

# Infectious Disease

"ACCORDING TO INFORMATION supplied by members of the military high command in 1994, President Salinas already had given orders for a massive military move into Chiapas to root out and destroy the insurgents, but was dissuaded by the United States Embassy and some of his own governmental advisors because Subcomandante Marcos had become a charismatic figure worldwide and Mexico could not afford the negative publicity that crushing the movement would create. Therefore Salinas and the federal government determined to isolate and contain this 'infectious disease' and curtail popular protests and other indications of allegiance and support that might arise."

—RODOLFO MIGUEL

The same sources asserted that the United States School of the Americas, which taught anti-insurgency tactics to the militaries of numerous Latin American countries, tutored Salinas' forces in low intensity warfare to replace the all-out assault that Salinas had desired. They equipped paramilitary groups that harassed Zapatista communities, burned crops, and apprehended residents for supposed offenses such as theft, assault, and destruction of public property. Using the pretext of drug searches, military incursions evicted householders, destroyed food and water supplies, and manhandled and sometimes sequestered residents.

The depredations have continued for over seventeen years. Despite Mexico's severe economic problems, the takeover of much of northern Mexico by drug corporations, and rampant corruption, Mexico's federal government has maintained an active duty force of several thousand armed troops and supplied well-equipped private "armies" like the *Ejército de Dios*, a militant arm of the *Iglesias Cristianas Evangélicas*, with weapons, training, and the impunity to harass, assault, and burn to prevent the infectious disease from spreading past

the quarantine to which the government has subjected the Zapatistas.

THIS MODEL OF REPRESSION isn't confined to Chiapas. Military incursions also repress popular movements in the Estado de Mexico, Guerrero, and Oaxaca. Soldiers, militarized federal police, and paramilitaries arrest, torture, steal, and rape with impunity. I have witnessed their criminality. I had just returned to my house on a hill perched above the city of Oaxaca's central district on November 25, 2006 when I heard gunshots. Then shouts and sirens. The angry percussive sound of low flying helicopters. I threw a jacket over my shoulders and scrambled past shops and houses towards an intersection from which I could get a clearer look at what was happening.

Except for distant outskirts, the city was totally dark. A sea of undulating black obscured stars and the moon. As I crossed the intersection, I saw flames flare upwards from burning buildings and heard what I thought were more gunshots. Phantoms that turned out to be people running towards me shouted warnings in Spanish that I couldn't decipher until hands grabbed my shoulders, spinning me around, and a face close to mine bleated, "They're kill-killing everyone! Everyone!" As it did I felt a sudden burning in my lungs: Teargas! Flashed remembrances of military experiences.

Cautiously I edged along the sidewalk, keeping close to building fronts. I could hear the shouted pleas of women, incoherent screamed commands, glass shattering. My eyes and lungs burned; I tried to cover my mouth with a handkerchief but the teargas made it impossible to see anything clearly. Around me as I joined scores of people in retreat I heard questions, denunciations, curses. Soldiers...police...surrounded...beatings...snipers... No one seemed to know exactly what had happened. Just that after a protest march had ended, heavily armed and gas-masked soldiers and

militarized federal police had swept through the center of the city beating and arresting everyone they could get their hands on.

A lawyer whom I encountered the following week confided that an administration official had answered his complaint that virtually all of the 141 people who'd been arrested and sent to federal prisons for "sedition" and other offenses were innocent of any wrongdoing, even of participating in the protest march:

*"All the better. It will make the rest of the people more afraid."*

LESS THAN A MONTH AFTER THE ASSAULT, I participated in the first human rights delegation to interview members of the Popular Assembly that had initiated the protest march. Although various witnesses told us they'd seen persons who'd been hit by pistol or rifle fire, we could not verify any gunshot wounds or mortalities. Nevertheless, we corroborated twenty-three deaths at the hands of paramilitaries and non-uniformed police, including the slaying of American video cameraman Bradley Will, during the months preceding the armed assault.

Will was filming an attack on a defensive barricade set up by Popular Assembly members and supporters in the Oaxaca suburb of Santa Lucía del Camino on October 30, less than four weeks before the November 25 purge. U.S. Ambassador Tony Garza tepidly admonished the Mexican government and asked that the crime be investigated; Will's parents and a number of his friends and Indymedia associates formed an NGO to pressure U.S. governmental sources and media to insist that Mexican authorities resolve the assassination.

It took over a year for the "exhaustive investigation" to discount Will's videos of armed attackers charging towards

him and incriminate Juan Manuel Martínez, one of his companions at the barricade. To eliminate testimony that could have vindicated Martínez, state prosecutors charged all of those who had been at the barricade with being accessories to the crime, thus nullifying any testimony they might have given.

Efforts by Will's supporters in the United States to reopen the investigations and drop the charges against Martínez muddied the waters. Their insistence that the crime was premeditated and the shooters singled Will out because he had actively supported the strikers and filmed incidents and interviews criticizing the repressive state government overlooked or ignored that Will was only one of three killed and that four Mexican journalists and more than a dozen other *barricadistas* were wounded by gunfire during paramilitary assaults that day.

A few months after Will's murder—and before Martínez was arrested—a Oaxacan who'd helped man the Santa Lucía barricade and I inspected the place Will had been shot. Photographs published the day following his death showed three armed attackers, all identified as current or former Santa Lucía police, charging along the rutted street, weapons raised. Obviously they had no concerns about return fire for they were fully exposed; it's extremely unlikely that anyone at the barricade was armed. Witnesses confirmed at the time that the assailants had been drinking.

Traversing the rough asphalt at a slow trot, hand upraised as though wielding a weapon, I tried to focus on my companion who was standing approximately where Will had stood. From my military experience I knew how difficult it was to hit anything with a .38 while one is running. (I found it difficult to hit anything, period!) The bullet ricocheted; others at the barricade were wounded; if Will's murder was premeditated it was part of a general plan to assault and kill, not to target the American journalist. But all that was

wafted aside in the drive to exonerate Martínez and indict the real killer(s). Mexico's Supreme Court eventually ruled the charges against Martínez lacked sufficient evidence and he was released from prison.

Six years later the crime remained unresolved. But Martínez's conviction and the disputes it generated deflected attention from the overall repression that existed throughout Mexico.

THAT THE ZAPATISTA MOVEMENT has resisted being co-opted and continues to function as a viable entity reflects its tightly organized origins and singularity of purpose. The small coterie around which the movement formed began recruiting and training ten years before they had emerged as an anti-governmental force (unlike Mexico City student strikers in 1999 or the Popular Assembly in Oaxaca in 2006). Although those movements attracted enthusiastic support, they each lacked the core organizational structure that enabled the Zapatistas to stand up against governmental pressure.

Tacitly, if not actively, the government of the United States has supported repressions of dissent. Zapatista spokespersons, principally Subcomandante Marcos, openly opposed capitalism, thus making them (by capitalistic definition) "subversive" and "leftist."

The obsession with curtailing social protest, typical in totalitarian governments, might seem out of place in what ostensibly is a democratic country. But Mexico's "democracy" retains many elements of its centuries-long authoritarian origins. The Spanish kings awarded hundreds of thousands of square kilometers of territory to relatives and supporters despite claims of ownership by *indigena* groups. Even after Mexico gained its independence in 1810, the *hacendero* system of royalty-like elite and dependent workers and *campesinos*

continued. In 1910 nearly 90 percent of Mexico's approximately 16 million inhabitants were illiterate and a few dozen families controlled over 90 percent of the country's wealth.

The Constitution of 1917 invested the bulk of power and authority in the executive (the president and in the states the governor), relegating elected assemblies and the judiciary to subservient roles. It included no provisions for citizen recall of governors or the president and granted the executive the power to appoint judges and to control finances. Once elected an executive does whatever he or she pleases, including fortifying his or her party's hold on the government and repressing dissent.

The police and the military have been the primary tools for exercising executive authority, backed by government-paid paramilitaries and/or *porros* (political gang members). Not only have these *porros* subverted legitimate union activities but they have infiltrated student and popular movements and instigated participants to vandalism and criminal attacks that prompted armed police and the military to repress under the guise of restoring law and order.

In *Acteal: crimen de estado*, journalist Hermann Bellinghausen asserts that Mexico's federal government planned and carried out—through paid mercenaries—the murder of forty-five Zapatistas, almost all of whom were women and children, at Acteal, Chiapas in December 1997 as part of a deliberate repression of political dissent.

"Here (in Mexico) there is no punishment...for crimes committed by the government...instead the guilty are rewarded," Bellinghausen insisted in a newspaper interview.

Immediately after news of the Acteal massacre spread worldwide, Mexico's federal government attributed the killings to "religious and tribal disagreements" just as it had attributed the slayings of community radio broadcasters in

Oaxaca and dissident *campesinos* at Aguas Blancas in Guerrero to land disputes between rival communities.

By officially attributing politically involved slayings to socio-religious confrontations or regional land disputes, the federal government is able to dismiss them as "local concerns" which have nothing to do with government repression. Even when state authorities confirm assaults or intimidations they find ways to derail accusations, as they did when the public prosecutor in Teopisca, Chiapas refused to process charges against three *Ejército de Dios* members who waylaid and beat a teenaged Zapatista. Despite acknowledging that the assault had occurred, the prosecutor claimed that the teenager lacked proper identification and consequently was not authorized to file charges under Mexican law.

Soldiers and armed police, spurred on by *porros*, overreacted to National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) student strikers in 1968 and attacked and killed a still unconfirmed number of protesters at Tlalcoloco in Mexico City on October 2 of that year. An eyewitness fleeing from the assault told me he saw pistol-wielding police fire *tiros de gracia* (coups de grace) at protesters who had fallen or were curled in doorways trying to protect themselves.

President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and his successor, Luis Echeverría, who was Díaz Ordaz's Government Secretary, were absolved of criminal charges but the protests and their violent aftermath stimulated anti-dissent and anti-public education feelings among the country's political leadership.

THE ASSAULT BY HEAVILY ARMED MILITARY and militarized police in Oaxaca in 2006 broke the back of the People's Popular Assembly that had emerged after government repression of a teachers' union strike in June of that same year. A year and a half earlier, in January 2005, armed Oaxacan state police swept

into the town of Santiago Xánica and opened fire on a group of more than eighty *indigena* men, women, and children engaged in a community work project. Members of the Santiago Xánica community had clashed with clear cutters illegally harvesting forest land that the community claimed fell within their jurisdiction. During the skirmish a policeman was killed and over twenty-five *indigenas* badly wounded and placed under arrest.

Mexican law makes no provision for jury trials; a judge determines whether or not the accusations are valid and levies sentences accordingly. The presiding judge sentenced Santiago Xánica community members Abraham Ramírez and two others to prison for homicide, attempted homicide, personal injury, and kidnapping. The judge disregarded evidence that would have vindicated them but did note that all three men were members of the *Defensa de los Derechos Indígenas de Santiago Xánica*, an organization affiliated with the Magonista Zapatista Alliance, the People's Popular Assembly of Oaxaca and the "Other Campaign," the Zapatista's national organization.

"That was the real crime," a Santiago Xánica resident told me, "that's why the police came."

IN SEPTEMBER 2009 federal agents arrested Ramsés Villarreal for participating in bank bombings in Mexico City, claiming they had identified him from photographs taken at the scene of the crime. It later was proved that the photos weren't of him, but the federal accusations detailed his role on the student strike council during the 1999-2000 UNAM closure, his participating in FARC solidarity against the military incursions by the army in Colombia and in the Zapatista The Other Campaign. The Mexico City newspaper *La Cronica de Hoy* quoted a federal dossier that linked Villarreal and other former UNAM strikers with discussions about Marxism, opposition to the privatization of the energy industry and the



higher educational system, exalting Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez and protesting neoliberalism.

"The government has made it clear that it plans to take advantage of the bombing investigation in order to spy on and hunt down student and social organizations...(that) are allegedly linked to terrorists," journalist Kristin Bricker insisted in her blog.

When citizen protests reach dimensions that the outcry in Ciudad Juárez over drug-related assassinations have done, or that the thousand-mile march from Cuernavaca to the city organized by Javier Sicilia after his son was killed achieved, and the government cannot respond by using repressive force against "lawbreakers," it sponsors "dialogue and negotiation" and assures support, investigations, and legal actions. Publicity photos extol this cooperation, the *abrazos* and attention to widows and orphans and welcomes citizen participation in the war against crime.

Occasionally, as happened after the Tlalcoloco massacre in 1968, it grants concessions to those affronted or victimized. But overall politics don't change. Seldom are restrictions actually lifted. Seldom are those responsible for the violence sanctioned. Seldom do those protesting achieve any of their goals. Seldom do any concessions lessen the stranglehold on power that those in governing elite cling to.

"Social protest," a former federal government official who refused to have his name published for fear of reprisals told me, "is more threatening than the drug corporations to those in power. Those in power can work out deals with the drug corporations. They're after the same things: money, more money, and much more money. It becomes a contest to see who can corrupt each other the most.

"They can't deal with protesters who want change. Change could destroy what has been built up for over eighty, ninety

years. That's why protests have to be repressed."

"So the only way for a protest movement to succeed would be to corrupt those in power?" I asked.

He gave me a knowing wink.

## **Footnotes**