

# Letter from Chiapas: Decolonization and Indigenous Struggle

Carlyn  
Zwarenstein



Carlyn is a  
Toronto-based  
activist and  
journalist.

I've been here in Mexico City since September visiting my partner, a Mexican labour-rights activist, and his family. Saúl and I just got back from a week in Chiapas, the southern state that is Mexico's poorest. Since the mid-1990s, parts of the state have been controlled by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), a guerilla army pushing for Indigenous rights and autonomy, with constant Mexican military presence in the rest of the state. Paramilitary groups also operate in Chiapas — December 25 will be the fifth anniversary of the still un-resolved Acteal massacre, where 45 Indigenous people were killed by paramilitaries allegedly acting with government support.

Official military presence — on a good day already in the tens of thousands of soldiers — has increased dramatically since the Supreme Court recently overturned an application by 330 municipalities against a law on Indigenous rights and culture approved by the Mexican senate in April, 2001. Just as Ontario's Tenant Protection Act abolished rent control under the guise of protecting tenant rights, this new law purports to protect and promote the rights of Indigenous people in Mexico. The people themselves, and their armed representatives, the Zapatistas, disagree, pushing tensions high.

The Supreme Court decision deals a crushing blow to hopes of increased autonomy and improved justice for Indigenous people in the country, as well as halting discussion between the government and the EZLN (which had resulted in the unimplemented San Andreas accords). As the Chiapas-based Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Centre for Human Rights wrote last August, the law pushes Indigenous people to the wall by confining rights to a bare minimum far less ample than outlined in the negotiated San Andreas accords.

Like Canada, present-day Mexico is built on the land and blood of its original Indigenous inhabitants. Nowhere is this more evident than here in the capital, a monster metropolis constructed by Spanish *conquistadors* on the ashes of the capital of the Aztec Empire (downtown you can visit the ruins of Aztec temples excavated during construction of the city's huge and sophisticated metro system). Some 500 years ago, a Spanish priest, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, documented horrible human-rights abuses, murders, enslavement and tortures perpetrated by the colonizers.

Today human-rights activists — including some I met from the eponymous Fray Bartolomé Centre — work to document continuing abuses perpetrated against Indigenous people and leaders fighting for self-determination and freedom from crushing poverty. These include death threats, displacements

— thousands remain displaced from their homes in more than a dozen Chiapas communities — NGO-documented (but officially uninvestigated) accusations of torture, and the Acteal massacre.

While perpetrators are both paramilitary and military — abuses by the EZLN are alleged to be minimal — activists say serious problems began in 1994 when the Mexican army initiated its counter-insurgency strategy against the Zapatistas, whose armed rebellion began formally on January 1 of that year, as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect.

Like in British Columbia, where Premier Gordon Campbell's referendum on Indigenous rights has soured hopes for just settlements of treaties governing land rights, Mexico's Indigenous law is a perilous step backward in a situation where negotiations with the government were already agonizingly difficult. Indeed, issues of concern to Indigenous people in Mexico are essentially the same as those affecting First Nations in Canada.

Primary issues are governmental autonomy, access to land unimpeded by multinational or private ownership, cultural preservation, self-determination, judicial remedy and the desire to be seen as peoples, rather than as geographically localized communities. Both the Zapatistas and organizations like the Fray Bartolomé Centre identify neoliberal politics — in the form of NAFTA, the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas and the proposed Plan Puebla Panama, which would open Central America to foreign investment and mega-construction projects — as fundamental to attacks on communities, destruction of biodiversity and unwillingness to devolve power and funds to local government. In April, the Council of American Bishops (CELAM) declared that Indigenous people in Latin America (approximately 60 million in number) were experiencing a state of emergency due to the menace of globalization.

Then again, if you read American academic and Indigenous activist Ward Churchill, you quickly get a sense that today's globalization is only more of the same bad news — the colonization of Indigenous people across the Americas that has been continuous since Columbus thought he'd found India.

With First Nations people suffering first and worst from economic globalization and neoliberal policies, they have ample reason to resort to desperate measures like armed insurrection and guerrilla warfare. Until governments begin to recognize and surrender human rights, including economic sufficiency and self-determination for these occupied nations, armed struggle like that of the EZLN and smaller-scale uprisings in Canada and other places remains the most important route to change.