

In the pre-dawn hours the aging Volkswagen "combi" van chugs up and down the winding mountainous roads of Chiapas, southeastern Mexico, hauling sleepy Tzotzil Mayan passengers plus two strangers to these parts. The two of us had received a briefing at the human rights center of the diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, headed by Bishop Samuel Ruiz, affectionately known as "Tatik" (Little Father) Samuel. Nora, an engineer from the northern desert state of Sinaloa, was changing careers and applying to medical school at the UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) in Mexico City. From a farming family, she was the only one of ten siblings to attend university. But the UNAM was on strike, taken over by some of its 250,000 students in protest against neoliberal policies: The government threatened to impose tuition, to escape spending the UN-recommended minimum of 8% of GDP on education. Students were outraged that the government had cut education spending to 4%, yet somehow found the resources to bail out the bankers in Mexico's equivalent of our Savings & Loan scandal. While waiting to see when the UNAM might reopen so she could take entrance exams, Nora threw a hammock into her backpack and took the 18-hour bus ride to Chiapas to volunteer as a human rights observer.

We caught the 5:00 a.m. combi toward a town I'll call Belén, hoping the army and immigration police roadblocks would not be operating at that hour. The plan was to get off at a predetermined point along the road, where supporters of the Zapatista indigenous rebellion would guide us to the village that had requested human rights observers. But an hour out of the colonial town of San Cristóbal, we were stopped at an army roadblock. Noting my foreign appearance, the soldiers demanded to see my passport and visa, wrote down the information, asked where I was going, and searched my backpack,

all in flagrant violation of the Mexican constitution. Then we all got back into the combi and the soldier in charge of the roadblock instructed the driver, "Don't let the paleface off before Belén." So it was that Nora had to feign a terrible attack of car-sickness, much to the consternation of the elderly woman sitting in front of us, so the driver had to let us off by the roadside. The driver gave us a knowing look as he collected our fares and said, "This town is Benito Juárez."

"Free Trade" and Life at the Bottom of the Food Chain

We waited in the shade of the village schoolyard for our guides, and a man named Alfonso stopped by to chat. He asked what country we came from, how many hours it was to Michigan and Sinaloa, and what we did in our distant lands. Reflecting on our responses, Alfonso thought it was O.K. that people do different jobs, since we can't all do the same thing. But the work of the campesino (peasant) is fundamental, he continued, because we all have to eat. Even the President of the Republic has to eat, he remarked, and even if he has a fat wad of bills, he can't eat them! We inquired about last year's harvest, and Alfonso told us that the dry weather had hurt the coffee crop. In any case, the prices were low: They peaked at 15 pesos a kilo (70 U.S. cents a pound), but fell to 7 pesos before the harvest was over. Many campesinos ended up in debt, especially those who held onto their harvest in hopes that prices would rise and finally had to sell for 7 pesos. Naturally, he explained, we still had to pay people we hired to help harvest, 30 pesos (\$3) a day; we couldn't lower their pay just because prices were low. When we told him that coffee such as the export-grade organic Mexican beans grown here fetched around \$8 a pound in the U.S., he pondered the information quietly. Nora asked why the community didn't organize their own production and marketing networks, as her father did in the north for his small crop of wheat and sorghum. Ah, sighed Alfonso, when we peasants organize, they just send in the army. It's not like we're organizing criminal bands to rob, he exclaimed—we're just trying to organize for work, to work better together. But the government doesn't want us to get ahead.

Prices were not always so bad for peasant producers. Since the foreign debt crisis of the early 1980s, the Mexican government adopted a neoliberal program of "structural adjustment," throwing the economy open to the forces of the world market, shrinking the role of the state, and privatizing the resources of the nation. As a result, 22 new Mexican billionaires appeared, putting Mexico in fourth place for number of billionaires, behind the U.S., Germany, and Japan. But the purchasing power of

workers' salaries fell 80% from levels of the 1970s. Peasant price supports were eliminated, and the coffee marketing board that had stabilized prices was dismantled in 1989. All of this, plus credit cutbacks and the flood of cheap grain imports from U.S. agribusiness since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), devastated the precarious peasant economy. The final straw came in 1992, when the Salinas administration modified Article 27 of the Mexican constitution to allow the breakup and private sale of collective *ejido* lands. This effectively destroyed the agrarian reform that was a cornerstone of the 1910 Revolution and the last hope of millions of poor peasants. The privatization of land ownership in preparation for NAFTA reversed the historic struggle led by Emiliano Zapata in the Mexican Revolution, for the rights and dignity of the Mexican peasantry.

On January 1, 1994, NAFTA went into effect. On that day, Zapata rolled over in his grave, and the masked indigenous rebels of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) took over towns in Chiapas to announce, "¡Ya basta!"—We won't take it anymore! The *federales* moved in with tanks and helicopters to try to suppress the rebellion, and one-third of the federal army now occupies this tiny state that has 3% of the country's population.

Out in the schoolyard in Benito Juárez, people don't think much of the government. "The government only looks after their own," Alfonso said bitterly. One of the village teachers from a nearby community stopped by to talk, and he angrily dismissed the government's education program in the region as a sham, out of touch with local reality. We have to completely redo the curriculum to adapt to these indigenous communities, he explained. It's very hard for those who finish primary school in these communities to go on to secondary, because even if the families could spare them from the cornfields to send them to the town of Belén, they couldn't afford to board them. Besides, he said, the constitutional guarantee of free public education is a lie; the students have to buy their books and the parents are asked to contribute a fee which they can't afford. This was another consequence of the neoliberal rollback of the state, as budget cutbacks forced teachers to invent fees to keep their schools functioning.

Then the teacher brightened and said, maybe soon the students can go to secondary in Oventic! One of the five Aguascalientes (Zapatista centers of regional organizing), Oventic and surrounding communities had pitched in to build their own schoolhouse with dormitories. The buildings were just about finished, and the project was already a source of pride and hope. But the military siege is an obstacle, and the teacher from San Diego, California who helped organize donations and work brigades for the school construction was summarily deported last year for the crime of school-building. The San Francisco-based Global Exchange and a Mexican human rights group just issued a report documenting over 100 expulsions of foreigners from Chiapas in the last year alone, as part of the government campaign to remove witnesses to the repression.

The teacher went back to the schoolyard and blew his whistle, and eventually our guides appeared and escorted us over cattle paths on a two-hour hike over the mountains. Our older guide Francisco, his son, and their four dogs waited patiently as we city folk labored

in the midday sun under the weight of our backpacks, carrying sleeping bags and the food we would need for our ten-day stay. A large snake scrambles out of our way, and the guides assure us it is only a rat-snake, not the deadly *nauyaca* found in these parts. We arrive exhausted in Salto Grande, where we are greeted by one of the community leaders and human rights observers from the previous shift, three young women on summer break from Columbia University. One had been here before as a human rights worker, when she was seized by the authorities and taken straight to the state capital several hours away, escorted on a small plane to Mexico City, and dumped in the airport with orders to leave the country within five days. Undaunted, she organized a group of classmates to return, and here they were in several communities of rural Chiapas, a thorn in the side of a government bent on reducing a people to submission.



Observers from Ann Arbor report on soldiers' model behavior such as defecating in a village's only well

From Subsistence to Resistance

In the 1980s, the 23 families of Salto Grande had organized to buy this land, a beautiful spot cradled in the lush green hills, from a bankrupt landlord. Here these Tzotzil people grow corn, the staff of life, in the traditional way of their Mayan ancestors. They also tend the coffee trees that were on the land they purchased, though the landlord's old coffee-processing equipment lies rusting in disrepair, since the government cut the electrical connection when the landowner pulled out. Now they wash and de-pulp the coffee fruit by hand and spread it to dry in the sun, hauling it over the hills to the road to sell for low prices in Belén. They could get a much better price in the state capital of Tuxtla, explained Alberto, who was loaning one of the two rooms of his house for the human rights observers to string our hammocks. But the government wouldn't give them a license to transport it, so the coffee could be seized on the road as contraband; and in any case the wholesalers in Tuxtla boycotted them. Our hosts Alberto and Rosa cultivate six-tenths of an acre of corn on the steep mountainside for the family's subsistence, plus a tiny coffee plot that yields an annual income of about \$400 to purchase beans, clothes, workboots and tools.

After the landlord and his electricity left, the government took no interest in electrification—until after the 1994 Zapatista rebellion, when a power line was installed to the nearby hilltop community of Los Mangos, populated by supporters of Mexico's perpetually ruling PRI

party. Although Chiapas produces half the country's hydroelectric power, most indigenous communities lack electricity. The Zapatista supporters of Salto Grande redistributed the resources a bit by attaching their own wire to the power line through the hills, yielding enough wattage for a few light bulbs and cassette players for the three annual parties: the patron saint's day, Christmas, and the January 1st anniversary of the rebellion. These holidays were occasions for shuffle-dancing to the same few cassettes and celebrating a community meal with a rare taste of meat. They offer a break from the daily routine in which the women rise at 4:00 a.m. to grind corn for tortillas, and the men climb the hillsides with hoe and machete to work their fields before the brutal afternoon sun takes its toll.

This year a fourth commemoration was added to the community calendar, marking the first anniversary of the sad events that occurred one year ago. Over the last few years, the government's counterinsurgency strategy has included training and arming paramilitaries to terrorize communities of Zapatista supporters. One day last year, federal army troops invaded Salto Grande accompanied by masked pro-government paramilitaries from Los Mangos, where armed *prístas* (ruling party supporters) had already driven out Zapatista families. As the troops approached, Salto Grande called a hasty community meeting and decided the women should go hide in the hills. Some

of the men who were unlucky enough to be out hunting armadillos when the troops approached were shot on sight. The rest of the men were held face-down at rifle-point on the basketball court for six hours while the soldiers and *prístas* ransacked their houses, stole their meager possessions, and ate their chickens. Then the assailants hauled off five men who were fingered by the paramilitaries. After human rights groups denounced this abuse, the authorities returned the five dead bodies, plus three from

nearby communities, mutilated almost beyond recognition.

Since then, convoys of soldiers and Public Security forces (the equivalent of state police) regularly visit the paramilitaries of Los Mangos to resupply them, firing shots in the hills to maintain the tension in Salto Grande. The day after our arrival, thirteen truckloads of troops could be seen passing by on the road up the hill to Los Mangos. Last December, the government forces and paramilitaries returned to Salto Grande, and this time everyone fled to the hills, where they watched as the rest of their possessions were carted off and the village trashed. Similar scenes were repeated throughout Chiapas, where human rights groups have identified 14 different paramilitary groups, and some 15,000 Zapatista sympathizers have been driven out of their homes into refugee settlements. In December of 1997, paramilitaries attacked the highland village of Acteal, killing 45 unarmed men, women, and children. Public Security forces stood by, 200 yards away, while the paramilitaries spent five hours hacking up the survivors with machetes, and state authorities dismissed the frantic phone calls from the Church's human rights center in San Cristóbal.

By arming and training paramilitaries, the government can claim that the violence is internal to the indigenous communities. This "low intensity warfare" strategy was outlined in the army's 1994 Chiapas counterinsurgency plan, written by a Mexican general trained at the U.S. Army School of the Americas in Ft. Benning, Georgia. The School of the Americas has sharply increased its training of Mexican military forces since the Zapatista rebellion, and the U.S. gov-

other military equipment on the pretext of helping in the "war on drugs."

We ask Alberto what he thinks the 13 truckloads of troops are going to Los Mangos for, and he says it's all part of the government's intimidation campaign to break their resistance. They'll probably claim they're looking for drugs, he explains, but the army and paramilitaries actually plant marijuana and then blame it on the Zapatistas. Meanwhile, residents of Salto Grande take turns doing a 24-hour watch so they'll know what's coming down the road.

Ironically, two U.S. military attachés from the U.S. embassy in Mexico were caught in Los Mangos a few months ago. They were seized by pro-government paramilitaries who evidently thought the foreigners were Zapatista supporters or human rights workers. The two claimed to be lost, and the government quickly arranged their release and hushed up the incident.

As I write this, the thunderous afternoon rain slows, and suddenly a double rainbow appears in the sky, linking the two communities that the government is working desperately to divide. Night falls, and I walk down the hill with Jill, one of the Columbia students, to check with Manuel about arranging guides for the trek out of the mountains for the departing shift of human rights observers. A quiet, smiling man, Manuel was chosen by the community to keep a roster of families to take turns supplying tortillas to our "Civilian Peace Camp," and to find volunteers to escort observers in and out of the mountains. We find him in the corn shed, playing the marimba (a xylophone-like instrument) with two other men, while children and chickens wait in and out. The soft pinging of the marimba sounds magical as it floats through the cool evening drizzle. A gaggle of children recruit us to swing them in the air squealing, and to play a local version of tag in the muddy patch between Manuel's house and the corn shed.

On Sunday there is a 6:00 a.m. service in the tiny church. Cut-outs of colored plastic sheets are strung overhead for adornment, and pine needles are spread over the dirt floor to produce a sweet aroma. There is no priest, but the local catechist reads some scripture aloud in Spanish and Tzotzil and ad-libs a sermon, then invites commentary from the 20 or so people gathered. The women speak first, speaking from their benches while covering their mouths modestly with their shawls, and the catechist murmurs encouragement. A chicken keeps running in and hopping onto the altar, and one of the elders quietly directs a barefoot little urchin in the front to go shoo the chicken away. After everyone has had a chance to speak, there are a few final prayers and songs, and the service ends.

One of the congregants we hadn't met before, a middle-aged man I'll call Victor, stops by the peace camp after service. With only a first grade education, Victor became a peasant organizer in the early 1980s, taught himself to read along the way, and helped organize a cooperative to buy the land for the community of Salto Grande. They drew up a coffee and cattle production project with assistance from agronomists at a university on the other side of the country, got credit through a government program (with the help of a little creative accounting to demonstrate financial solvency), and within four years they paid off the loan and owned the land they once worked for the rich landlord. Perhaps the landlord sold to cut his losses, since organizers from a tiny socialist party were promoting peasant land invasions in the nearby hilltop community of Los Mangos. In any case, the co-op in Salto Grande went bankrupt when coffee prices suddenly dropped one year, but the land was divided among the members and the community thrived. Victor thinks the 300 residents of Los Mangos have been jealous of their success ever since.

When the 1994 Zapatista rebellion broke out and the people of Salto Grande were identified as sympathizers, Public Security forces moved into Los Mangos

and threw the other 26 pro-Zapatista families there, occupying their houses. The government offered protection and resources to Los Mangos in exchange for their participation in anti-Zapatista paramilitaries. Now they ride back and forth to Belén escorted by truckloads of Public Security forces in convoys like the one we saw winding down the hillside this morning, and fire off their R-15 high-powered rifles randomly in the hills to intimidate the Zapatista supporters. Their leaders walk around Belén with five machine-gun-toting guards, says Victor, shaking his head in amazement. Meanwhile, the deeds to the Salto Grande properties have expired, but the government refuses to renew them, making the village ineligible for credit.



Kay Bond introduces Mayan kids to soap bubbles

Remembering the Past, Envisioning the Future

Victor tells us the men of the community are going up to the cemetery at midday with machetes to clear the overgrown rainy-season brush in preparation for the commemorative service on the anniversary of the massacre. I join them, and the brush is quickly cleared under the rhythmic slashing of so many hands. There are five crosses for the victims from Salto Grande, and a crudely lettered cement marker explaining that the five were assassinated by paramilitaries from Los Mangos and Public Security "because they were working for peace with justice and dignity." As we rest in the shade by the cemetery, amid the hum of the men re-filing their machetes and the intermittent thumps of machetes swung idly into tree trunks, an impromptu meeting takes shape. Still sprawled in the brush, some looking down at their machetes or brushing off insects, the men take turns expressing their views in Tzotzil, punctuated by an occasional "mm-hmm" of assent.

Victor later summarizes for me in Spanish the two points of discussion. One is the community's demand for compensation payments for two widows of the slain villagers. He explains that a non-governmental organization donated some food, and the rest of the community has been pitching in to maintain the cornfields of the two families, but they want compensation for the people that the government took away alive and returned dead. They decide to take up a collection to send Victor into town to check with the Church's human rights center to see how the case is going. The other point has to do with Raúl Vera, the new Bishop scheduled to take over when "Tatik" Samuel Ruiz retires next year at age 75. Like the legendary Archbishop Romero of El Salvador, and like Tatik himself, Don Raúl came to Chiapas as an apolitical traditionalist and was quickly radicalized by reality—a transformation that was hastened after he and Don Samuel survived an ambush by pro-government paramilitaries on a pastoral visit to northern Chiapas. Now the *priistas* want to block Don Raúl

and taking over as bishop, and the Salto Grande group decides to draw up a statement of community support for Don Raúl.

Back at the peace camp, I report on the meeting to Nora. We compare it to the meeting at church and wonder about the extent of women's participation in decision-making in Zapatista support communities. Victor tells us there is a community-wide meeting every two weeks, but we aren't sure if there will be one before we leave.

The three Columbia students left early in the morning, so the peace camp is quieter, and Alberto and Rosa invite us over for an evening meal of roasted plantains and sweet coffee. Alberto kills cockroaches while he tells us about the art of coffee growing and harvesting. The beans are picked gently with the fingertips, "Just like the way we pluck ticks out of our skin." Rosa recounts how she learned to make beaded bracelets from a previous peace camper. I think about the effect that our presence has in these communities, and reflect on something Victor said earlier in the day about the San Andrés Accords. Back when the government was still pretending to negotiate with the Zapatistas, they signed agreements in 1996 to respect indigenous rights

and culture, but then reneged on the accords and continued the militarization of the state. Victor was disgusted that the government had violated "the word"—a sacred value for the indigenous people—but noted proudly that the Zapatistas were committed to implementing local autonomous government anyway, without waiting for the government to keep its promise. Regarding indigenous customs, he noted, not all traditions are good. But the important thing is, he emphasized, we want to choose what we want to accept from outside and how we want to live.

The autonomy movement is an attempt to build democracy from the grassroots up, but the PRI is loathe to give up its 70-year grip on power. The Zapatistas have proclaimed 32 autonomous municipalities (equivalent to counties), but since last April the government has been launching military invasions of these county seats and arresting leaders, in an effort to nip democracy in the bud. In the highland town of San Andrés Larráinzar, site of the now-suspended peace talks, when Zapatista supporters were elected to municipal government in the last election the PRI ignored the results and installed its own people. Angry Zapatistas marched en masse in ski masks, but unarmed, and took over the municipal offices, which they continue to occupy. Residents of Salto Grande and many other communities take turns sending reinforcements to support the sit-in. Like the schoolteacher in Benito Juárez, most people in these communities seem convinced that nothing good can come from this government. As we prepare the fire for our afternoon meal one day, a helicopter of Public Security forces flies overhead toward Los Mangos. I wonder if I am watching my U.S. tax dollars at work, perhaps flying in more beer for the *priistas*. (The Zapatista communities are dry, but the government continues to ply other villages with alcohol as part of a long-standing pattern of promoting disintegration of indigenous communities.) We hear on the radio that the U.S. Secretary of Housing & Urban Development is visiting coastal communities in Chiapas that were affected by last year's floods. Yet there are never resources for the desperately poor communities of the highlands and eastern jungle of Chiapas, where the Zapatistas raised the cry of "Ya basta."

We are awakened early one morning to shouts and laughter as a pack of

young men from Salto Grande come running down the road, towing a lassoed and very angry bull. It is the day before the first anniversary of the massacre, and the bull will be slaughtered for the soup to be shared with people coming from neighboring communities for the commemoration. The women prepare *atole*, a thick corn drink. On this special day before the main event, the men stay home from their cornfields for a basketball tournament with teams that hike in through the mountains from other villages, bringing their lunches of *pozole* (boiled ground corn mixed with water). There is an air of excitement on the court. One of the teachers keeps score and announces it over a rickety loudspeaker attached to the schoolhouse. Players take turns serving as referees, children chase stray balls down the hillside, and the pace is fast. The home team, "The Rebels," takes the championship. A torrential rain breaks out before the games end, but nobody's spirits seem dampened.

After the rain, the air is filled with clouds of slow-flying insects. The chickens attack them voraciously, while the children run around squealing with their ears plugged to keep the bugs out. We are told it is the annual arrival of the *tsulup* or *ch'unuk*, a welcome omen because they are always followed by *tsisim*, a prized edible ant. The bull is slaughtered and most of the meat is set aside for tomorrow's soup, while the rest is carefully weighed and distributed to each family. We walk up the hill to the center of the village and watch as the hide is salted and carefully folded up to be taken to Belén and sold. Night is falling and the priest from the county seat has not arrived for tomorrow's ceremony. People speculate that he was delayed by the rains and will come first thing in the morning.

Victor drops by our camp, and he is in a pensive mood. After commenting on the ball game and the arrival of the *tsulup*, he starts to recount the events of this time last year. We have been hearing fragments of the story since we came to Salto Grande, but this was the most complete and detailed version, and Victor's Spanish is good. In the wee hours of the morning, the small village was invaded by a ridiculously large force of paramilitaries, army, and police. He says the Public Security forces approached from two sides and then opened fire on each other in confusion, leaving three truckloads of them dead—a fact which the government covered up, admitting to only two dead. He describes the feeling of humiliation and helpless rage as the assailants held them at gunpoint all day, face-down in the blazing sun on the basketball court, while ransacking their houses. When the assailants left, he and others gathered up a little remaining corn to grind and went on horseback into the mountains at night to look for the women and children who had fled, and bring them something to eat. They stayed in the hills another night, still fearful of another raid, before returning hungry and exhausted to their devastated village. He describes the horror when the government later returned the bodies of the five men they had taken away plus three from nearby villages, "sliced open like chickens," in a state of putrefaction. The stench was so overwhelming they had to bury the bodies immediately, even though it was nightfall. Victor seems pained, but driven to retell the events. Then he excuses himself, leaving us in stunned silence.

The attack on Salto Grande was not an isolated occurrence, but part of a pattern of repression of indigenous sympathizers of the Zapatista movement over the last five years. Government security forces work hand in hand with paramilitaries, terrorizing with impunity. Earlier that day I tuned my pocket short-wave radio to Radio for Peace International, broadcast from the United Nations University for Peace in Costa Rica, and learn that pro-government paramilitary forces in Chiapas have just killed a

Zapatista sympathizer in the northern municipality of Tila, after torturing him and tearing off his testicles. The incident is not reported in the PRI-controlled media (and therefore won't be picked up by *The New York Times*), and the perpetrators will no doubt go unpunished.

We wake up on June 1 to the sound of fireworks at 6:00 a.m. and the happy birthday song "Las Mañanitas" being played on the marimba, signaling the start of the holiday. The sun is gearing up to sear away the mist suspended in the valleys. Indigenous families start arriving on foot from neighboring villages, the women in bright embroidered blouses and the men carrying woven *morrales* (saddle bags). Mass is held on the basketball court, where flowers have been laid out in the shape of a cross with photos taken from the identity cards of the slain men. Also arranged on the court are candles and small clay urns of burning *copal*, the Mayan incense.

The priest, a tall man with a flowing beard and brightly colored braided cloth bracelets, makes a short speech about those who were "assassinated by this political system that misgoverns us," urging congregants to rise above hatred and division with the power of love. One of the village elders wearing traditional cotton shorts and tunic gives a Tzotzil version. A young seminarian who helps officiate was a wild man in the basketball game the day before. Today he looks grave in his white robes, mopping his brow with the trademark red kerchief of the Zapatista militia. Some people quietly wipe away tears. The service ends, and everyone takes a flower and a candle for the procession through the coffee fields to the cemetery. Now gathered at grave side, there is a chorus of wailing as the memories return, and the candles and flowers are distributed over the graves. The priest dips a red hibiscus flower in water and shakes it over the assembly, says a few more words, then leads in singing "Venceremos," We Shall Overcome. After the service ends, the seminarian and one of the elders stay behind to kneel quietly by the graves.

We wind back down the hill to a field where the village loudspeaker has been set up, and there are political speeches in Tzotzil. Then the community meal is served, *atole* and beef broth with roasted tortillas. The women ladle and the men serve bowls to families sitting in clusters in the grass. As we sit quietly enjoying the feast, a bright ring appears around the sun. Nora asks Josefina, who is sitting next to us with her family, how long it takes the women to embroider their beautiful blouses. Only a month if we work on it every day, she replies, smiling shyly. We all retire to the community grain storage shed to watch the video "Romero," about the Salvadoran archbishop killed for standing up for human rights and justice. The seminarian has brought the video, and he periodically cranks up the volume to keep up with the roar of the rainstorm that has broken out.

The Struggle Continues

The video ends, bringing the commemoration to a close, and the hundreds of visitors from neighboring villages start

their rain-slicked treks back through the hills. Nora and I talk about how the film must seem all too close to home here. We begin to pack up for our early morning departure from Salto Grande, remarking on how fast the time had gone even though we hadn't really done much of anything. Yet we were touched by the warmth we felt from the community. Earlier in the evening, Manuel (who is our tortilla connection) insists on giving us bags of rich dark coffee to take home. His grandchildren come running out of the house, grinning, to thrust little fist-fulls of fried plantain slices into our hands. Our hosts Alberto and Rosa come by for one last chat, and Alberto comments on how different this day was from that fateful day last year. They offer us some of the rain-water they have collected, since the stream water is muddy from the churning of the rainstorm. They say goodnight, and we are left to be sung to sleep by the frogs and crickets.

Our guides for the return hike arrive at 5:30 a.m., a half hour early. The two young men skip over the hills like mountain goats while we struggle to climb the muddy trails and balance on stepping stones across rivers. We pass chest-high anthills, lush coffee fields, and a hillside planted with banana trees like green windmills. One of our guides whips out his slingshot to take a pot-shot at a roadrunner. We finally arrive in Benito Juárez, where the owner of a roadside stall lets us use his storeroom to change out of our muddy clothes, so as not to advertise to the soldiers at the next roadblock that we have been off the beaten path. A vehicle comes and soon we are back in San Cristóbal, where the noise of cars honking and rattling down the cobblestone roads suddenly seems overwhelming after ten days of rural tranquility.

My innkeeper is distraught: Her brother has just been kidnaped by men dressed in the black garb of the feared

Judicial Police. The family is known around town for their work in favor of indigenous rights, and now they fear the worst. I express my sympathies, but am hard-pressed to think of something encouraging to say. Walking across town to return a borrowed sleeping bag, I am passed by two shotgun-toting men in black with no insignia, and a chill goes up my spine.

Friends insist on driving me to the airport in the morning, two hours away in the state capital of Tuxtla. As we approach the city, they tell me we are about to pass "our little army barracks." Rounding the curve, we see what looks like a small city of multi-level concrete apartment blocks. Shaking his head, my friend comments, "The worst of it is, they're building these to stay." He says Chiapas is essentially under military rule, comparing the situation to the South American military dictatorships of the 1970s.

Catching up on the newspapers on the plane ride back to Michigan, I see that the army has launched a series of new

offensives, displacing entire communities of Zapatista sympathizers in various parts of Chiapas. Eight military and police incursions in early June have sent 5,000 fleeing, joining over 15,000 refugees who have already fled government-sponsored violence. I remember Manuel's words as he gave us our goodbye gift: "Think of us when you are drinking your coffee up there."

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For more information on how you can get involved, contact:

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