

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Chiapas

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Dear Peter,

Most Mexicans, when asked if a violent insurgent movement similar to those underway in El Salvador and Guatemala could develop in Mexico, bite back a rapid, definitive "¡No!" But if then asked, "And in Chiapas?" many reluctantly will admit, "Well yes, maybe in Chiapas."

Chiapas, a state just slightly smaller than Costa Rica, brings together the best and worst of Mexico. With Indian tribes composing 7% of its population of 2,000,000, Chiapas has one of the richest and most diversified cultural heritages in the country. It also has forests filled with precious woods, the most extensive network of rivers and lakes in Mexico, and bountiful oil and gas reserves. At the same time, its illiteracy rate of 44% is more than twice the national level (19%); and the local populace's access to electricity, piped running water, schools and health services is less than half the national average. Disputes over land tenure are more numerous and tend to be much more violent than in other states.

Furthermore, Chiapas shares a 450-mile border with Guatemala, a nation embroiled in violent civil war. The poor socioeconomic conditions in Chiapas are not that different to those found on the other side of the border. While there is much less repression in Chiapas than in Guatemala, it does exist. Thousands of Guatemalan peasants currently reside in rural communities throughout Chiapas. This gives the Guatemalans a chance to talk to the Mexicans and compare their problems.

I have recently returned from a four day visit to Chiapas with a group of journalists. Let me briefly relate my experience.

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Saturday May 15, 1982: Venustiano Carranza.

The Indian town of Venustiano Carranza is situated in a valley indistinguishable from those found in many other parts of tropical Mexico: endless acres of sugar cane intermittently interrupted by small plots of corn, and smatterings of mango, banana and palm trees. On the edge of the town stands an antiquated sugar refinery surrounded by small, dilapidated wooden huts built by the company to accommodate the workers. Between the sugar refinery and the center of town, the only landmarks are the Pemex gas station, and a statue of Venustiano Carranza. Venustiano Carranza was a man of dubious distinction. He was Mexico's first elected president after the 1917 revolution, and initiated the nation's agrarian reform program. But he implemented this land redistribution program at a tortoise's pace, and he ordered the assassination of Emiliano Zapata, the most important peasant leader in the history of Mexico. It seems an appropriate statue in a community which is bitterly divided over the issue of land. The graffiti on the town's adobe walls say, "Land and liberty" - Zapata's war cry.

The town has two factions, and our destination was the Casa del Pueblo, the meeting hall of one of them. We found it hidden behind a tall adobe wall on a side-street a few blocks beyond Venustiano Carranza's statue. The Casa del Pueblo-"home of the people" - had a large broad-leafed tree shading the center of its dirt courtyard. The one-storey, two-room adobe structure was humble in appearance. Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Cuban and Mexican revolutionary posters spoke of the political orientation of the group.

People had been informed of our visit. The men, in the impeccable white, loose-fitting cotton shirts and pants worn by the Tzotzil Indians of the region, greeted us warmly. The women, wearing brightly embroidered white blouses and black skirts, smiled shyly and bowed their heads as they passed us.

Inside the meeting hall, the walls were a dirty peach-pink, lit by a couple of bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling. Wooden benches covered the floor space. But for an altar covered in plastic flowers in the front left-hand corner, it was like hundreds of other meeting halls throughout Mexico. Above this altar hung 3 black and white photos and a list of fifteen names. They were members of the Indian community who had died violent deaths in the struggle for land. Most had died during the last 10 years.

CNPA (Coordinadora Nacional Plan de Ayala), a national peasant organization which is independent of the Mexican government, has printed a pamphlet giving the history

of the land-struggle in Venustiano Carranza. According to this pamphlet, the Spanish kings gave the Tzotzil Indians title to 70,000 hectares in this area. Over the years, however, the local government authorities sold off nearly 20,000 hectares of the Indians' best lands; the money from the sales rarely reached the Indians. Until 1939, they endured the authorities' abuses. Then they decided to organize. To ensure that their lands were not further pilfered, the Indians needed a presidential resolution which would legally define the exact boundaries of their land holdings. But like Indian communities throughout Mexico, the people of Venustiano Carranza could not speak Spanish (even today, half the Indians of Chiapas cannot speak Spanish) and even less understand the legal jargon in which Mexico's agrarian laws are written.

It took from 1939 until 1965, twenty-six years of fighting with the government's agrarian reform bureaucracy, to obtain this presidential resolution. Even then, the document was vague, and did not sufficiently define the exact limits of the Indians' land. In 1973, by occupying the offices of the Ministry of Agrarian Reform in Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of Chiapas, the Indians were finally able to get their boundaries defined, but not before many more hectares had been stolen from them. So they began the legal processes necessary to recover this from the large landowners and caciques, the local political chiefs.

There was a further problem. In 1964 a group within the community decided to purchase a cattle herd with a credit from the government's rural bank. Arguing that the project would use the communal grazing lands but not benefit the community at large, the majority of its members vetoed the project. Ever since then, Venustiano Carranza has been bitterly divided. According to the CNPA pamphlet, government officials and the local landowners have provided economic and political support to the minority group which applied for the credit. It has been a violent dispute. Leaders of the larger faction - Casa del Pueblo - have been shot, macheted to death or repeatedly imprisoned. For over a year now, four leaders have been imprisoned on charges of murder. The peasants say that the charges are fabricated. They say the key witness claims to be able to identify the alleged killers as well as the type of gun they used, but also claims to have observed the incident from a kilometer's distance. Sixty other members of the Casa del Pueblo group have arrest warrants out for them. Some think the government, however, is less interested in jailing them than using the warrants as a control mechanism, to keep them from becoming too active, too outspoken.

The current elected-leader of Venustiano Carranza, a man unwilling to give us his name, is one of the sixty on the

"wanted" list. As we tried to coax him into participating in our discussion, the Indian women gathered in the meeting hall began singing a slow dirge. It had been exactly one year since one of the women leaders had died in a car accident. She had been returning from a visit with the four imprisoned community-leaders. Some doubted it was an accident. Her car was forced off the side of the road by an on-coming truck.

When the women's half-hour of song, eulogy and prayer ended, the men began to settle in under the courtyard's tree in anticipation of our question-and-answer period. While we weren't able to convince the incumbent leader to participate, the community's message was eloquently expressed by others.

One man: This meeting is important because we want our problems to be known, to show how we are living. ... They have divided us, they have repressed us using the forces, army control, the police, the federal police which keep on threatening us. In that way they try to stay in power. This grave problem results in great hardships for us and we should find a way to defend ourselves, to show them that a problem cannot be solved by force. They say that we are a group of young people, therefore immature, but we are here today showing the opposite. The majority of us are from the grassroots, but they do not consider that. They just use the repressive forces to scare us and to feel more powerful... But we do not have to feel frightened, we have to fight back. They pretend to calm us down by repressing us, by arresting us, but we say we have to fight back even more.

Question: Are you going to participate in the presidential elections in July?

Second man: We never participate in an election because they do not consider our opinion. Besides, they already know who is going to be elected, those who are in power today, right? We have realized that they use us as steps to move to the top. When they tell us you are going to vote for this one, for governor, for president, we realize it means we are wasting our time. Because with or without the votes from the poor, they will be elected anyway. This is why we do not vote.

Third man: Those who will vote for the next government are humble, poor people who have been bought. They do not know any better. They buy them off with machetes, grain mills, so that they can say that is what the PRI\* has done for them and that all of them voted of their own free will. But those people who were bought are misled. They do not understand they have just been cheated.

Question: Why are they being cheated?

Third man: Through these gifts. On the radio we heard that many gifts have been given to the campesinos and it is all lies. The campesinos are not given anything. We suffer because we do not have water and electricity. They promise us these things but they never give them to us.

I hope that those compañeros who are here today would also let it be known throughout Mexico that when we demand our rights to be respected, the government orders that we be jailed or killed. As you can see all the names written on the walls are those compañeros who have died because they were defending their lands.

Question: Is another revolution necessary?

Fourth man: Yes, but when the peasants are more politically aware. (Many of the other men nodded in agreement.)

As our question and answer session drew to a close, one man suggested we visit the other meeting. "The presence of the soldiers makes it very interesting," he added.

Thrown by his remarks, we asked for further detail. The other faction in Venustiano Carranza, the would-be ranchers of 1964, were meeting to try to vote out of office the community leader who had been unwilling to talk to us. Their candidate was also the local representative for the CNC (Confederación Nacional Campesina - National Peasants Confederation), the peasant organization which is financed by the government. For decades, the government had been able to name the local "democratically-elected" representatives: the mayors, the senators, the congressmen. They now wanted, however, to penetrate the indian community's power structure. And the minority faction (which those at the Casa del Pueblo estimated at about 200-300 families vs. their 800 family faction) were said to be willing to help the government.

"But why are there army troops present at their meeting?" we asked. People laughed. "They say that they need troops in order to protect these peasants against us. But really they are to intimidate the local people, to let them know with which group the government stands."

The entire complex of primary school buildings had been made available to the minority faction for their meeting. Seventy soldiers lined up in rows, three-deep just outside the school entrance. Their crisp marine-blue uniforms looked new; they carried night sticks, M-16 rifles and tear gas canisters. Two jeeps of the Ministry of

Agrarian Reform were parked just a few feet from them.

We tried to get a peasant within the school's gates to tell us what was taking place, and why there were so many troops. Just as we had resigned ourselves to his non-answers, the military commanders emerged from the school building. It was not a question of wanting or not to interview them; they obviously had been told of our presence, and rapidly made their way towards us. They were accompanied by an extremely large bodyguard who sported a Nike T-shirt and carried an Uzi machine-gun. After identifying ourselves, one officer agreed to answer a few questions. He was short, with a pug-dog face, and was treated with deference by the other.

"What's happening here?"

"A meeting."

"A meeting for what?"

"To elect a new community leader."

"And why are so many soldiers necessary?"

"We are not going to tell you."

It was all so strange, so un-Mexican. I had seen similar confrontations before, but always south of the Chiapas border.

Sunday, May 16, 1982: Comitán and Las Hamacas.

Comitán is a province of Chiapas. It was a priority area for us for the simple reason of its also being a priority area for the Mexican government's principal agricultural program: the Mexican Food System. This program, which is known in Mexico by its Spanish acronym SAM, was initiated in March 1981 with the objective of making Mexico self-sufficient in basic grains. To do so, SAM proposed to provide Mexico's peasant farmers with incentives (cheap credit, subsidized fertilizers, seeds, and pesticides, higher guarantee prices and a crop insurance program) to produce and to plant previously uncultivated lands.

The state representative for SAM said that Comitán's farmers had received SAM incentives for 2 years. We decided to visit two ejidos at random to talk with the members about the benefits they had received.

An ejido is the principal land-ownership unit by which lands were distributed after the 1910-1917 Mexican Revolution. The land, while officially owned by the state, is worked by a group of peasants. The peasants can work the land allotted to their ejido either collectively or in individual plots. Today ejidos represent 50% of Mexico's

lands. The government likes Ejido Abelardo Rodriguez. It has constructed a grain storage center, a food store, a three-building school complex and a soccer field. The attractive wooden houses, fertile fields and new clothing of its residents are above average for the state of Chiapas.

None of the residents we spoke with knew what SAM was, but they had noted an increase in the support price of corn in recent years. They had benefited from the government's crop insurance program.

Less than one kilometer down the road we saw the sign post for Ejido Ajayaxh. Driving up an extremely steep, rock-filled road, we soon encountered its first houses. They appeared typical enough: small, adobe structures with mud floors. The fact that so many of them were emblazoned with the hammer and sickle of the socialist PSUM party was not normal. The first villager we saw was a rather plump young woman, combing her recently washed hair.

"Excuse me, could you please tell me where the Comisariado Ejidal (community leader) lives?"

"Yes, he lives in the house up that road. But he is not in town at the moment... However, the other comisariado is in, and he lives in that house over there."

I was shocked. Ejidos never have more than one comisariado.

"What do you mean the other comisariado?"

"Well we have some differences in our community," smiling, almost laughing she replied.

"Now come, come, tell me what's up."

"Well, you see, some of us are socialists."

The government had named one leader to the ejido who also represented the official political party, the PRI. At the same time, the people had chosen their own leader, who also happened to be a local representative of the Mexican Socialist Unified Party, PSUM.

When we arrived at the house of the PSUM community leader, only his wife was in. He was out working in his field. But his plot of steep, rocky land was so small that she could call to him from the window without the least difficulty. We asked him if he and his community had benefited from SAM. Bitterly he told of the many promises the government's agricultural officials had made and broken. And did he think it might have something to do with the community's political leaning?

"Well yes, that is surely one of the main reasons."

We returned to the highway, and continued our drive south towards our next destination: a Guatemalan refugee camp. Visiting the Guatemalan refugee camps is not a venture lightly undertaken. Various contacts have to be made just to find out exactly where along the border the camps are located, and what is the best way to win the trust of the closed-mouth, suspicious Guatemalans. Fortunately, one of the journalists traveling with us had been to the camps just a few days earlier.

To get to the camp required another hour and a half drive on the paved highway from Comitán, plus two more hours on a bad dirt road. And once we finally got there, I questioned whether we had gotten to any where. The location of Las Hamacas, the refugee camp we visited, is one of the most dry, desolate, end-of-the world places I have ever visited. The weather was extremely hot, and the earth was scorched to a pale dusty yellow. The area seemed uninhabitable by any animal or plant. It was difficult to imagine anyone voluntarily settling in these parts. Nevertheless, there were hundreds of Mexican families in the area, and the Guatemalan refugees explained that their town, which was only a few miles away on the other side of the border, was similar in climate and topography.

Las Hamacas is inhabited by about 125 Guatemalan peasant families. It was founded in December 1981. The Guatemalan Indian families in the camp said they had fled to Mexico after army troops had massacred several dozen people in villages near their own. Although none of those we talked to had had immediate family members killed by government forces, some said they had been intimidated and beaten by police or soldiers.

While the one and two-room bamboo huts were simple, the metal bed-frames, kitchen tables, large transistor radios and few household goods brought over by the Guatemalans made their huts look quite inhabitable after all. They had also built hearths, a medical clinic, and were about to finish a food storage center.

According to the refugees, it was the local Mexican peasants who, having provided the Guatemalans with clothing and food, had been the greatest help when they first arrived. Since then, the Mexican government had provided some basic food supplies. And a Mexican solidarity committee, directed by the bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas, had furnished them with a good supply of medicines. Malnutrition was their main problem.



The refugees had mixed feelings about their treatment by the Mexican authorities. On the one hand, the government had given them a group visa, good for three years with the possibility of renewal. But they said local immigration officers often visited Las Hamacas, and repeatedly urged them to return to their homeland, assuring them that with the recent change of government there, the violence in Guatemala had ceased. Even though these migration officials said they had no orders to remove the refugees, and were not threatening them, the refugees said that the tone of the warnings was usually harsh and authoritarian.

While confused and slightly embittered by the authorities' contradictory behavior, the refugees were thankful for the moral and economic assistance provided by the Mexican solidarity committee. Besides food and medical supplies, the committee was providing the refugees with information on the political situation in their country and discouraging them from returning, saying that the change of the government there had not significantly reduced the level of repression in the Guatemalan countryside.

These refugees do often go home however. Since the Mexican government has not given them land to work or other employment opportunities, they sneak over the border at night and fearfully work their fields under the cover of darkness. They seem resigned to this modus operandi. But there are other small groups, even less fortunate, scattered in the border mountains in more precarious conditions.

Monday, May 17, 1982: Monte Libano.

I had read the short newspaper accounts of the incident, I had talked with people who had been there, and I had talked with Doroteo the leader of the Monte Libano community. But I was still unprepared for what happened.

As our small two-prop plane began to circle for landing, the remains of Monte Libano were in evidence. From the air it looked as if a large troop of Boy Scouts had recently been in the area, leaving blackened campfires about every 40 feet. In fact, that was all that was left of the village of Monte Libano: 70 black patches where the residents' houses had been.

When the plane landed, Doroteo seemed in exceptionally bright spirits. He was obviously excited to have the chance to state his case, on site, to a group of journalists. The people at the National Indigenous Institute's (INI) offices in San Cristobal de las Casas, those

who had most helped the Monte Libano refugees, had told them not to take their case to the national press. Rather, they had argued, the threat of doing so was the community's most important weapon to ensure that the state governor would help them, as he had promised.

But the broad smile and carefree conversation of Doroteo was soon replaced by silence and eyes widened with terror. We were barely out of the plane when some 15 to 20 men began to approach us from various directions. Some were on horseback. All were carrying drawn machetes. We decided to walk to where Doroteo's house had stood, hoping that if we ignored them, they would ignore us.

Doroteo's house was further away than any of us (except Doroteo) had imagined. We walked briskly, trying to look relaxed and fearless, but each moment the distance between us and the hired-hands diminished. Chris Isham of ABC News and I stood on either side of Doroteo. "They want to kill me," he muttered softly again and again. We tried to reassure him there was no reason for fear, that there was no way they would dare lay hands on the foreign press, that we were also many people (including Doroteo, we numbered 6) and could defend him. I don't think I was much more convinced than Doroteo by our reassuring words. I had recently returned from El Salvador, where people were hacked to death by machete, and where the lives of the foreign press were not considered sacred. Yes, I thought, you are in Mexico. But that short moment of regained confidence was punctured by an almost equally convincing counter-argument; but Kim, this is Chiapas.

When the posse was still 100 yards away, I realized that the film in my camera needed to be changed. Forgetting to rewind it, I opened my camera. I hadn't even finished removing the ruined film when our pursuers were upon us.

"What are you doing here?"

"Taking photographs; we have the governor's permission." The first phrase was true, the latter not, but it sounded good.

"And why is that man with you?"

"He's just showing us around."

Not once did we stop walking, or turn around to address them properly.

"Well, what he's told you is true. Yes we did burn down their houses. But that's because they had no right to be here. They were squatters, this is private property and they had no right to be here."

The fact that I did not reply, and that we kept walking, confused them. They followed us a few more yards, and then stopped. I didn't breathe easily until we were at least another 5 minutes away from them, and I could see the group break up. Doroteo was still terrorized, and I for one, didn't blame him. But we were all angry at ourselves for not having one of our tape-recorders running. This was the first time that the landowners' people had admitted to burning the houses. The version they had maintained previously was that the community members had burned down their own houses.

We arrived at the remains of Doroteo's house. He narrated what happened in Monte Libano in April this year:

On the night of the 4th of April, seventy of our houses were burned, as you could see from the plane. You cannot see them all because some are in the mountains. I cannot really show them to you, if I show them to you and they get hold of me they would kill me ... even though I have committed no crime; those men said we were invaders, it's not true, I am not invading anything.

They burned everything and they also stole many things from us such as tools, saddles, machetes, axes, etc... Everything burned down including our clothing. The clothes I'm wearing now were given to me and I'm terribly embarrassed because I have nothing for my wife, for my children. No clothes. No food. Everybody's suffering from what they did. That's not a way of solving anything. If at least they would have asked us to leave without using violence. It is the third time they do this to us. I have built my house three times already, but they said we had burned our houses because they don't want to recognize their guilt. How could I burn down my own house, tell me? If you burn your house, where are you going to live? ... My children suffered greatly. One of my daughters was lost for three days without food in these fields. Many women were beaten up and their bones were broken...

For days after the burning of their houses, the 70 families of Monte Libano hid in the mountains. Many of them became quite sick; the Volcano Chinchon had erupted less than 90 kilometers away, and the heavy dust which fell made it difficult for them to breathe. Finally, the National Indigenous

Institute (INI) answered their pleas for shelter. Since then, most of the community members have been housed in INI dormitories in San Cristobal de las Casas. Others have gone to stay with relatives.

This confrontation at Monte Libano has been going on since 1971, when Doroteo and his fellow Tzetzal Indians first founded their village. They had been landless peasants. They had found out, they claim from the Ministry of Agrarian Reform, that Mr. Herbert Stacpoole, a doctor of German descent, owned 1,100 hectares of land, a holding many times larger than is legally allowed. To get around the law, he had sub-divided his land and registered it as 5 plots, using the names of his wife, children and a friend as the other proprietors.

The Indians invaded Mr. Stacpoole's land, convinced of the illegality of his holding. They thought the government would award them the land within a short time. But when the ruling of the Agrarian Reform Ministry was announced the Indians were shocked. It said there were insufficient people demanding the land. Although the request had been made by 70 families, the Ministry claimed that only 9 legally qualified. (I believe the legal minimum is 20 families). The Ministry said that the others already owned pieces of land or for some other reason had been disqualified. The Indians claim that the government's accusations were false. They decided to appeal the decision. Meanwhile, their houses, the school and the town hall were burned down twice.

In 1981, the Ministry of Agrarian confirmed what the Indians had claimed for over a decade: Mr Stacpoole was the owner of all the holdings, and therefore held more land than was legally permitted. Under Mexican law, however, Mr. Stacpoole was allotted several months to challenge the conclusions.

Perhaps Mr. Stacpoole was convinced that he would not be able to win the case. In the months given him to assemble evidence for his defense, he began to cut down valuable timber on the disputed land. This February, the Indians, believing he was robbing them of the wealth which should be theirs, stole two of the trucks which were carrying away the timber. Subsequently, Mr. Stacpoole called Juan Sabines, the governor of Chiapas. Immediately the governor's personal helicopter was dispatched with 12 policemen. The trucks were recovered; the policemen stayed on. As the peasants tell it, less than two months later, with the help of the landowners' hired hands, the police burned down Monte Libano; they believe that during 3 days of burning, beating and rape, the aggressors were under the influence of alcohol, drugs, or both.

The governor has personally told the people of Monte Libano that he is horrified by what happened and will ensure that those responsible for the atrocities committed are prosecuted. Initially, he also offered them roofing materials and

60 hectares of land in another region of the state. But the community refused this offer, explaining that they wanted to reconstruct their houses in Monte Libano.

The day following our visit to Monte Libano, we visited the INI dormitories and talked at length with the affected villagers. Most of the women wore their traditional dress, had their hair fixed in long ribboned braids, and had children dangling from their skirts. Few of the Indians could speak Spanish; Doroteo acted as translator.

One man: All the policemen there are those who did it. They started on the first day, continued on the second and on the third day and until they stopped on the fourth day, when the night seemed to be the morning because of the fire. There was a cloud of ashes, everything was covered by ashes.

One of my children died the first time they came to evict us, ten years ago. They threw bombs in the fields and I was there, hiding on the floor with my three children when the bombs exploded killing my daughter. It was very hard and I still suffer from the loss of my child. I have this other daughter, she's seven years old, still so small; she doesn't grow.

A woman: That day the police arrived at two in the afternoon. They told me you're getting out of here right now. Take your things along with you. I said, "I'm not leaving because I have a paper which allows me to stay here." They told me, "No, there is no such paper. Who gave you this paper to stay here?" "I have an order which the governor gave me." "If you don't want to get out of here, I'm going to burn you, if you don't want to leave, then, this way you'll get out of here." They showed their guns. They hit me with the back of the gun and they said: "If you don't want to leave, we'll burn this place down." During those hours they did all this, they also stole some of my chickens. The police broke into my house and they locked the door and they said: "We're going to burn it down." To fight me they hit me very hard and they also raped me. When the police were hitting me I tried to avoid their blow, their gun hit the baby. After this the baby was very sick for eight days, and then he died.

A man: The men came in and they kicked me and I fell down and they put a knife into my knee. They continued to hit me and kick me and I couldn't get up. Finally they left me half-dead.

Question: Could you ask him to translate what they had said when we asked if they wanted to go back to their land?

Doroteo: Yes, we want to return where we've suffered for eleven years, we want to live right there. Where am I going to go if those lands aren't given to me? I don't want to go anywhere else, especially as it is where my children died, where I lost my animals, where I spat out my blood.

That evening the community held a meeting. Unanimously they decided to return to Monte Libano, to construct their homes. The governor finally agreed to help them, and has offered roofing materials and protection against the landowner's men.

While the case of Monte Libano may be more dramatic than many, it is not unique. In a study conducted last year by agrarian-specialist Gustavo Esteva, there were 110 cases of violent land disputes in Chiapas in 1981. Of those, 90 were provoked by large ranchers invading the lands of Indian communities or ejidos.