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2012: Year of Indigenous Resistance in Mexico

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Once again, the international press and a good deal of the Mexican one-missed the real story coming out of the Mayan heartland. Zoomed in on the completion of the ancient Mayan calendar and the media-hyped, predicted end of the world December 21, the corporate show boys did not notice or grasp the significance of the silent mobilization that occurred on the afternoon of the 21st in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas.

In a almost step-by-step replay of their New Years' Day 1994 uprising, tens of thousands of masked and uniformed members of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) marched in military formation into five Chiapas towns.

A big difference between this year's action and the one nearly 19 years ago is that the Mayan Zapatistas of 2012 did not carry guns or utter words. And according to Proceso magazine, their numbers this year- estimated between 30,000 and 50,000 people- were many-fold greater than the several thousand fighters who launched the 1994 revolt on the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect.

The emblematic Zapatista spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos, who mysteriously vanished from the public limelight during the past four years, delivered a brief but ironic message issued by the EZLN's Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee-General Command that declared in part, "Did your hear? This is the sound of your world being torn down, and of ours resurging..."

In one swift move, the Zapatista's reappearance laid to rest widespread rumors of Marcos' and the movement's demise.

"Thousands of young men and women who represent the new cadres of the EZLN paraded," wrote Proceso writers Jose Gil Olmos and Isain Mandujano. "They were born or grew up after 1994 when the insurgent group burst on the political scene in the days that Carlos Salinas Gortari was announcing the entrance of Mexico to the First World..."

The Zapatistas' "Mayan Apocalypse" march also fell on the eve of another important

date-the 15th anniversary of the Acteal massacre in Chiapas, when 45 Mayan men, women and children were slaughtered by paramilitaries originally organized and coordinated by the Mexican armed forces as part of a counterinsurgency plan. The EZLN's public reemergence could be interpreted as a message to new President Enrique Peña Nieto and his PRI party to not attempt a repeat of an earlier PRI administration's counterinsurgency scheme, and to comply with the 1996 San Andres accords, an agreement recognizing the rights of Mexico's indigenous peoples which was reached between the government and Zapatistas but never respected by the former.

The Zapatista mobilization is far from the exception in 21st century Mexico. From north to south and from east to west, many of Mexico's estimated 15 million indigenous people have spent a milestone year immersed in a thousand battles to recover ancestral homelands, organize community-based security and justice systems, face down foreign mining and energy companies and, like the Zapatistas' Good Government Councils in Chiapas, carve out autonomous zones of political power.

In the process they're showing the world alternative paths in implementing community security and justice institutions, furthering grassroots participation in governance and striking the proper balance between economic development and environmental protection.

In the states of Michoacan and Guerrero, more and more indigenous communities are taking security matters into their hands. Besieged by organized crime, the Purepecha community of Urapicho, Michoacan, followed the lead this fall of their neighbors in Cheran by posting armed guards and erecting barricades at the entrance to the small town.

Similar actions were soon reported in neighboring Guerrero state, where indigenous communities in the municipality of Olinala reclaimed their security. The latest citizen uprisings dovetail in many ways with the community policing and justice movement that first arose in Guerrero in the mid-1990s following the Zapatista revolt to the south. .

Unlike law enforcement and justice systems devised in state capitals, Mexico City and foreign nations, the community police/justice model hails from the bottom up and is rooted in indigenous customs. Typically, the lightly-armed police officers are locals who are selected through community recommendation and consensus. Alternative justice is often meted out through community service and victim restitution as opposed to incarceration.

At last month's 17th anniversary ceremony for the Coordinating Council of Regional Authorities (CRAC), the leadership body of Guerrero's community police, at least 23 new communities announced they were enlisting in the movement.

The pledges bring to more than 100 indigenous communities in 13 municipalities of the Costa Chica and La Montana zones of Guerrero participating in community policing. Upwards of 1,200 community police officers joined with supporters from Cheran, Olinala and Mexican social movements like the Other Campaign at the gathering. Speakers linked the movement to fights for cultural survival, economic justice, self-determination and autonomy, and protection of Mother Earth from mining and other forms resource exploitation.

"For us, justice implies the possibility of having health, education and the

strengthening of our cultures...,” Felicitas Martinez Solano, CRAC councilor, was quoted in La Jornada.

Defending communities and the earth

Opposition to new mining operations by Canadian and other foreign capitalists is at the forefront of many indigenous struggles across Mexico. In November, for instance, 5,000 indigenous residents of Zautla, Puebla, demanded the closure of the Chinese-run JDC Minerals mine, contending the facility will contaminate springs, crops and soil, as well as harm human health. “No to the mine, yes to life!” chanted the protesters.

In northern Mexico’s Sierra Tarahumara country, the indigenous Raramuri people are increasingly active in defending their lands from illegal loggers, tourism developers and other encroachers.

Earlier this year, Raramuri litigants won a major victory in Mexico’s Supreme Court when the justices ruled that indigenous residents had a constitutional right to participate in the Copper Canyon Trust Fund, an organization spearheading tourism development in the Sierra Tarahumara of Chihuahua state.

The high court’s members also noted that relevant national law is similar to the International Labor Organization’s Convention No.169, which protects the rights of indigenous communities and tribal peoples. Mexico is among 22 nations that have ratified the international agreement. The United States is not one of them.

However, the issue of genuine indigenous participation in decisions affecting their homeland is far from resolved.

In a September letter to Chihuahua Governor Cesar Duarte, three Raramuri leaders from the communities of Huetosachi, Bacajipare and Mogotovo explained why they were boycotting a government-sponsored meeting. Maria Monarca Lazaro and the other Raramuri spokespersons asserted that recent tourism projects in the Copper Canyon region had brought land speculation, increased drug and alcohol abuse, marginalization of traditional crafts sellers, and water shortages, among other negative impacts.

The letter demanded a temporary halt to tourism, logging and resource extraction projects; the resolution or expedition of Raramuri land claims in the courts; and the release of pertinent information about development plans so Raramuri leaders could adequately discuss the issues with community members.

“We want the decisions we take to be respected,” the letter concluded. “Our way of life tells us that decisions can’t be made on their own; we have to take our people into account.”

Resistance in the NAFTA region

The surge in Mexican indigenous activism comes at a time of mounting resistance by the aboriginal peoples of the other NAFTA member nations. In the U.S, indigenous communities are battling against the KeystoneXL Pipeline, proposed new uranium mines and coal-fired power plants. In Canada, meanwhile, a national uprising called Idle No More, named after a poem by former American Indian Movement leader John Trudell, is taking hold against government attempts to curtail treaty concessions, exploit lands and assimilate First Nation’s peoples into the melting pot of Canadian capitalism.

Like earlier periods in history, the lands of indigenous peoples in Mexico, Canada and throughout the hemisphere are the coveted prize of outsiders profiting from economic booms elsewhere. Only this time they are doing it under a free trade

regime that allows capital to move much easier across borders.

In a statement that echoes sentiments of indigenous activists in Mexico and across the Americas, Idle No More calls on “all people to join a revolution which honors and fulfills Indigenous sovereignty, which protects the land and water.” The new movement concludes:

“Colonization continues through attacks to Indigenous rights and damage to the land and water. We must repair these violations, live the spirit and intent of the treaty relationship, work toward justice in action, and protect Mother Earth.”

Demanding a serious hearing of long-standing grievances of Canadian First Nations, Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence declared a hunger strike this month in the national capital of Ottawa until a meeting was held with Prime Minister Stephen Harper, whose conservative government has promoted the recent spike in Canadian mining investment in Mexico and Latin America, an expansion which has often been accompanied by controversy and violence.

In Mexico, indigenous activists frequently continue to be the target of violence and repression. Among the latest suspected victims is Celodonio Monroy Prudencio, Nahuatl defender of the Manatlan Biosphere Reserve from illegal loggers in the borderlands of Jalisco and Colima states.

The director of indigenous affairs for the municipality of Cuatitlan in Jalisco, Monroy was taken away from his home last October 23 by a group of heavily-armed men dressed in military-style uniforms, according to his wife Blanca Estela, who reportedly witnessed the forced disappearance. “We don’t know anything, (officials) don’t know anything, and when I ask them they say they don’t know...,” she later told La Jornada’s Jalisco edition.

Despite the ongoing and historic repression directed against them, Mexico’s indigenous communities push forward in defense of their lands, their cultures and their ecosystems.

The year 2012 reminded the world of the relevance of the slogan that was popularized after that New Year’s Day nearly two decades ago when the Zapatista National Liberation Army burst into history: “Never a Mexico without Us!”

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