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**THE AMERICAS**

*William F. Foote is an Institute Fellow examining the economic substructure of Mexico.*

## The Separated Brothers

MEXICO CITY, Mexico

April 2, 1997

By William F. Foote

The search party spotted buzzards circling over the river bank, just north of a Zapotec Indian hamlet. Josefa Velazco expected the worst: her brother-in-law, an *evangelista* like her, had been missing for weeks. As she neared the shore, Josefa remembered how the neighbors had mocked his pious harangues; how children had thrown pebbles at him in the village square. Upon seeing that lifeless body half buried by the rapids, Josefa fled her birthplace in the mountains of southern Mexico, never to return.

Thirty years later, she rents a tumble-down apartment in the peripheral slums of Mexico City. Recently her daughter, who works as a maid downtown, invited me to visit their home and meet Josefa. Upon hearing her story, and with an interest in Mexico's Protestant-Catholic conflicts, I readied my map and drove south, in search of Josefa's past.

Passing Oaxaca City, I headed west into the mountains of La Mixteca, Oaxaca's poorest region. A bruising dirt road climbed ever upward, passing a half-dozen Indian *pueblos* before reaching San Miguel Peras. Like the others, it was a sorry collection of thatch-roofed mud huts with not much else, save a towering blue and white Catholic church perched on the high ground in the village's center.

"The preacher lives up there," said an old man in the main plaza, referring to



*Josefa Velazco  
posing with her  
daughter and  
grandchild in  
Mexico City*



*Zenairo Martinez standing beside a Star of David and the Ten Commandments inside an evangelical temple in San Miguel Peras*

Josefa's first cousin, Zenairo Martinez. Spray-painted on a wall, fresh graffiti read: E.P.R., the Spanish initials for the People's Revolutionary Army. Guerrilla troops had visited town recently. Passing pigs and malnourished dogs, I leapt over a creek and followed the footpath up a steep escarpment. Halfway to the top, a leveled place gave way to a small, whitewashed adobe building. In sandals and a cowboy hat, Reverend Martinez beckoned me inside his one-room temple: The Church of God.

"You know Josefa?" said the preacher with surprise. As he sat down on one of the rough-hewn wooden benches, I asked what had happened since she left. "We've had our troubles," he replied, "but we survived and we're growing."

Martinez's congregation now has over 70 members. Farmers mostly, the men built the temple and the women crafted the religious decorations inside: a plywood altar bearing the Ten Commandments in hand-painted, yellow letters; a golden Star of David embroidered on a green velvet banner draped from the ceiling.

"We are the Israelites," he continued, kicking off an unsolicited, half-hour Bible lesson. Waving a tattered copy of the New Testament, Martinez railed against the Church of Rome, the local religious *fiestas*, the alcohol consumption. Calling the Catholic saints mere wooden figures, he declared idolatry an abomination and explained: "We live by the Scriptures, with moral vigor and probity. The Catholics—who don't—call us the separated brothers."

San Miguel Peras is hardly unique. For nearly three

decades, Mexico's religious landscape has been undergoing a change marked by the emergence of non-Catholic minorities, particularly evangelical Protestants and Pentecostals. From mega-cities to minuscule villages, a clash of culture and credence has eroded social stability and divided communities. The fallout of this spiritual struggle is most evident in rural hamlets like San Miguel Peras, where customs based on Catholic and semi-pagan beliefs form an essential part of an entire vision of life.

That vision is blurring with the pace of change. In 1930, 98 percent of Mexicans called themselves Catholic. By 1990, fewer than 90 percent did.<sup>1</sup> Over the past 20 years, as Mexico's population grew by 40 percent and the number of Catholics increased by only 30 percent, the pool of Protestants expanded by 174 percent.<sup>2</sup> Today Mexico has between four and five million converts. As their ranks have swelled, evangelicals have spread from their traditional strongholds in northern and central cities toward Mexico's rural Southeast, which now accounts for 22.5 percent of membership in the country. In the state of Oaxaca, estimates of the number of Protestants range from 7 to 30 percent of the population.<sup>3</sup>

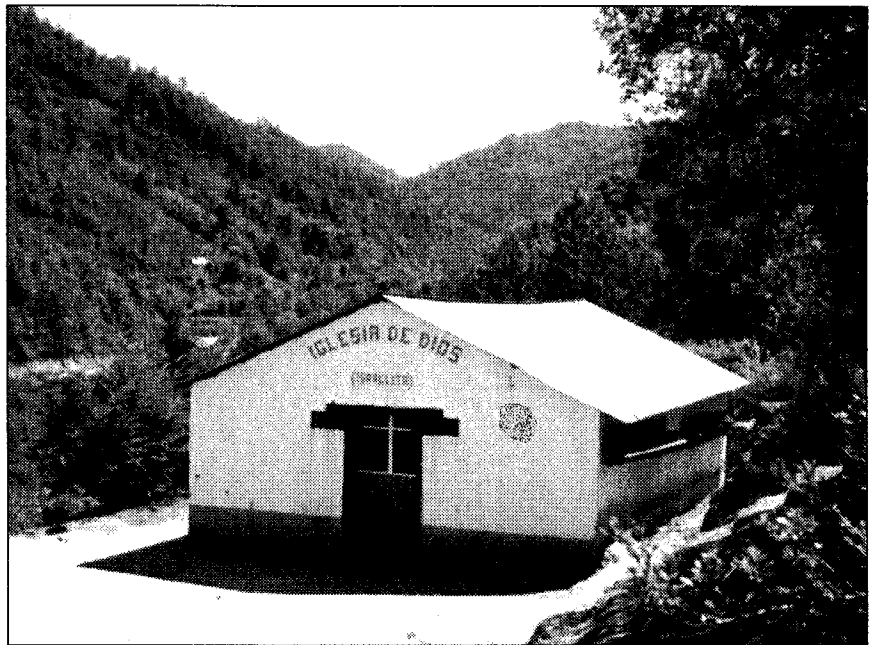
Protestants are hardly newcomers to Mexico. They first arrived here during the mid-19th Century. Only these were neither Seventh Day Adventists nor Jehovah's Witnesses, but rather members of conservative Protestant churches: Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian. From the 1850s onward, these largely U.S.-based churches expanded southward by capitalizing on an historic rift between the Mexican state and the Catholic church.

Since Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821,

1. *El Financiero*, 3/4/96

2. Enrique Marroquín Z., *Persecución Religiosa en Oaxaca?*, Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Culturas (1995), p.9.

3. *Ibid.*, p.10



*The Church of God*

relations between politicians and priests have been ambiguous and filled with rancor. Benito Juárez, Mexico's great liberal reformer of the last century, believed the country should turn its back on Catholic traditions and build a new nation modeled after the United States. As president in the 1860s, the Indian lawyer from Oaxaca set an enduring precedent by attacking the powerful Catholic church: nationalizing its property, closing monasteries and convents, suppressing religious festivals. After the 1910 revolution, a new constitution included harsh religious prohibitions, like forbidding priests from donning robes in public and barring the Church from owning land.

All this benefited the Protestants, whom Mexican statesmen came to see as useful counterweights to Catholicism. For example, in the 1930s, leftist President Lázaro Cárdenas believed that Protestant ministers might help break the Catholic barriers to modernizing the Indians. As a welcoming gesture, the same man who nationalized Mexico's oil industry invited the Summer Institute of Linguistics, a branch of the U.S.-based Wycliffe Bible Translators (WBT), to establish operations in Mexico. For the next half century, WBT translated the Bible and religious music into indigenous languages, undertook social assistance programs and converted thousands.<sup>4</sup>

Conservative Protestant churches, however, soon fell on hard times. By the early 1980s, in Mexico and across Latin America, the face of Protestantism had been completely transformed by its more fanatical expression. Starting in the 1960s, evangelical funda-

mentalists began steadily pushing aside their more conservative cousins, who currently comprise less than a fifth of Protestant membership in Latin America. In the case of Mexico, the Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist churches now have about 100,000 members each, or less than ten percent of the total number of Protestants in the country.

What explains this spread of evangelicalism? In the case of poor states like Oaxaca, the role of migration to the U.S. cannot be underestimated. Imagine a farmer from San Miguel Peras who migrates to America. Leaving behind his close-knit indigenous community, he typically feels homesick and depressed in the North. Seeking substitutes for the emotional stability left behind, he is often willing to accept what he might otherwise reject back home. Filled with lonely, needy people, his camp of migrant workers offers prime recruiting grounds for U.S. evangelical churches.

Efrain Gaspar, whom I met on the mountain pass to San Miguel Peras, is a case in point. In the late 1980s, the Oaxacan corn grower spent several seasons planting pine trees in the forests of Oregon state, along with dozens of other Mexicans. Sunday was their only day off, a day that Gaspar, ironically, disliked. "With time to think," he said, resting in my passenger seat, "I got homesick."

For fun, he and his companions attended activities organized by an evangelical church. In addition to arranging soccer games, the *evangelistas* donated food, second-hand clothing and basic medical supplies to the migrant workers. Meanwhile, religious services were held under tents near the dormitories. While Mr. Gaspar remains a

4. Over the years, these activities drew increasing criticism from Mexican intellectual circles. In 1983, the Summer Institute of Linguistics was evicted from Mexico on grounds of "ethnocide and cultural expropriation," as stated in one document of the National Indigenous Institute. Alan Riding, *Distant Neighbors*, (Vintage Books), 1984, pp.205-6.



*Recruiting in San Miguel Peras recently, the People's Revolutionary Army spray-painted their initials on houses, stores, and electric posts.*

practicing Catholic, he admits to having liked the missionaries, who managed to convert many of his friends. "Everyone appreciated their help," he said. "The evangelists were nice to us."

Rubén Borguete, director of the Baptist Theological Seminary in Oaxaca City, explained the success of his church's faith missions in migrant communities. In the early 1990s, he preached among the fruit and vegetable pickers of the northern state of Sinaloa. Many had come north from states like Oaxaca and Chiapas. Borguete recalled how on Saturday nights, his church would show motion pictures free of charge about the life of Jesus Christ. The Baptists also helped finance water and electrification projects and set up medical clinics in makeshift neighborhoods. "By lending them a hand," said Borguete, "we were delivering God's message."

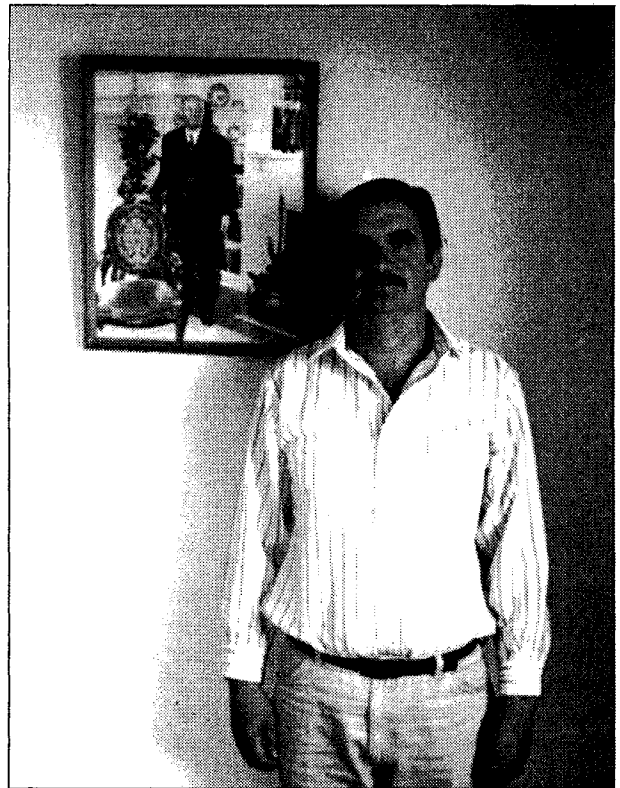
Not that everyone listens. Mr. Gaspar, for instance, refused to attend church in Oregon. In fact, he had harsh words to say about the spread of evangelical fundamentalism back home. "It's terrible," said the 46-year-old man. "Long before I went North, the *evangelistas* had been coming here from America to divide us."

His statements reflect a popular, if not necessarily accurate, view of the evangelist invasion, as Mr. Gaspar called it. Conspiracy theories are fashionable among Mexicans who demand simple explanations for the pro-

liferation of non-Catholic minorities in their country. These people often subscribe to the xenophobic contention that evangelical crusades form part of a deliberate strategy of the Imperialist North to destroy Mexican culture.

One such person, a shopkeeper I met in Oaxaca City, rattled off historical evidence to back his position. Juan Ramirez, who had clearly pondered the issue before, explained how the crusades of evangelical preacher Billy Graham, conducted inside the U.S. following World War II, were virtually recreated south of the border. U.S. converts, hell-bent on extending their Bible Belt southward, financed saturation marketing campaigns to proselytize across Latin America. Through radio and TV shows, religious pamphlets, telethons, street interviews and house calls, they managed to brainwash millions of Mexicans, said Ramirez.

Beyond their crusades, evangelists in Latin America have drawn fierce criticism for their ultra-conservative politics. Since the 1960s, there has been a holy alliance between American-based churches and the Latin American right. Perhaps it was the influence of Rev. Graham's Cold War-era crusades, which mixed the biblical message with anti-Communist rhetoric. Or maybe the "faith missions" allied themselves with local dictators in a machiavellian ploy to ensure the systematic growth of their organizations. Whatever the motive, as historian Jean-Pierre Bastian writes, "the evan-



*Rúben Borguete, head of the Baptist Theological Seminary in Oaxaca, poses beside a photo of his church's first U.S. missionary to Mexico.*



*Sandinista guerrilla turned evangelical preacher, Mario Ayala Olivares stands outside the Church of Christ in downtown Oaxaca City.*

gelical churches grew rapidly with the support, whether implicit or explicit, of the military.”<sup>5</sup>

Ironically, the rise of non-Catholic minorities in Latin America coincided with the adoption by a progressive wing of the Catholic church of a critical position toward the region’s military regimes. In the 1970s and ’80s, so-called liberation theologians advocated taking concrete action to correct social injustices, like defending human rights in Central America. Who can forget the images of Catholic nuns fighting alongside Sandinista forces to topple the dictator Anastasio Somoza; the memory of priests joining the revolutionary cabinet of Daniel Ortega; the struggle of Archbishop Oscar Romero in favor of El Salvador’s downtrodden and his subsequent assassination at the hands of right-wing death squads?

By contrast, recent memory also recalls the statue of an evangelical preacher erected in 1982 in downtown Santiago, Chile, to symbolize good relations between Pinochet’s armed forces and the evangelists. In Guatemala, Ríos Montt, a bloodthirsty dictator (1982-83), was a member of Gospel Outreach of California and hosted his own evangelical TV show. In general, Latin American men-of-arms identified with the evangelists’ message,

which condemns collective revolutionary activity, advocating instead the spiritual revolution of the individual.

There were, to be fair, exceptions to the rule. In Central America, some Protestant churchmen did denounce army atrocities, and often paid for their courage with their lives. In Oaxaca, I even met a former communist guerrilla turned evangelical preacher. Mario Ayala Olivares, Nicaraguan by birth, spent his late teens as a bomb-slinging Sandinista. In 1982, still a committed atheist, he fell in love with a Protestant woman in Managua who eventually converted him. After three years of Bible study in Honduras, and seven years of preaching in Mexico City, he now heads the Church of Christ in downtown Oaxaca City. When I heard that a parent congregation in Golding, Colorado, pays for his salary and housing, I asked the reverend about the Protestant-imperialism theory.

“What you say is true,” he replied. “Many Mexicans do criticize our religion for being a U.S. import; but how easily they forget the way the Spanish imported their crushing brand of Catholicism.”

This is true Catholicism came by the sword, yet the peaceful introduction of Protestantism belies its conflictive role in recent Mexican history. As we have seen, evangelical fundamentalism, once a curiosity for Catholics, quickly became a threat, spurring religious conflict. In Oaxaca alone, 254 of these were recorded between 1986 and 1992.<sup>6</sup> Whether it takes the form of subtle discrimination, ostracism, expulsion or murder, religious persecution is on the rise in a growing number of communities across Mexico.

Take the town of San Juan Chamula, Chiapas. By the early 1970s, a third of the population of approximately 30,000 had converted to Protestant religions. As usual, they rejected local custom, boycotted religious *fiestas*, abstained from alcohol consumption. In 1974, the converts organized politically, presenting candidates in the local elections. In response, municipal officials, with the alleged blessing of Catholic authorities, forcibly expelled the religious dissidents from their homes and land. Accused of “destroying ethnic identity and solidarity,” the Protestant refugees relocated to San Cristobal de las Casas, the county seat, and founded new neighborhoods with names borrowed from the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

What motivates this persecution? Some point to Catholic frustration over an inability to disprove the Protestant claim that the Catholic faith is based more on custom than credence. Nowhere, preach the *evangelistas*, does the Bible sanction things like financial excesses for *fiestas*, or drunkenness on religious holidays, or the self-infliction of bloody wounds during pilgrimages to the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico’s patron saint; yet these are consid-

5. Jean-Pierre Bastian, *Protestantismos y modernidad Latinoamericana*, (Fondo de Cultura Económica), 1994, p. 243.

6. Enrique Marroquín Z., *Persecución Religiosa en Oaxaca?*, Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Culturas (1995), pp. 25

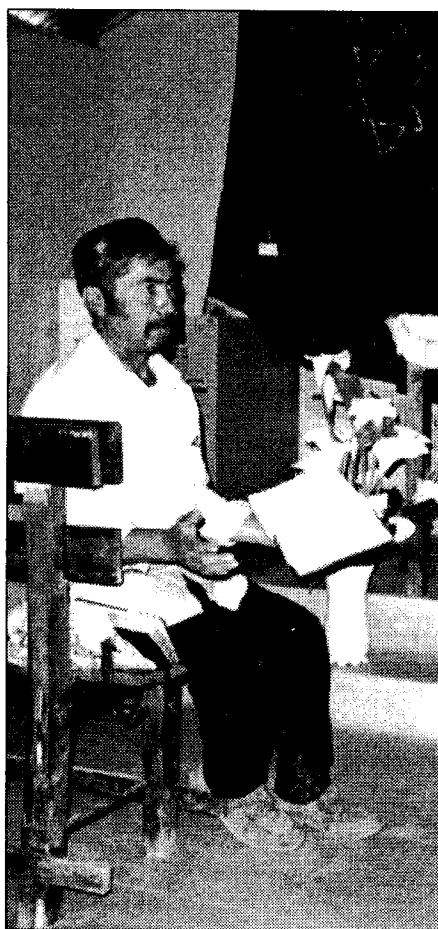
7. Jean-Pierre Bastian, *Protestantismos y modernidad Latinoamericana*, (Fondo de Cultura Económica), 1994, pp. 245-6.



ered as Mexican as sombreros or tortillas. They are, in fact, central to what has become known as folk Catholicism, a form of spirituality that reflects Mexico's *mestizo* (mixed-race) tradition. Embodying an Indian legacy of religious fanaticism and violence, it has long been tolerated by the Church of Rome under the umbrella of ecumenism.

But doctrinal differences are only part of the story. Specific beliefs aside, the evangelists, with their chosen life of moral rectitude, behave in ways that seriously threaten the economic and political *status quo* in Mexico, especially in rural communities. This defiance of established norms ranges from obvious cases, like the Jehovah's Witnesses' refusal to honor the Mexican flag, to less conspicuous ways of challenging time-honored tradition.

For instance, some academics thank Protestantism for freeing poor people from paying the hidden costs of Catholicism. To discern some of these, Rev. Ayala and I visited a cathedral close to Oaxaca City. Bolted to tables beside velvet-clad saint figures, tin donation boxes were brimming with pesos. "These offerings are supposed to inspire the icons to make miracles happen," said Ayala. "The more you pay, the better your chances." Arranged



*Holding the New Testament, Rev. Martinez preaches religious tolerance in San Miguel Peras.*



*Votive candles flickering before a Catholic saint figure inside a cathedral in Oaxaca.*

around the boxes, votive candles flickered light onto the canonized, whose devotees must keep their flames lit year round at a cost of two pesos per candle, or 30 pesos per month, since the candles burn out in 48 hours.

Add to that the cost of Catholic *fiestas*. Once upon a time, when class differentiation between rural villagers was negligible, religious feasts served to redistribute surplus wealth. Each person contributed his or her fair share and reaped relatively equal rewards. Over time, however, things changed as subsistence farmers became wage laborers and entered the money economy. With growing income disparities in the countryside, local strongmen, or *caciques*, began misappropriating festival funds for their own benefit. Within this context, the evangelist boycott of *fiestas* can be interpreted, writes one academic, "as a symbolic power struggle...waged by Mexico's disenfranchised rural workers through their conversion to Pentecostal or Protestant religions."<sup>8</sup>

By the same token, the proscription of alcohol con-

8. Ibid., p.255

sumption on religious grounds may have less to do with Anglo-Saxon Puritanism than a desire to break the liquor monopoly controlled by local *caciques*. As for the famous *tequio*, which refers to the obligatory communal labor still expected of many rural villagers in Mexico, Protestants refuse to participate in these community projects on Saturdays. Is this because, as evangelists claim, Saturday is their Sabbath? Or, have the converts merely found a good excuse to deny *caciques* the opportunity to misappropriate their free labor? Whichever the case, by resisting local monopolies—the sale of alcohol and votive candles, the financing of Catholic feasts, the allocation of voluntary labor—*evangelistas* have helped undermine the authority of Mexico's local elite.

But not all are Christian combatants. "We try hard to avoid trouble," says Rev. Martinez, exiting his hillside

church in San Miguel Peras. Since Josefa Velazco left town thirty years ago, the Protestants seem to have reached a *modus vivendi* with their Catholic neighbors. While an exceptional case perhaps, this village offers hope that religious tolerance may one day conquer Mexico's spiritual conflicts.

That doesn't mean the *evangelistas* will attend Easter feasts, but they nevertheless agree to play their part. The local authorities, on the other hand, schedule *tequios* only on Sundays.

"We have to be pragmatic," reasons Martinez. Standing outside the Church of God, he gazed down at the blue and white cathedral towering far below in the village's center. "We're separated," adds the preacher, "but we're still brothers." □

# Institute of Current World Affairs

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## Institute 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]

**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, an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators and manager

of a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is tracing her roots in India, and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

**Marc Michaelson.** A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARA]

**Randi Movich.** The current John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, Randi is spending two years in Guinea, West Africa, studying and writing about the ways in which indigenous women use forest resources for reproductive health. With a B.A. in biology from the University of California at Santa Cruz and a Master of Science degree in Forest Resources from the University of Idaho, Randi is building on two years' experience as a Peace Corps agroforestry

extension agent in the same region of Guinea where she will be living as a Fellow with her husband, Jeff Fields — also the holder of an Idaho Master's in Forest Resources. [sub-SAHARA]

**John B. Robinson.** A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an English teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where 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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