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Into the Chimalapas

Journey to a Jungle of Conflict

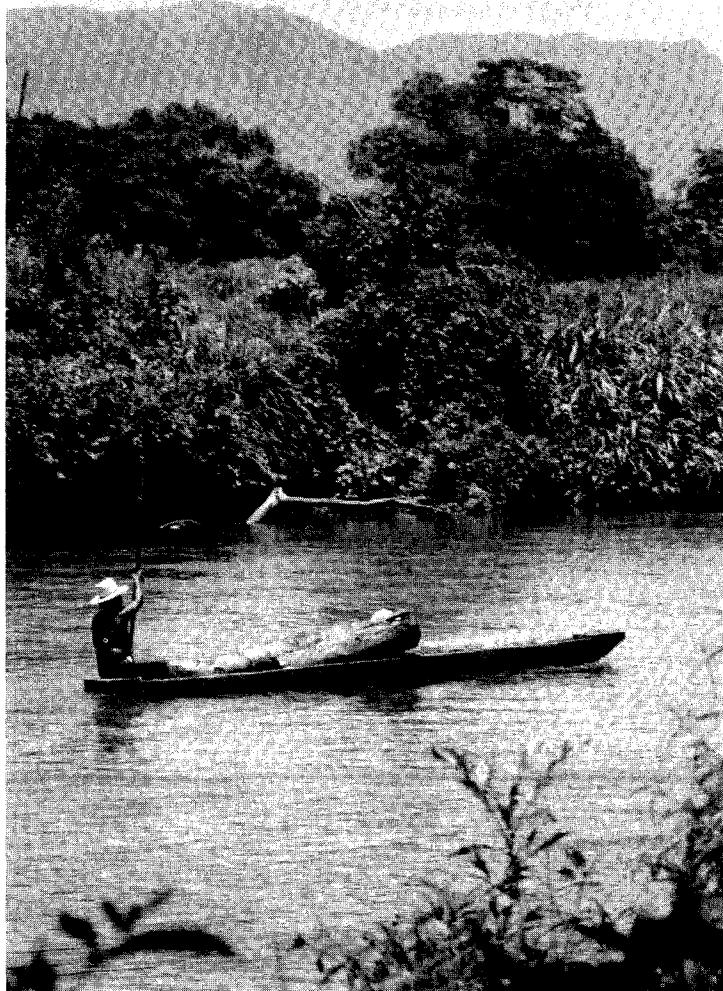
OAXACA, Oaxaca

August 1996

By William F. Foote

Light pierced the filigreed palm fronds as we motored upstream toward San Francisco La Paz, a village of some 160 families situated deep in the Chimalapas rain forest. We glided from the shade of a limestone canyon draped with heavy, fruit-bearing foliage. Sun showered our 35-foot canoe. The rain-swollen river, about twenty yards wide, sparkled a beautiful, clear shade of green.

"See that mountain ridge," said Fermín Martínez, standing up at the bow, dusting off his threadbare khakis and faded camouflage hat. I squinted at the distant peaks rising above the jungle floor, stretching across the horizon. "That's called the *Espinazo del Diablo* [The Devil's Backbone]. On top lies a landing strip built by the *narco*—"



Poling upriver toward San Francisco La Paz in the Chimalapas jungle

ganaderos [narco-cattle ranchers]."

We were floating into drug-trafficking country. Not long ago, hired guns might have shot a hole in this wooden canoe full of environmentalists and dirt-poor settlers. During the 1980s and '90s, about 90 cattle ranchers controlled most of the surrounding territory, called La Gringa, about 100,000 acres tucked away in the northeastern extremes of the Chimalapas jungle in the state of Oaxaca.

Capitalizing on the remote location, some of the *ganaderos* allegedly diversified from beef into marijuana and poppies. Thanks to the high-tech landing strip up on the Devil's Backbone, the global drug markets were just a few hours away. "We would often see wing lights flashing as planes landed in the dead of night," recalled the man slouched beside me.

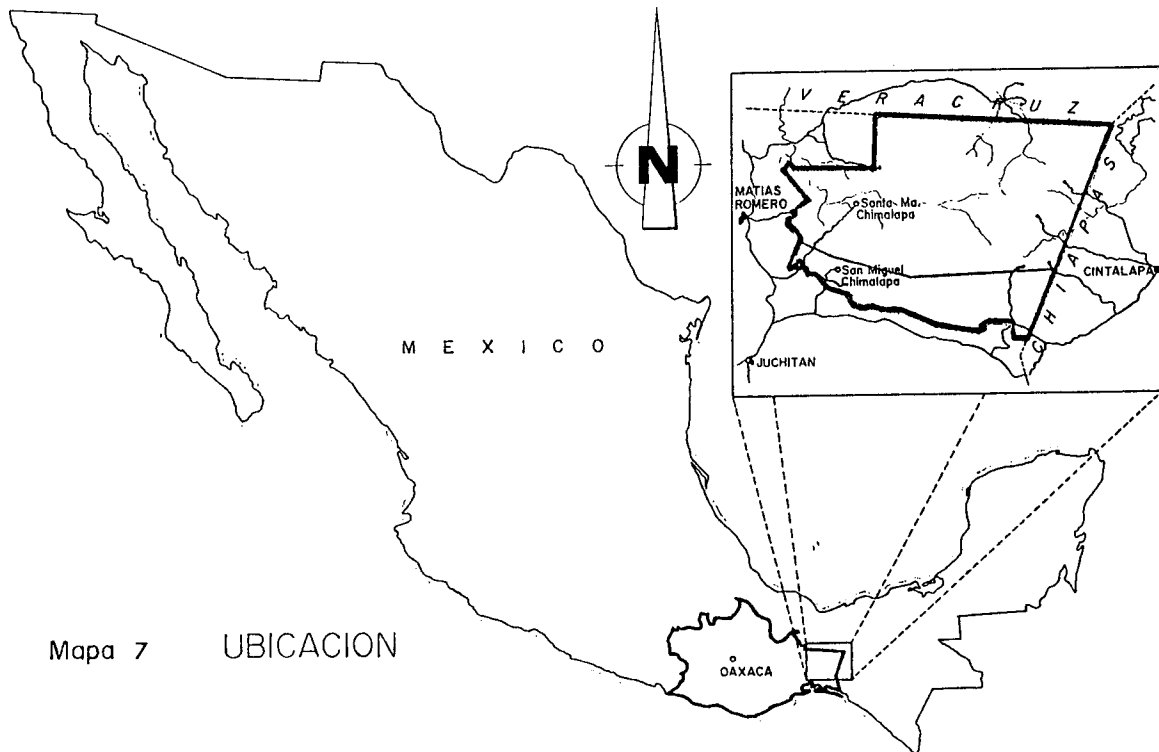
As we approached San Francisco La Paz, recent history unfolded with the landscape: unbroken tracts of virgin jungle gave way to deforested pasture lands. Beyond the receding fields, verdant canyons shot up the

escarpment of the Devil's Backbone, offering ideal terrain for illicit agriculture. It was a drug runner's paradise, except for the locals across the river. "We survived a quarter century of terror — well, not *everybody* survived," said Francisco Osorio, the Chinateco Indian steering the bow with a wooden pole. "That was enough."

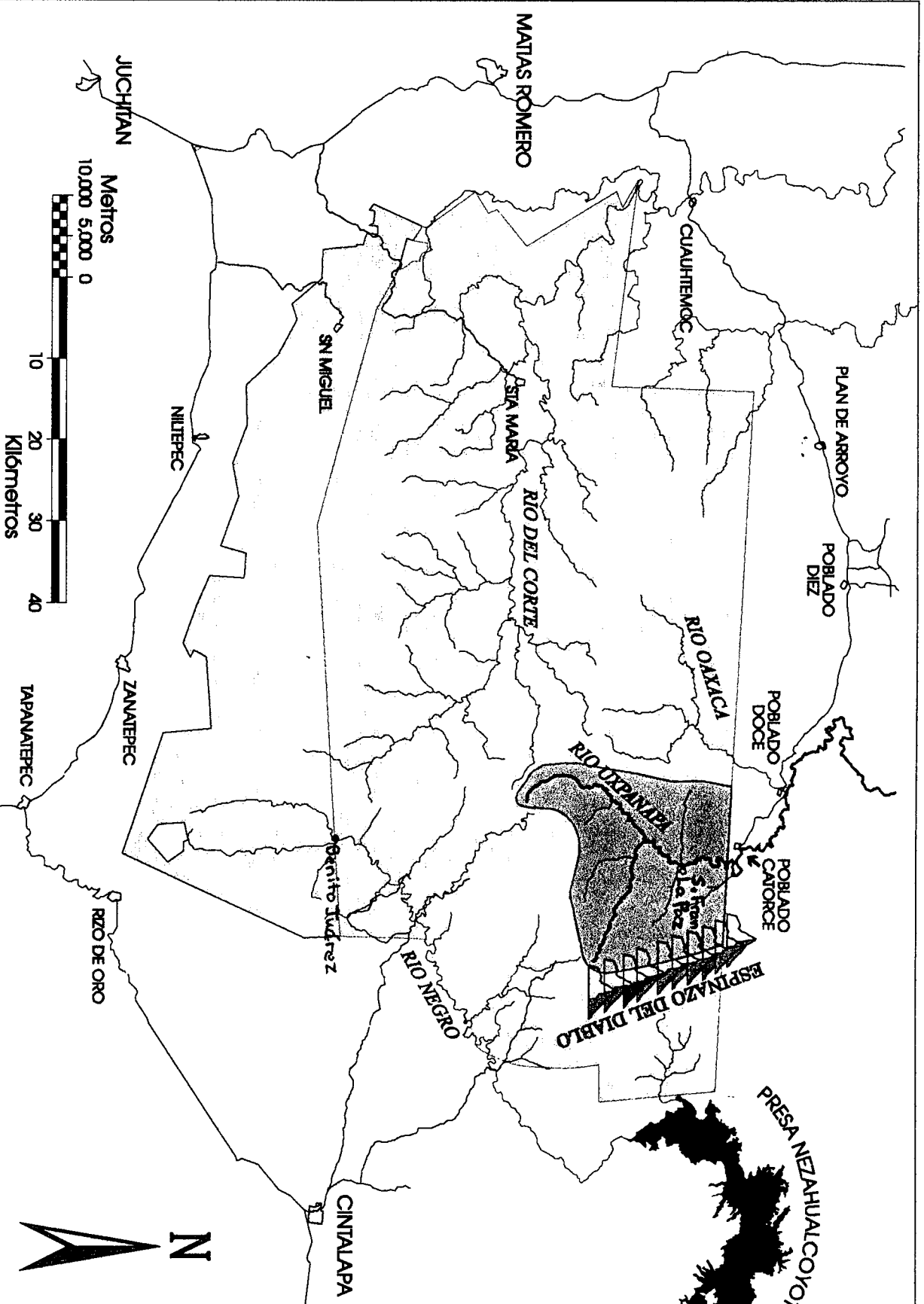
A year and a half ago, local villagers ran the *narcos* out of town. Backed by regional, national and international organizations — some of which were represented in our canoe — peasants like Osorio successfully pressured Oaxaca's state government to expel the cattle ranchers. Brute force *and* generous indemnifications helped close a violent chapter in La Gringa history.

Despite that happy ending, the liberation of San Francisco La Paz was just another (rather exceptional) episode in an ongoing struggle affecting all 1.5 million acres and 16,000 inhabitants of the Chimalapas jungle. The hamlet we were about to enter would afford glimpses of but one of dozens of remote communities torn asunder by a conflict that threatens the very survi-

[Map A, 3-D projection map of the Chimalapas jungle inside Mexico]



UBICACION DE LA CUENCA ALTA DE UXPANAPA



FUENTES: SRA. PLANOS COMUNALES DEFINITIVOS, 1983.
INEGI, CARTAS TOPOGRAFICAS ESC. 1:250,000 1981-82

Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste A.C.
www.maderasdel Sureste.org



Motoring up the Río Uxpanapa toward the canyons of the Devil's Backbone

val of one of the world's last remaining rain forests, not to mention the people within.

ROOTS OF THE CHIMALAPAS PROBLEM

The story began centuries ago. In 1687, native Indians bought the rights to their jungle back from the Spanish crown with "gourds of gold," or "*chimalapas*" in the local Zoque language. Three hundred years later, those rights are in hot dispute. The modern conflict started 30 years ago when the federal government, pressing forward with agrarian reform, opened uncolonized areas in Mexico's South. The scramble for land in the Chimalapas had begun.

Who controls the jungle? That's the central question that has pitted Indian against rancher, peasant against peasant, and state against state. Technically speaking, about 80 percent of the country's forests — including the Chimalapas — are communal lands owned by indigenous villages without individual property titles. Yet around here, local Indian rights are lost on those who would decide the fate of a rain forest the way it's done in Brazil, Colombia and Indonesia.

Visions of the jungle vary: ancestral home, last frontier, the world's lungs, a treasure trove. Whatever the perception, everyone seems to want a chunk of the Chimalapas.

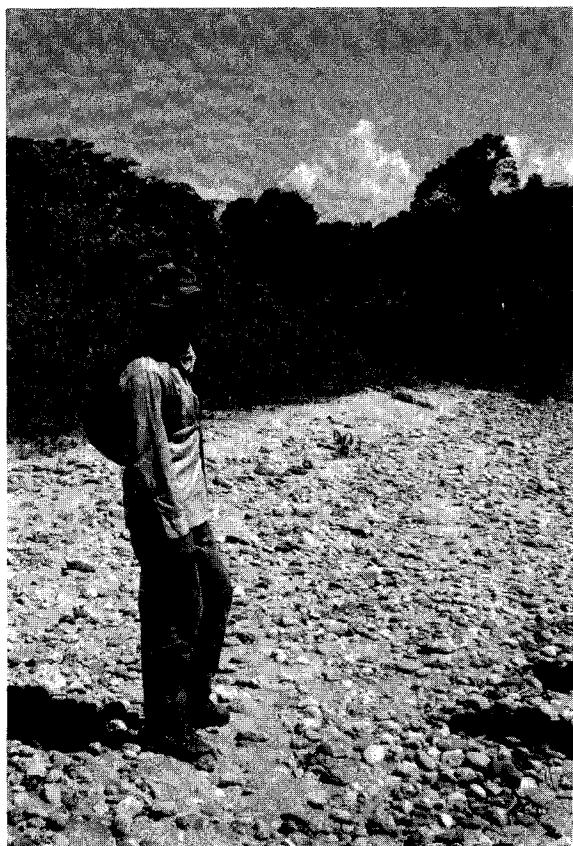
Consider Oaxaca and Chiapas. For years, these neighboring states have been feuding over the rain forest. Yet according to both states' constitutions, the

Chimalapas clearly falls within Oaxacan territory. In 1967, a presidential decree confirmed this by establishing the limits of the two Oaxacan municipalities — Santa María and San Miguel — that encompass the entire jungle. So the legal claims are clear; but who said anything about legality?

Chiapas broke the rules. Three decades ago, in response to demographic pressure and the demands of powerful cattle and logging concerns, state officials allegedly fabricated a border dispute. Since then, Chiapas has laid claim to approximately 400,000 acres of land situated within the eastern corridor of the Chimalapas, clearly inside the state of Oaxaca.

Starting in the 1960s, invading lumberjacks commenced the systematic extraction of precious woods — cedar, mahogany, pine, tropical oak — from the disputed territory. Cattle ranchers slashed and burned the jungle for pastures. Meanwhile, hordes of Chiapas peasants, attracted by land and jobs, hopped the state line. Many arrived with "legal" land titles supplied by the Secretariat of Agrarian Reform. Today they inhabit 35 *ejidos* (communal farm settlements) scattered across the eastern forest, enclaves of Chiapas homesteaders living inside Oaxaca.

Feeling besieged, the Chimalapas communities began to protest. In recent years, with conflicts mounting, the invading cattle ranchers *et al.* have taken to hiding their illicit activities — which increasingly include narcotics production — under the cover of the aforementioned *ejidos*. Many register their land under peasants'



Fermín Martínez of Maderas del Pueblo
(The People's Wood)

names, buying friends and fealty with ill-gotten profits. Some literally disguise themselves as Chiapas farmers.

Either way, cattle ranchers, loggers and drug traffickers have taken legal shelter under arcane legislation that protects the rights of homesteaders and squatters. If physically expelled from the disputed territory — an increasingly common occurrence — they often continue to rule in *absentia*. Calling the shots from Chiapas, they condemn plaintiffs to purgatory in the appellate courts, while paying hired guns to play judge and jury in the jungle. The verdict is perpetual conflict.

What's the fallout? The Chimalapas are shrinking. On a daily basis, nearly 1,500 beams of cedar and mahogany are reportedly trucked out of the jungle.¹ Tens of thousands of hectares of rain forest are intentionally burned each year to clear land for marijuana fields.² The result is that of the original 1.5 million acres of virgin forest, only about half remain (which is better than most jungles in Mexico, where just 10 percent of the original 55 million acres of tropical forest remains.³)

In large measure, the Mexican government — both

federal and state — has been unable, or unwilling, to address the problem. In response to official neglect and unabated deforestation, civic activists and environmental groups have taken action to help solve the crisis. Since the late 1980s, regional, national and international concerns have coordinated efforts with the local Chimalapas communities to create a counterweight to the lawlessness that reigns.

Their strategy is two-fold. First, resolve land-tenure conflicts. Chiapas peasants who live "on and from" the land can stay, but *narco-ganaderos*, loggers and company must leave. Second, rescue and restore the rain forest. In broad terms, programs for this purpose try to integrate nature conservation with extensive community participation and productive projects considered to be environmentally friendly.

"You'll see how it all works once we've toured La Gringa," said Fermín Martínez, back in the wooden canoe. The forestry engineer works for *Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste*, A.C. (The People's Wood of the Southeast), a non-governmental organization that draws support from the likes of the World Wildlife Fund, the British Council, the MacArthur and Rockefeller Foundations and The Synergos Institute.

Moments later our boat slid up a sandy bank. I gathered my stuff, preparing to observe the plans that may turn San Francisco La Paz and the surrounding jungle into a paradigm for community-based nature conservation. Yet as I hopped ashore, glancing across the river toward the Devil's Backbone, I imagined that abandoned runway up on top. Swept by the intrigue, I wondered how it got there? Better yet, *what happened here?* As guests and guides discussed the future, I kept thinking about the past.

WHEN NARCOS RULED LA GRINGA

Fernando Osorio suddenly fell silent. Ten yards behind him, a man wearing a red flannel shirt and cowboy hat walked down the embankment toward the Río Uxpanapa. Shooting a glance in our direction, he climbed into a tree-trunk canoe, pulled the rip cord of an Evinrude outboard and motored away from shore.

"That guy threatens me all the time," said Osorio, 48, peering over his shoulder toward the water. We stood beneath a canopy of leaves in the riverside village of Catorce, moments before our boat launched itself upstream toward San Francisco La Paz. "He was a second-class rancher who worked for the *ganaderos* from Chiapas," the man continued, his dark-skinned features relaxing as we walked toward a tethered donkey. "When the ranchers disappeared so did his job, and he blames us [people from San Francisco La Paz]."

1. *El Sur*, May 10, 1996.

2. *El Sur*, May 7, 1996.

3. Vocalía Ejecutiva de los Chimalapas, *Propuesta de Regulación Ecológica de los Chimalapas*, Oaxaca, May, 1991, p.1.

Osorio swung astride his mule. "We'll talk more upriver," I said. "Not if they pick me off on the way," he replied, half jokingly.

Frontier towns have always been dangerous. Osorio knew that when he came to the Chimalapas in 1984. Fleeing the crushing poverty of Oaxaca's central highlands, he arrived in search of arable land on which to raise a family. For that, he was willing to endure just about anything: poor soils, unfamiliar and poisonous plants and animals, skin-burrowing insects, parasitic diseases. When he happened upon the idyllic village of San Francisco La Paz, he rejoiced at his good fortune. "Right away," Osorio recalled, "I knew this was the place."

The site *is* unique. Nearly two thousand years ago, long before the rise of the Mayan empire, Olmec Indians built ceremonial temples in this river-braided valley. Today, the remains of that holy city tease the imagination, lending the modern hamlet the air of an *Indiana Jones* movie set: stone pyramids under thick overgrowth; a vast ceremonial plaza covered with grass; a sunken ball court; ancient snake-head sculptures on display beside the present-day meeting hall.

"The ranchers kidnapped our carvings," stated a bristling Doña Angela Méndez. Recovered last year, several of the pieces had been broken. "The *narcos* painted them with those tacky colors too," added the 78-year-old village matriarch.

Doña Angela, who moved to the Chimalapas with her husband in 1959, helped found San Francisco La Paz with her seven sons. As a welcoming gesture the night we arrived, she served up tortillas and chicken soup inside the clapboard community house. The naked light bulb above our table — electricity arrived in 1991 — accentuated her flickering smile and bony shoulders stooped by time. As we ate, the aged hostess recalled the tranquility of their first 15 years here. "The jungle," she said, "was kind to us."

In 1974, the first cattle ranchers arrived. "They didn't bother us in the beginning," Doña Angela recalled. "But then we started seeing the things we weren't supposed to."

They were hard to ignore: canoes floating downstream filled with marijuana; a mail man arriving each week from Oaxaca City with empty sacks, leaving with them full of "you know what"; heavily-armed men guarding pot and poppy fields that locals stumbled upon while hunting; helicopters in and out, pilots disappearing into the woods, returning with bags a-bulging; and finally, those landing lights blinking in



Cooling off by the river, Fernando Osorio explains what life was like when narco-ganaderos ruled La Gringa.

the heavens above the Devil's Backbone.

"You know who they say built the runway?" volunteered a man whom I'd met earlier on the river. "José Patrocinio González, that's who," he said, referring to the governor of Chiapas from 1988 to 1993. That same politician became Mexico's Interior Minister in 1994, but was fired following the Zapatista revolt, accused of repression and abuses against peasants. "Everyone knew Patrocinio was the biggest land holder in La Gringa," added the man who requested anonymity. "We never saw him, though. Like most of the big shots from Chiapas, he wouldn't deign to live here."

Yet others would. When newcomers arrived at the village in the early 1980s, the *narco-ganaderos* put out the unwelcome mat. Consider Osorio. Three times he built a house — three times they knocked it down. On the first two occasions, masked horseman tied ropes to his roof and galloped across the river. The third time, they blew it to smithereens with a high-caliber rifle.



Olmec sculptures and unexcavated pyramids inside the remote jungle hamlet of San Francisco La Paz

"That man we saw on the river today," said Osorio, visibly shaken in the recollection, "he did that to me."

Unperturbed, Osorio built a fourth house by the light of the moon. Posting 24-hour watches with fellow settlers, they threw up one building after another. More immigrants arrived and the village grew, much to the chagrin of the ranchers across the river. "They took pot shots at our canoes," Osorio claimed. "They cut down

our corn, brought in the Chiapas police. Clearly, we weren't wanted."

Things got uglier. In the late 1980s, Doña Angela lost her husband, the village founder, to a police bullet. In September 1992, one of her seven sons, Pablo Escobedo Méndez, disappeared on the road to Catorce. "He left home on a mule and never returned," she told me, crying. "They murdered my boy."



Traditional thatch-roofed houses in San Francisco La Paz.



Peaceful kidnapper Angélico Solano justifies the abduction of Ernesto Castellanos from the Casa Blanca plantation in 1986.

Yet most remain untold. In large measure, the illegal land invasions, the uncontrolled logging, the drug-related forest fires, the escalating human rights violations, all these remain dark secrets of the jungle. Indeed, in the face of government indifference — and complicity on the part of the state of Chiapas — it's a wonder many communities haven't rebelled. Actually, they have.

FIGHTING BACK: A PEACEFUL STRUGGLE FOR THE CHIMALAPAS

Driving along the edge of unbroken tracts of tropical forest, you begin to wonder what lies within. The cool darkness, the invisible clucking sounds, the plaintive whistles — they all tempt you to stop the car, grab a machete, and cut a path into the unknown. Yet nobody has ever crossed the Chimalapas by foot, so inhospitable is the mountainous terrain. Nobody, that is, except the *duendes* (elves).

We had just left La Gringa, heading west toward the

hot, grubby town of Matias Romero, when our driver confirmed that elves do in fact live in the Chimalapas. Like many indigenous locals, Tirso Bante Lopez believes in a parallel, *duende*-ruled world inside the jungle. He was dead serious when he told the following story:

Several years ago, a young mother from his hometown of Santa María spotted a naked infant abandoned in the woods. Naturally, she picked the baby up, cradled him in her arms and began to breast feed. "Big mistake," said Tirso dramatically. "It was an evil *duende*, you see. He kidnapped her and took her to his cave. We haven't seen the lady since."

In 1986, another kidnapping occurred in the rain forest. Only this time it wasn't a mother who disappeared, but a brother — the brother of the then-governor of Chiapas. At that time, Ernesto Castellanos was one of the most powerful, and despised, cattle ranchers in the eastern corridor. As for his abductors, nobody ever blamed the *duendes*.

"We kidnapped him," said Angélico Solano, 30, proudly. "Hundreds of us did it together, virtually every farmer in the area."

I had recently arrived at Benito Juárez, a mountainside village tucked into southeastern Chimalapas. Located just miles from the Chiapas border, this sparsely-populated, deforested ravine lies seven hours by car from Matías Romero. Resting after that bumpy ride, I lay on the town soccer field as the kidnapper explained his crime.

"Everybody helped storm the Casa Blanca plantation," Solano affirmed, pointing toward the site up the canyon a few miles north. "Once inside, we uncovered arms, bullet-proof jackets, drugs. A week later Ernesto walked free; nobody was hurt. Looking back, it wasn't really a crime. We just wanted the world to see what was happening here."

The world didn't watch. Castellanos owned but one of approximately 100 illegal cattle ranches scattered across the disputed territory. Furthermore, the authorities allegedly censored press coverage of the event. Yet the kidnapping set the stage for things to come. Soon after, civic and environmental activists began trickling into the rain forest. Of course, they had no illusions about mobilizing the remote jungle communities, a formidable task.

In hindsight, unexpected events would dramatically accelerate that process of grass-roots organization. Before long, indigenous peasants would not only be rallying around the Chimalapas cause, but marching their demands through the far-off streets of Mexico City. What's



Typical wooden homes in the mountains of the disputed territory in the eastern Chimalapas rain forest

more, their protests would form part of a well-organized campaign backed by national environmental coalitions, human rights groups and international foundations. By 1991, it seemed, the world *was* watching.

What happened? First, the federal government disclosed "developmental" plans in the Chimalapas that were so environmentally controversial as to make tropical-wood smugglers look like tree huggers. On one hand, they wanted to build a four-lane superhighway straight through the virgin forest. Originating in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas, the interstate would have crossed the northeast corner of the Chimalapas, passing alongside the Devil's Backbone, one of the most vulnerable, bio-diversified regions of the jungle. On the other hand, national water officials announced a joint project with the World Bank to construct an enormous hydroelectric dam on the Río El Corte, which flows through the heart of the rain forest.

Second, the government planned to declare, by presidential decree, all of the Chimalapas a *reserva biósfera* (federal biosphere). That might sound nice. Yet granting the state absolute control over jungle-resources management meant denying all 16,000 local inhabitants — the rightful owners of the Chimalapas — any influence over rainforest conservation and exploration. Moreover, the highway and dam projects, combined with the federal government's free-market fervor of the 1990s, cast serious doubts upon official motives for environmental protection in the first place.

The jungle communities were mad. That anger

turned to fury when they learned that the decree would freeze all land-tenure patterns in the Chimalapas as of the moment of signing. This carried a grave implication: much of the disputed territory would become legal property of cattle ranchers, loggers and drug runners from Chiapas, legitimizing 30 years of illegal land invasions. The measure, so it seemed, was designed to reward the very people who had effectively raped the region.

"We had a genuine crisis on our hands," recalled a senior member of the National Committee for the Defense of the Chimalapas (NCDC), a civic coalition founded in 1991 in response to the aforementioned projects. According to the environmentalist, who asked not to be identified, the perceived emergency helped unite sectors from across Mexican society to fight for the Chimalapas and the rights of its communities. "The response was amazing," he said. "Not just ecologists, but human-rights activists, lawyers, scientists, writers, painters, musicians — everyone came forth in solidarity."

In conjunction with these developments, international support began penetrating the jungle. As early as 1989, U.S. and European backers began offering financial and technical assistance to help bolster local efforts to address the Chimalapas problem.

"In addition to funding and expertise," said a visiting representative of one of the North American institutions, "we can help provide moral support to the local communities, assuring them — while reminding

the Mexican government — that the international community cares *and* is watching.”

Yet only so much can be done from New York or Mexico City. Hence the importance of the jungle dwellers and the grass-roots organizers working with them. Interestingly enough, virtually all of the local civic and environmental activists dedicated to the Chimalapas, starting with those who arrived soon after the 1986 kidnapping, belong to the same non-governmental organization, called *Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste, A.C.* (The People’s Wood of the Southeast).

“*Maderas* has been inspirational and instrumental,” said a founding member of the NCDC during a recent trip to Oaxaca City. “Their commitment to the region has guided us all; regional, national and international participants alike.”

Thanks to that cooperation, the four-lane highway, the mega-dam and the presidential decree were successfully blocked in 1991. Accordingly, *Maderas* won the hearts of many jungle communities and the wrath of every cattle rancher. Over time, the latter’s opposition to the NGO has only grown. This is perhaps surprising, given that *Maderas* simply aims to help indigenous communities learn to manage their own forest resources in an environmentally-sustainable fashion. Yet that objective threatens the *status quo*. And considering the nature of local conflicts — the power of the *narco-ganaderos*, the terror of villages like San Francisco La Paz, the rage of widows like Doña Angela — their altruistic mission has become extremely complex.

“It’s like this,” said Zeneido Garnika, one of 28 *Maderas* professionals working in the Chimalapas. “To get to point B, we had to reach point A first. The people here demanded a resolution to their land-tenure conflicts — namely, the expulsion of the cattle ranchers and loggers. Until that happened, they couldn’t be bothered with anything else.”

“OUT WITH THE INVADERS”

Scribbling in my notebook, I began to feel carsick. Garnika, who lost his left arm in a childhood accident, was testing his driving skills up a steep dirt road *en route* to the town of Benito Juárez. Locals waved cordially from rickety wooden houses as our white pickup truck passed. Everyone recognized us by the decals on our side doors: *Maderas del Pueblo*, the World Wildlife Fund, the British Council.

Beside us in the front seat sat Marbel Reyes López, the 35-year-old *comisariado ejidal* (communally-elected president) of San Miguel, one of two municipalities in the Chimalapas.⁴ As we rounded the hill, Reyes explained

Marbel Reyes Lopez, a full-blooded Zoque Indian, was 23 years old when he wrote this song. The lyrics, he said, stem from growing up in San Miguel de Chimalapas, from his love for the jungle, and his loathing of those who would destroy it. His guitar accompaniment features the rhythmic, melancholy tone that typifies the regional music of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

In the 1980s, like a traveling bard, Reyes began performing his song at community meeting houses across the jungle. In 1994, he sang it in Mexico City at a demonstration that led to the state-sponsored expulsion of the *narco-ganaderos* from La Gringa. Months later Reyes was elected to his current position as communal president of San Miguel, one of two municipalities in the Chimalapas rain forest. Since then, he has presided over the recovery of some 30,000 acres of Oaxacan territory formerly invaded by cattle ranchers from Chiapas.

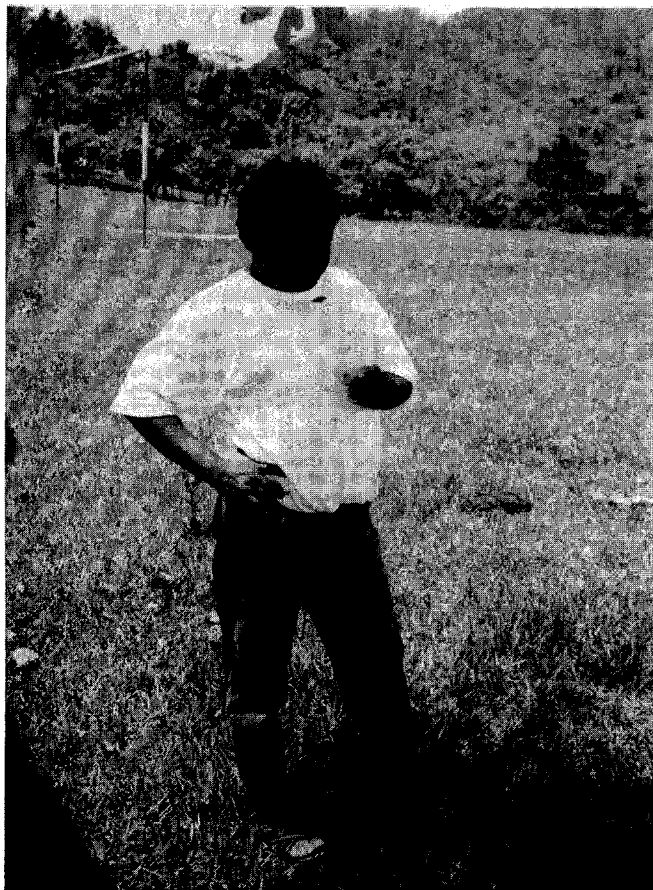
“Invasores Para Fuera”

Yo salí por la mañana A caminar por mi región Y salí pensando en todo Ay, que desilusión	Si hago de mi canto historia Quiero que la gente sepa Nuestra tierra la compramos de la colonia española
Chimalapas acabandose Por muchos invasores Ocupando nuestras tierras De las buenas, las mejores	25 mil monedas de oro Son los que nos costó Un tal Domingo Pintado Hizo la transacción
La gente que nos invade Son los que causan problemas Son los que dividen pueblos Son los que nos saquean	Ay, Ay que desilusión Chimalapas de riquezas Y los indios pobres son
Ay, Ay, escuchen con atención Chimalapas en zoque Jícara de oro en español	De una cosa estoy seguro No nos han puesto cadena Un día menos pensado Invasores para fuera!

“Out With the Invaders”

I left in the morning To walk through my region I left thinking of it all Ay, what a crying shame	If my song makes history I want my people to know We purchased our land From the Spanish crown
Chimalapas torn asunder By so many invaders Occupying our land The good, the best ones	25 thousand coins of gold Was what we paid One Mr. Domingo Pintado Made the transaction
The people who invade us They cause our problems They divide our communities They plunder our lives	Ay, Ay what a crying shame Chimalapas of great riches Yet the Indians are so poor
Ay, Ay, listen closely Chimalapas in Zoque means Gourds of gold in Spanish	Yet of one thing I am certain They haven’t chained us down One day when least expected Invaders out of town!

4. In indigenous regions of Mexico like the Chimalapas, municipalities are divided into *ejidos* (communally-held land). These agrarian communities are governed by a democratic structure of a general assembly of *ejidatarios* and an elected three-member commission called the *comisariado ejidal* (president, secretary, and treasurer). Reyes is the president of that representative body in the municipality of San Miguel de Chimalapas.



Marbel Reyes López, 35, communal president of San Miguel de Chimalapas, eating a mango on the soccer field of Benito Juárez

how the entire valley before us had been recovered from the *narco-ganaderos* last year. As we observed the deforested canyon, he broke into a tune called "*Invasores Para Fuera*" (Out with the Invaders), a protest song he composed 12 years ago.

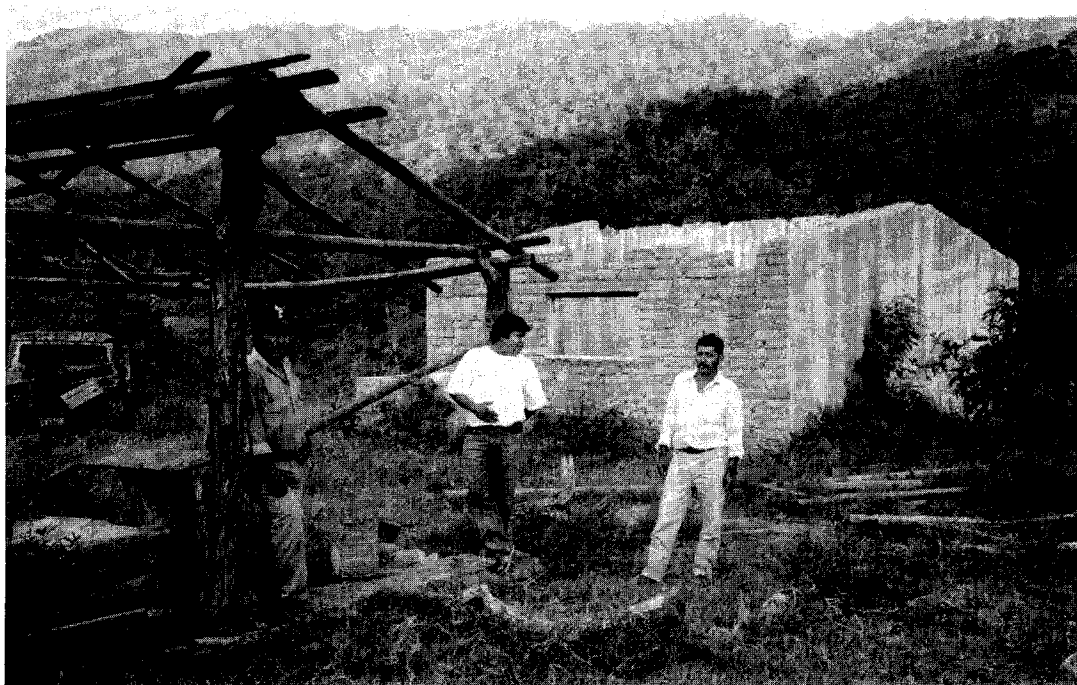
"That's where the ranch hands lived," said Reyes, pointing out the window toward two abandoned farm houses. We parked the truck on the weed-covered yard. Climbing out the back, two fellow communal leaders joined Reyes in kicking through the debris: charred rafters, broken window panes, shattered glass.

"There used to be an armed checkpoint right over there," shouted Reyes, leaning against an empty stable spray-painted with a skull and crossbones. "The folks from Benito Juárez had to sneak by night past the hired guns, walking *way* up there in the mountains."

On May 30, 1995, at the crack of dawn, Reyes led some 500 local farmers to this spot. As the unarmed men encircled the ranch, he stepped forward to instruct the Nibon brothers — three Chiapas ranchers of German descent — that they had exactly 15 days to evacuate the communal lands of San Miguel. Two weeks later, the same *campesinos* returned to claim the valley, all 12,500 acres of it.

"The *gueritos* (blond-haired men) tried to bribe me," recalled Reyes, as we returned to the car. "They invited me inside, offered to pay 350,000 pesos (U.S.46,600) on the spot. I said no and so they departed, walking in silence past hundreds of peaceful comrades."

Since assuming office early last year, Reyes has helped



The communal authorities of San Miguel stand before the charred remains of an abandoned cattle ranch that once belonged to the Nibon brothers from Chiapas.



Skull and cross bones painted on the empty stables inside the 12,500-acre valley recovered by Reyes and his constituents last year

recover in this way about a dozen cattle ranches, or 30,000 acres of communal lands. "This has been my dream since childhood," said the *comisariado* as we rattled northward, "to oust the invaders."

Back in Benito Juárez, I met an old man who was born in Chiapas and who used to work for the Nibon brothers. For 12 years, Refugio Arriola, 76, cut palm fronds in the cloud forests they controlled. The wages were measly, the hours long. Retired now, Don Cacho — as his friends call him — relaxed under the shade of a white straw hat. He recalled with delight how he helped set fire to his former bosses' barn after their expulsion. "It was the happiest of moments."

In hindsight, however, Don Cacho appears troubled by that experience. As our conversation progressed, it became clear that as a Chiapas native who has fully integrated into this Oaxacan village, he is an exception. Unlike him, many locals from his state were opposed to the eviction of the Nibon brothers. This is understandable. Having moved to this disputed territory, clearly unwanted by the native Oaxacans, those farmers often depended on cattle ranchers and loggers for employment and protection. Many felt beholden, moreover, to men like the Nibons for having helped them secure arable land, even if they were tricked into believing it was inside the state of Chiapas.

Significantly, it's the loyalty of those Chiapas peasants toward lumberjacks and *ganaderos* that worries Don Cacho. For that relationship enables cattle ranchers like the Nibons to maintain an iron grip over the region

even after they've been expelled. Put another way, the 35 satellite *ejidos* inhabited by Chiapas farmers inside the disputed territory constitute a bulwark through which *narco-ganaderos* and company can protect their interests from afar. "So the ranchers may have left," remarked Arriola ironically, "but they're not gone."

Evidence of their distant presence abounds. Last February, for example, just a few miles south of Benito Juárez, 18 unauthorized loggers were captured in a canyon called La Hondonada. All of the accused came from Chiapas, most lived inside the disputed territory. "They were probably working for the Nibons," said Reyes, "or some other rancher who would be familiar with La Hondonada."

Curiously enough, the Oaxacan police didn't make the arrest; Reyes and his army of peaceful vigilantes did. "We surprised them at sunrise," said Alvaro Román, head of San Miguel's Communal Watch Committee. "About 300 of us



Chiapas farmer Rufugio Arriola (center) chats in the shade beside Maderas forestry engineer, Zeneido Garnika, (left) and an unidentified friend (right).

spent the night hiding up in the mountains so we could snag the smugglers red-handed."

The accused landed in the San Miguel jail. Just days later, however, the Oaxacan state police arrived and demanded their release. "There wasn't even a trial," said an angry Román.

He was mad, but not surprised. San Miguel's communal officials have long gotten used to their state authorities intervening in the Chimalapas when — and only when — open clashes with Chiapas are at risk. This underscores a basic problem underlying the ongoing struggle: the ambivalence of Oaxaca's state government. Indeed, it's not coincidental that the described land expulsions were carried out by communal authorities, which represent community, not political interests.

Whether Oaxaca's governor, Diódoro Carrasco, is safeguarding his political future by avoiding any overt conflicts with his southern cronies in Chiapas is unclear. What is clear is that his administration's ambiguous position toward the Chimalapas problem has exacerbated conditions of violence and uncertainty in the disputed territory. Evidently, the only counterweight to the lawlessness of the cattle ranchers, loggers and drug traffickers has been the localized efforts of the jungle communities themselves and certain grass-roots activists, namely *Maderas del Pueblo*.

Unfortunately for *Maderas*, that responsibility has left very little time for the development of community-based projects for rain-forest preservation. Not that aiding the recovery of communal property isn't a necessary first step. Yet without the political will required at the state level to back such informal measures with institutional guarantees, land-tenure settlements become so many lines drawn in the sand. One downpour (of bullets?) and the limits wash away. In no time at all, every corner of the eastern corridor could be crawling again with cattle ranchers.

Every corner, that is, except La Gringa. Indeed, out of all 1.5 million acres of the Chimalapas jungle, La Gringa is the only area legally protected from the ranchers' return through state-level statutes. In the summer of 1994, the people of San Francisco La Paz joined other Chimalapas peasants in Mexico City to demand the liberation of La Gringa. Important civic leaders joined them in protest outside the downtown offices of the United Nations Environmental Program. Soon after, the Carrasco administration officially kicked all 90 ranchers out, acceding to the demands of the transnational coalition of citizen and environmental groups discussed earlier.

(Never mind that the land invaders got the velvet boot, receiving a combined total of 14 million pesos in



A little boy in San Francisco La Paz shows off his favorite pet toucans.

indemnifications, or about four million dollars at that time.)

So the mobilization of the Chimalapas communities paid off. Yet larger forces were also at work. In hindsight, mid-1994 was a highly propitious moment for Carrasco to make a token stand against the Chiapas ranchers. Normally, Oaxaca's youthful governor would have loathed confronting the Chiapas political elite — some of whom own ranches in the disputed territory — given his alleged aspirations to participate in federal politics, and his subsequent need for their support.

However, thanks to the Zapatista rebellion that racked Chiapas in January 1994, many key members of that state's power establishment had been politically disgraced — especially José Patrocinio González, the former governor and largest land holder in La Gringa. Only weeks after the guerrilla insurrection, Patrocinio was conspicuously fired from his recently-acquired job as Mexico's Interior Minister. His dramatic downfall provides an indication of just how politically safe — and smart — it was for Carrasco to oust the ranchers in mid-1994. Since then, however, as the dust has settled in Chiapas, and relative political stability has returned, so has Carrasco's ambivalence toward the Chimalapas.

Be that as it may, La Gringa had resolved its land tenure conflict. At long last, the people of San Francisco La Paz and *Maderas* were free to begin working to

gether to resurrect the region, hence our canoe trip up the Uxpanapa River to observe their efforts. The liberated town welcomed us, their friends and supporters from the outside. They caught and cooked us fish, gave us hammocks to sleep on. We toured the pyramids, bathed in the river, played with pet monkeys and toucans. After 24 hours I was quite sure that life in La Gringa had indeed returned to normal. As usual, I was wrong.

CHOPPING DOWN THE PEOPLE'S WOOD (MADERAS DEL PUEBLO)

Pointing toward the computer screen, Victor Tena explained the color photos snapped by a satellite somewhere in the heavens above the Chimalapas. Clicking his mouse inside the *Maderas* office in Matías Romero, the computer technician zoomed in on a suspended, three-dimensional view of the Devil's Backbone. Thus ended our cyberspace tour of every mountain and valley in La Gringa.

"This technology has helped San Francisco La Paz to determine how they want to use their land," said Tena, referring to *Maderas's* Geographical Information Systems (GIS), which the World Wildlife Fund began financing two years ago. Part of a pilot project to create a so-called Campesino Ecological Reserve, the GIS images have enabled *Maderas* to design an ideal technical plan for land use in the region. We observed the blueprint, laser printed on a topographical map featuring color-coded zones for different categories of activity: conservation, restoration, agriculture, agro-forestry, livestock, logging, etc.

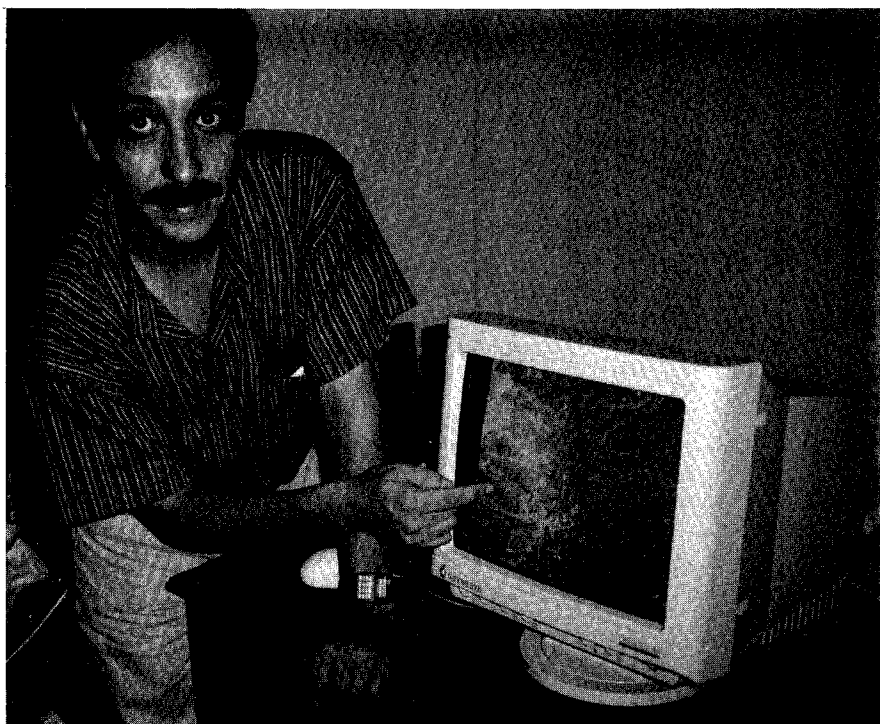
That's only half the story, however. Drafting a paral-

lel plan, the villagers of San Francisco La Paz also determined how they wanted to employ their land. Based on ecological as well as personal considerations, they drew a similar map outlining their ideal strategy. During village assemblies last Spring, these two plans — the "technical" and the "*campesino*" — were integrated into one, creating a master design that hopefully reflects both the environmental *and* economic needs of the locals of La Gringa.

"We're set to go with all 100,000 acres," said the computer expert. "But we can't..." Someone suggested that they start smaller, tackling the project incrementally. "No, no," he replied. "The problem isn't technical. It's political."

Those words came to mind as we bushwhacked through the jungle the next day. Following the leader away from our canoe, we entered a shady clearing. Green vines wrapped the trunks of several mahoganies. Isaac Matus, our guide from *Maderas*, explained that the 30 surrounding acres had been designated as an experimental testing site inside La Gringa. Here they planned to revive the ancient Chinameco tradition of growing crops in the rain forest without felling trees. "These are vanilla beans we planted last April," he explained, stroking the leaves.

Matus, a forestry technician of Zapotec descent, has worked in La Gringa since the late 1980s. By night, he sleeps in a hammock under a thatched roof, part of a permanent encampment near San Francisco La Paz. By day, he looks every bit the jungle explorer he is: muddy boots, frayed khakis, jackknife, sweaty red bandanna, scraggly beard, faded military hat. Indeed, as he stood in the woods under a shower of dappled light, someone



Victor Tena of *Maderas* guides a cyberspace tour of La Gringa using Geographical Information Systems financed by the World Wildlife Fund.

joked that he resembled a Zapatista. "That isn't funny," he said, good-naturedly. "You know very well what we're doing here — the restoration plans, the geographical studies, the community projects. Yet our enemies are spreading ridiculous lies, like we're trying to start a revolution."

Some listeners are gullible. Across Mexico, people worry that uprisings like the one in Chiapas are bound to occur elsewhere. One did, in fact, in the state of Guerrero just two months ago. During the 1970s, Oaxaca was convulsed by small armed bands determined to overthrow the government. In recent months, adversaries of *Maderas* have unjustly accused the NGO of inciting insurrection in the Chimalapas. Never mind that anyone remotely familiar with the NGO's work would consider such charges ludicrous. The guerrilla rumors form part of a larger, defamatory campaign meant to destroy the credibility of *Maderas* across the Chimalapas.

Who's behind it? That's hard to say. Many suggest that senior officials in Santa María — the sister municipality of San Miguel — have been co-opted by powerful foes of *Maderas*. These could include members of the PRI state government, which has lost significant political influence in the region due to the strong alliance forged between the civic group and the jungle communities. They could also represent economic interests, like cattle ranchers, loggers and related concerns such as saw mills and lumber trucking companies. Concerned with short-term profits, the owners and employees of such operations argue that environmental controls would be anathema to local economic development.

Smear tactics intensified this year. According to a senior member of the National Committee for the Defense of the Chimalapas (NCDC), Oaxaca's state government took advantage of a change of authorities last January in Santa María to ensure that the newly-elected officials would oppose *Maderas*. Reportedly employing Social Ministry funds, government authorities bought off several local officials, suggested a founding member of the NCDC.

"The communal president and the head of the security council were bribed by the state government with pickup trucks and what not. Now those authorities are hell-bent on dividing the Chimalapas communities in order to destroy the efforts of *Maderas*," claimed the man, who insisted on anonymity.

Recent press interviews suggest as much. Consider a statement offered last May by Rubén Pérez, the new pres-



Isaac Matus of *Maderas* leaning against a tree in the 30-acre experimental zone inside the jungles of La Gringa.

ident of Santa María's Communal Watch Committee:

"They [*Maderas*] want to create a 'Campesino Ecological Reserve' in order to turn the Chimalapas into an exclusive experimental zone for them and their international accomplices... They have manipulated our agrarian conflicts to convince the global community that they are defending our jungle and our people from border conflicts. Yet, from the start, their actions have only exacerbated problems and impeded solutions."⁵

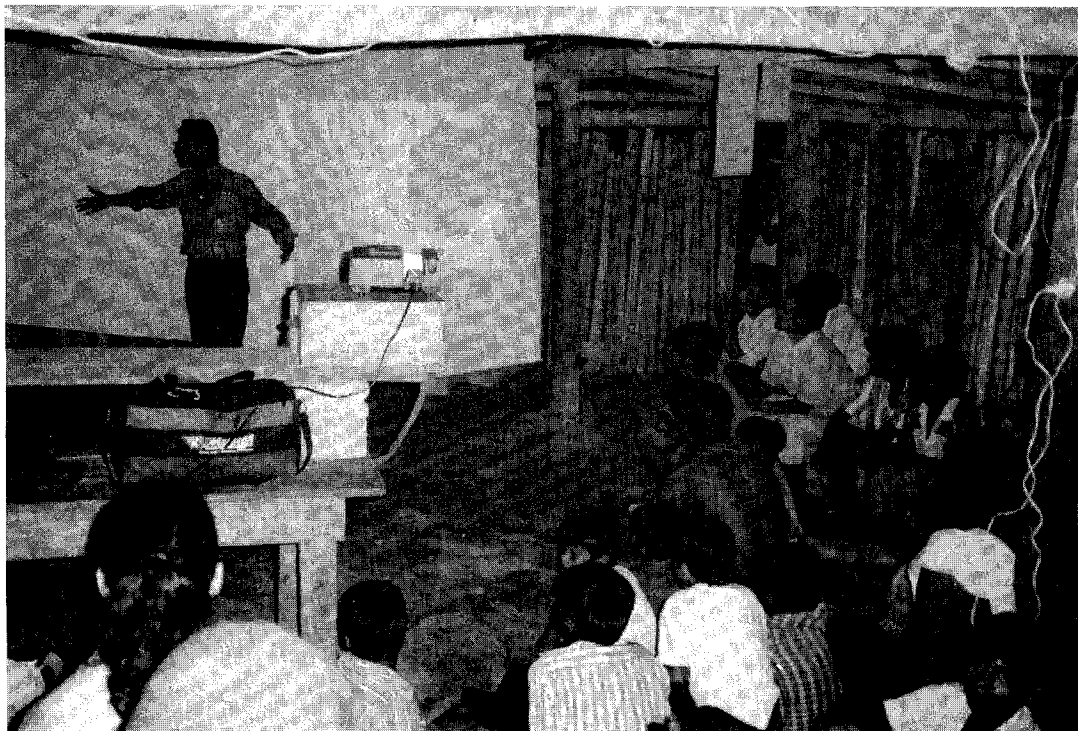
Likewise, the current mayor of San Miguel, reportedly the only official in that municipality who opposes *Maderas*, stated recently:

"Our communities no longer want these so-called ecologists and non-governmental organizations who, under the pretext of solving our problems, merely seek economic benefits for themselves," said Leandro Morales Cruz. "Their leaders obtain funding from international organizations, especially the British Council, yet those resource have not been applied to any solutions to our problems."⁶

Along with the verbal abuse, *Maderas* employees are

5. *El Sur*, May 23, 1996.

6. *El Sur*, April 24, 1996.



Inside the community house of San Francisco La Paz, NCDC spokesman Luis Miguel Robles Gil presents an environmental slide show while urging the village to continue working with Maderas del Pueblo.

being physically intimidated. A child of Miguel Angel García, the NGO's founder, received a death threat last year in Mexico City. Given that two daughters of Don Tacho, another *Maderas* activist, were murdered in 1992, this was particularly disturbing. Zeneido Garnika (with whom I traveled to Benito Juárez) said he keeps his family in Oaxaca City for security reasons, as do many of his colleagues. Victor Tena stated that in response to cases of arson, *Maderas* recently scattered its information systems into seven different locations. "I'm pretty sure our office phones are tapped too," he said.

Things came to a boil last Spring. The newly-elected authorities from Santa María invited *Maderas* to attend an assembly in their town hall. According to press reports, on May 19th some 300 locals voted unanimously to ban the NGO from working in any part of the municipality (i.e., over half the Chimalapas!). *Maderas* delegates were forced to abandon the premises immediately, "or run the risk of getting lynched," wrote one reporter.⁷

"What we want," avowed Rubén Pérez, as he exited the town hall, "is for the charlatans to stop speaking for us. And the voice of 300 comrades just expressed that, fi-

nally ending so many years of manipulation of the Zoque Indians."⁸

Not so coincidentally, just days before that assembly, regional delegates of the Social Ministry had reactivated a Special Development Sub-Committee, releasing seven million pesos (U.S.\$933,000) of state funds destined for the Chimalapas. Before hundreds of potential beneficiaries inside Santa María's assembly hall, the newly-elected officials received checks for 2,705,000 pesos (U.S.\$360,666) destined for local school buildings, health clinics, dry latrines, potable water, roads and electricity.⁹

Incidentally, the day we floated into San Francisco La Paz, those very same officials from Santa María were also scheduled to visit the remote hamlet to discuss plans to build a new kindergarten. This confused me at first. While we knew that the village was under their jurisdiction, we'd been told that the locals had officially rejected Santa María's vote to oust *Maderas* from the region. Indeed, our guides from *Maderas* were carrying legal papers exhibiting an official stamp of approval from the locals to enter La Gringa.

"It's pretty obvious what's going on," said Isaac Ma-

7. Interestingly, virtually every article I found in the local press on the Chimalapas problem was written by one Jesus García of the Oaxaca City newspaper, *El Sur*. When reporting on even the most inane of events in the region, this journalist cannot seem to escape his profound disdain for *Maderas del Pueblo*. This begs the question: Is he an unbiased observer, or a central player in this conflict? Quote cited from *El Sur*, May 22, 1996.

8. *El Sur*, May 22, 1996.

9. *Noticias*, May 11, 1996.

tus, on our way upriver to San Francisco La Paz. "They're here to spend money and thus, they hope, turn the community against us."

We never did see those officials. That night, however, we saw the entire village gathered inside the sweltering clapboard community house. As each of us introduced ourselves, I observed the sweating audience: barefoot kids clustered on the dirt floor; wrinkly grandmothers heating tortillas on a wood stove at the back; dark-skinned men lining the walls, striking solemn poses under dusty cowboy hats. As we exited the makeshift stage, all eyes turned toward a slide projection splashed onto white bed sheets hung from the rafters.

"This is Mexico and *that* is your beloved rain forest," said Luis Miguel Robles Gil, a spokesman for the NCDC. The rambunctious boys in the front fell silent. As bright colors washed over their faces, I realized that this picture show was the backwater equivalent of a big city Schwarzenegger film. Nobody moved for 45 minutes, by which time Robles Gil had made his point: that the Chimalapas is a global treasure and should be protected.

"That's why we, the Committee," he concluded, "are so glad that you have continued to support the work of *Maderas*. It's crucial that you stay unified, fighting together against these divisive forces."

Concluding the evening, a sunburnt representative of an international organization stood up to speak. Refer-

ring to the experiences of other countries, like Indonesia, where rich jungles have been all but destroyed, he expressed his profound admiration for the community's achievements. He thanked the village for receiving us and stressed the importance of our visit:

"It is crucial for the world to witness and understand what you've done here," stated David Winder of the New York-based Synergos Institute, in perfect Spanish. "You, the indigenous communities, as the owners of this jungle, have a big responsibility. Your struggle for the Chimalapas has been difficult. The problems will continue. But know that there are many people out there who care. Indeed, we of the international community stand behind you all the way."

That night, David Winder and I slept on hammocks inside Fernando Osorio's house — the fourth house, the one the *narco-ganaderos* never demolished. The next morning, back on the river, I sat down in the wooden canoe beside Doña Angela, the village founder. As we floated downstream, I asked the widow what brought her with us to Matias Romero?

"One of my sons is in prison in Chiapas," she replied, breaking softly into tears. A black cormorant splashed across the water, taking flight and soaring overhead. "I haven't enough cash to visit him myself, but I'm sending him what I can. A friend in town from *Maderas* promised to deliver the money to my boy."

On February 12th, Doña Angela's son, who was visit-



Doña Angela Méndez (right) sitting in the tree-trunk canoe on the way downriver to Matias Romero.

ing his in-laws in Chiapas, was picked up by the police on charges of first-degree murder. Incidentally, that was exactly three days after Marbel Reyes Lopez and his vigilante army captured 18 illegal loggers from Chiapas inside the disputed territory. Many find it hard to escape the conclusion that her son, a well-known defender of La Gringa, was arrested in reprisal for that embarrassing bust in the canyon of La Hondonada.

Gazing at the Río Uxpanapa, Doña Angela dried her eyes and changed the subject. "Do you know why we call this La Gringa?" she asked, forcing a smile and gesturing all around her. I listened to her story as we glided over submerged sandbars and under yellow-bellied birds.

In 1961, two years after she moved here with her hus-

band, three young Americans knocked on their door one rainy evening. Exploring the Chimalapas, the tired foreigners — one man and a married couple — asked for a dry floor to spend the night. The travelers left early the next morning, heading upriver. Three days later, they returned — two of them, that is.

"*La gringa* drowned upstream," said Doña Angela, shaking her head in recollection. "We were so moved by her husband's tears, that we decided to name this territory, our new home, La Gringa. And, so that she would rest in peace, we called our village San Francisco *La Paz*."

"Funny though," she concluded. "*La gringa* found her peace then. Yet after all these years, we still haven't found ours." □

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Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey and Central Asia, and their importance as actors the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. [sub-SAHARA]

John Harris. A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

John B. Robinson. A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Brown University, he and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland. He will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]

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