked suspiciously, as I placed the tape in my tape recorder. I explained.

"Are you sure you don't work for the government?"

"No, why?"

"Because once before people came posing as reporters, and they turned out to be police agents."

I tried to assure her that I had nothing to do with any police force. She stared down at the ground.

" I understand that you organized the women of the Casa del Pueblo."

"That's right," she replied, still looking down.

"What do you hope to accomplish through this organization?"

"We have organized to improve our economic situation, and to defend ourselves. When there is repression, when blows fall, we fight back. We defend our struggle, we defend our men - fathers, brothers, and husbands. We also fight to get back the lands that the large landowners stole from us."

She paused for a moment, and then looking directly at me, she went on.

"It is the blows, the beatings that teach us. If it weren't for them, we wouldn't have organized. For example, when we hear that they've arrested some of our companeros, that they've jailed them, then we immediately organize a committee to find out where they've been imprisoned. Then we go there, to protest their imprisonment, and to visit them."

"How long have you been a member of the Casa del Pueblo?"

"Only a short while - seven or eight years. My grandfather was one of the group's founders over thirty years ago."

I asked what they had been able to achieve during the years that she had been a member. She paused before replying.

"Almost nothing. We've won back almost no land. There are thousands of hectares which the government still owes us for, and they haven't paid us a cent. Then there are the 2,000 hectares that the ranchers stole from us; we haven't been able to get them back either."

She paused again, still looking at me.

"What we have achieved is being imprisoned, both men and women. And there are many of us whom the government has arrest warrants out for. At the same time, the large landowners, the ranchers are given free rein to screw us."

"How much land does your family own?"

"My father and brothers together own one hectare. It's not enough land to grow the beans and corn my family eats."

"If you've won back so little land, and achieved little other than getting yourselves imprisoned, why do you keep fighting?"

"To see what we'll be able to achieve in the times to come. Our struggle is a long one. Nothing can be achieved in the short term, or without some suffering. Like this woman," she said, motioning the other woman to come to her side."She and her children are suffering because of her husband's commitment to our people's struggle."

The two women smiled at each other, and spoke in a near whisper. The plump woman nodded as she looked at me. Several of her children were now at her side.

"This is Antoinetta Hernandez Vasquez," said the thin Indian woman. "Her husband, Augustin de la Torres Hernandez has been imprisoned."

"When and why was your husband imprisoned?"

"My husband was imprisoned on February 23rd, 1982. To date, they have not accused him of any crime. All I know is that the authorities have left his six children fatherless, and me working all hours to keep them barely clothed and fed."

Augustin de la Torres Hernandez was arrested while demonstrating against the imprisonment of several of his friends.

"At one point, he fell behind the others in the demonstration. Immediately the judicial police surrounded him, and dragging him by the hair, they pulled him into a police wagon. By the time the other demonstators realized what was happening, it was too late."

I asked if he was the only one arrested at the demonstration.

"Yes. You see, they recognized him from his workplace, where they arrested his friends."

The other men were freed after only two weeks in prison.

Antoinetta had wanted to visit her husband, but couldn't - the police had an arrest warrant out for her.

"I have never done anything against the law, but the local police officials have told us that they have three charges against me. But they won't say what they are."

One of her children, who had been tugging at Antoinetta's skirt for some time, began to cry. She picked him up into her arms, and slowly cradled him back and forth.

"The government does not like us to be organized. They think that we Indians are bad people, particularly when we speak out. For the government, the very act of speaking one's mind is a crime. My husband is one of the most loyal members of the Casa del Pueblo. He has always worked very hard for the causes of our people."

And had her husband written?

"Yes, he often writes to ask how the children are, and if I'm making enough money - I wash and iron clothing, and sell tortillas to keep them fed."

"Has he written about how he has been treated?"

"No, but my mother-in-law visited him. She told me that he was brutally beaten when they imprisoned him. He was in such bad shape that he couldn't get out of bed. They had repeatedly hit him in the stomach and chest, and kicked him in the face. Finally, a doctor was allowed to see him."

"Are you hopeful that they will free him?"

She again paused, looked around at her children, and then replied, "I have no hope. We have done everything, and gained nothing.'

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