

By 1998, the sense of hope and possibility emerging from the spirit of Zapatismo was spreading. With the proliferation of new websites, list-serves, and international activist gatherings, it seemed like a whole new cycle of struggle was taking place. Yet daily in the autonomous Zapatista communities, deep in the humid Lacandón jungle, the low-level war continued.

Chiapas is one of the areas richest in natural resources in Mexico; it has oil, natural gas and hydroelectric power, is the largest producer of coffee and second largest producer of beef, corn, bananas, honey, melons, avocados, and cocoa, all sold for export. Yet 80 per cent of the indigenous communities suffer from malnutrition, and more than half have no access to drinking water or electricity. Over a third cannot read and have never been to school, and in 1994, poverty-related disease accounted for an estimated 15,000 indigenous deaths.

Roberto Barrios, a community of 2,000 people, was one of the five places that hosted the first International Encuentro in 1996. Not everyone that lives there supports the uprising – supporters of the government live side by side with Zapatistas, and less than half a mile away (until 2001) sat one of the largest military bases in the area. The tension was always high, with low flying army planes and helicopters buzzing overhead. Fear of a repeat of the army's invasion of February 1996 was punctuated by the constant threats and attacks by paramilitary gangs.

The situation in Chiapas has drawn numerous international activists to visit and work as peace observers and to help build clinics, schools and sanitation projects with the autonomous municipalities. Despite the daily grind of poverty and fear, the Zapatista communities maintain a tenacious spirit of dignity and hope, a spirit which every visitor can't help but bring back home.

Death of a Zapatista

by Jeff Conant

Robert Barrios, Chiapas, Mexico, 1998

"Welcome to Zapatista Rebel Territory," a hand-painted sign reads as we enter the village, yellow letters on a black background, over what used to be a Coca-Cola advertisement. "Corn and peace, yes. Drugs and soldiers, no." Below the welcome is the five-pointed red star of the Zapatistas, the star representing the five continents united in struggle, representing the human figure standing up in dignity.

This past month has been especially tense, with military occupations of many villages and constant helicopter surveillance following the recent massacre in Acteal, where government supporters with AK-47s gunned down 45 unarmed men, women, and children. Everywhere there are threats that the massacre will be repeated in other villages. After Acteal, with federal police and military officials implicated in planning the massacre, both the secretary of the interior and the governor of Chiapas were forced to resign. But the murderers remained free, and the threat of open war put the Zapatistas on red alert. In response to international pressure, the government claimed to be applying the Federal Law of Firearms and Explosives to disarm paramilitaries. But they were really applying the law only as a form of harassment against Zapatista communities.

When I came into Roberto Barrios in December, a week after the Acteal murders, loaded down with seeds for the

community garden, my friend Trinidad greeted me at the entrance. He stood near the hand-painted sign, a tall, stocky *campesino*, muscular, with kind eyes and a long hunting knife at his belt.

“Como estás?” I greeted him warmly, relieved to have successfully passed through the army base and crossed the river. Trinidad smiled, shaking my hand. “*Pués, aquí, jodido pero acostumbrado.*” Just here, screwed but used to it.

This time, coming into the village in March, Trinidad’s not here to welcome me, because he’s dead. He was killed two days ago by machete blows to the head, along the road just above the army base. The killers were leaders of a local paramilitary group, *Los Chinchulines*, similar to those who killed with impunity in Acteal, in Sabanilla, in Nueva Esperanza, in Tila, in Agua Blanca, in San Geronimo Tulija, and who will continue killing as long as the government and the press continue to portray the Zapatistas as the source of violence in Chiapas. They are *Priistas*, supporters of the PRI, the [then] ruling party. In exchange for their support, the government, by way of the soldiers who surround these villages, gives them guns, trains them to

kill, allows them to take what they can and what they want. They are the local enforcement team of the global massacre known as neoliberalism.

Trinidad’s nickname was Trino, which in Spanish means the warble or trill of birdsong. The name fit him – he was gentle like that. After working on the village water system or in the gardens I sometimes looked for Trino in the community’s library. He could often be found there studying by lamplight, reading books on history or newspapers brought in by the international observers, or recent *communiqués* from Subcomandante Marcos.

The first time I met Trino he led me for a walk around the village. We walked down to the river, to the waterfalls where the jungle’s limestone shelf falls away in steps below towering *ceiba* trees and swallows make their nests in holes at the water’s edge. He told me a story:

“In 1992, after the government changed our constitution so that they could buy and sell our lands, some men came to the village. They were dressed like men from the city, we’d never seen them before. They said they came to help us, that

in Toronto, Canada against proposed cuts in social services, including changes in child care benefits which would no longer grant teenage single mothers free day-care.

>> **August** >> Coal miners in the Ukraine go on strike for back pay, higher wages and pensions, and better medical benefits. “I haven’t been paid in two months,” says Aleksy Tsybin, a miner from the eastern town of Makayevke. “This is a gross violation of workers’ rights.”

The miners, who have launched sporadic strikes at some of the country’s 246 mines in the past few weeks, are also demanding more control over the industry, such as setting coal prices and their own wage scale. The miners’ union has warned the government that a broader strike is likely in the winter if negotiations collapse.

>> **August 5** >> In a campaign to get multinational corporations out of India, the Karnataka Rajya Raitha

Sangha (KRRS, Karnataka State Farmers Association), a ten million strong direct action movement of Indian farmers, manages to close down India’s first Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet on health grounds. At the same time billboards belonging to KFC owner PepsiCo are destroyed by activists throughout the state, while the KRRS sets up training centres in organic agriculture and seed banks. The KFC eventually reopens under full-time guard.

they wanted to bring money and work to Roberto Barrios. They said they knew about our beautiful waterfalls and that they wanted to build a hotel for tourists right here, looking over the falls. They said the hotel would bring jobs and money, that it would be good for the village, that it would be development in a positive way.

“We had a community meeting that night to talk about it. And we agreed what we thought would happen. They would come with their men to plan the hotel and we would go to work building it. We would work for them like slaves levelling the ground and putting up the building, and they would try to trick us and pay us in liquor. And we would build the hotel, and then we would build a big fence around it, and then a big fence around the waterfalls, and once it was built they would make us pay to come in. And if we want to bathe in the river and wash our clothes in the river they would try to make us pay for the water in the river and they would not let us over their fence.

“So we made a decision. We told them to leave and never come back. And we told them to tell all of their other friends in the hotel business to not bother coming here, because our waterfalls are not for sale, and neither are we.”

Arriving two days after his death, on 17 March 1998, a sea of familiar faces was gathered together in the *Aguascalientes*, the community meeting centre at the entrance to the village, not in anticipation of our arrival, but in expectation of police, soldiers, or paramilitaries to continue the wave of violence. Getting down from the jeep, I greeted everyone

“Considered from a Western political perspective, the autonomous municipalities make no sense. They have no resources or real power or legal legitimacy, and they are dying, encircled by hunger, diseases, the paramilitary threat, and the security forces. However, for the indigenous peoples, they constitute an eloquent symbol of a culture which is resisting and defying the dominant culture, making a reality of a different way of understanding politics and of organizing the economy, society, and even human relations.” – *Servicio Internacional para la Paz*

sadly, with hugs and handshakes, in the mute way of greeting the families of the dead. I walked off up the road to find my friend Moises, *campesino* poet and songwriter, and spiritual brother to Trino.

Moises' house, like the rest of them, is a quickly built shack of hand-cut boards with a thatch roof and a mud floor. In the yard, marked off by a low stone wall, he had planted beans and amaranth among the weeds, epazote, and chrysanthemum that grew randomly around the muddy lot.

“Buenos tardes!” I called out from the yard, to make Moises and his family aware of my presence. He came out of the house barefoot and shirtless, followed by three of his sons, all calling out my name. The children were young, brown, mostly naked, their bellies swollen and round. In his hands Moises carried a few loose papers and a pen, and his eyes were wet from crying. He greeted me solemnly.

“I’m sorry I have nothing to offer you,” he said, “but I’m poor.”

“I just came to talk, to see how you’re doing.” I paused. “How are you doing?”

He held out the papers, and repeated, “I have nothing to offer you, but I can offer you my words.”

I looked at the papers, at his crooked handwriting and the misspelled Spanish text he’d been working on. “You’ve already written a song for Trino?” I asked.

“It’s not a song,” he said, “just something I wrote.”

He flattened out his papers and began reading.

“People accuse the Zapatistas of violence,” he read, “They say that we bring war and death to the communities. But in one year we have seen two murders in our community, in

one year we have seen two acts of war. Two brothers have been killed at the hands of paramilitaries, and not a single paramilitary has suffered in return. Who is violent here? Who is on the side of peace? Maybe after this everyone will see who is on the side of justice and who is on the side of war. Maybe Trinidad’s death at the hands of the *Priistas* will help them see.”

He put down the paper but continued talking. His initial shyness gave way to a flood of words.

“The *Priistas* have something wrong,” he said. “The *Priistas* think that when you throw a bit of grain to the ground, it dies there. In this they are wrong. When you throw a bit of grain to the ground, it takes root and grows there, and it comes back stronger than before. They will find out how wrong they are.”

He paused for a moment. In the jungle heat, the sweat dripping from my brow ran into my eyes, humid like his. A few yards away the river cut quietly through the afternoon, washing over the rocks towards the military post beyond. One of his children, his brown arms streaked with white patches of scabies, handed me a muddy wheel broken off a

>> **August 7** >> Oil workers in South Trinidad begin a six-week strike over wages, resulting in a seven per cent pay increase.

>> **August 7** >> One hundred thousand striking teachers, state workers, oil workers, and others march in San José, Costa Rica, in one of the largest demonstrations in 25 years. Some of the strikers occupy the Inter-American Court of Human Rights after the

march, saying they will remain until the government listens to their demands.

>> **August 8** >> Nearly 600,000 public workers in Turkey go on strike against the government’s austerity programme. Three days earlier, 100,000 workers marched through the capital city, Ankara, calling for an increase in the minimum wage, higher pay, and broader trade union rights.

>> **August 12** >> Nearly 1,500 landless peasants try to occupy the National Bank for Housing in Guatemala. Many are beaten by police. The peasants demand the land promised to 2,800 landless and homeless families. Lorenzo Pérez, a representative of the Guatemala Council for the Displaced, says 500,000 of the two million inhabitants of Guatemala City are displaced peasants who live in extreme poverty and are homeless.



Zapatista women defending their community. Chiapas, Mexico

wagon. I began to speak, but Moises cut me off.

"There is something that needs to be cleared up, a lie that has been told. The *Priistas* say that they have killed a Zapatista leader, that they have killed the Zapatista leader of this community. But they lie. They lie because the Zapatistas have no leaders. They think that by killing our leaders they can destroy the movement, but this is not so. It is true that there are people who command and people who obey, but those who command do it for those who obey, and those who obey do it out of pure will, out of service to the people. There are no Zapatista leaders, only Zapatistas, and so the *Priistas* have made a great mistake."

"I would have come for the funeral," I told him, "but we only heard yesterday. They say you gave a beautiful speech."

The three children, with bloated bellies and scabs all over their little bodies, ran around the yard with plastic bowls on their heads like helmets, laughing.

"Do you want to hear what happened at the funeral?" he asked, and before I had time to respond, he began the story.

"I was sitting there looking for something, anything, to help me understand what had happened, why they took

Trino and not me, and I couldn't find anything in Heaven or Earth that would make me understand. I was tired of looking at the body of my friend in its coffin and I looked up into the branches of a *guanacastle* tree. Sitting up there, on one side of the grave, was a toucan, and the toucan looked at the grave, and looked at me, and started bobbing its head back and forth the way they do when they're about to sing. And he started singing, and it made me angry and I thought, "Goddamned toucan, why can't you shut up! My brother is lying there dead and all you can do is sing." But he kept singing. And then, across from him, on the other side of the grave in an *higuero* tree, a *kashcan* started singing. It looked at the grave and it looked at me and it started singing. And then I thought, well maybe they have a message. So I listened, and I was relieved because I was tired of looking at the grave and at my friend's body in his coffin, and after a little while I thought they were telling me to pay attention to the trees. So I started paying attention to the trees, and I noticed that all the trees suddenly swayed in one direction, that a wind had come up out of the North. And then the wind died back, and the

>> **August 27** >> The Zapatistas hold the first international *consulta*, with the participation of over 1.2 million Mexicans, and more than 100,000 people from outside of Mexico. Voters overwhelmingly agree with the principal demands of the EZLN, call for a broad united opposition to struggle for those demands, and agree that women should be guaranteed equal representation and participation at all levels of civil and

governmental responsibility. In a country where the ruling PRI's own plebiscite on its economic plan only managed to achieve a voter participation of 600,000 voters in the spring of 1995, the Zapatista's success at dialogue with national and global civil society is illustrative of the will to change.

>> **September 27** >> Hundreds of Honduran students clash with police during protests against a rise in urban bus fares.

>> **September 28** >> More than half a million teachers in Russia go on a nationwide strike to protest against unpaid wages, low pay, and severe government underfunding of social services.

>> **September 28** >> 'Reclaim the Future', an alliance of Reclaim the Streets, rave activists, and the Liverpool dockers commemorate the anniversary of the dockers lock out. Activists break through fences, occupy cranes,

trees all swayed in another direction, with a wind from the West, where the sun sets. And then the trees all moved in a third direction with a wind that came up out of the South. And that wind died back, and then a fourth wind came up, out of the East, where the sun rises, and moved the trees in that direction. And I was watching the trees move in the wind when suddenly I heard thunder – and it hasn't rained here in two months – and then I saw rays of lightning shoot out of the clouds. And suddenly it started to rain, and just as it rained, they were lowering Trino's body into the grave, and I thought of his blood being washed off the earth by the rain, and I thought of the seeds planted that need the rain. Rain is a blessing.

“And a few minutes later the rain stopped and I heard the call of a howler monkey nearby. And all of this happened just like this, I can't share it with anybody but I can share it with you. And if they think our struggle is over because they killed Trino they're wrong, because the rain came and washed his blood off the earth and blessed the seed, and everything that I do, in my work and in my struggle, Trino is right here with me and we're going to struggle more than ever for justice. We don't want vengeance, but we want justice.”

Saying farewell to Moises, I made my way back to the Aguascalientes walking along the river, a wide foaming swath of blue that cuts through the jungle and marks the tentative border between the villagers and the war made on them by the government. The journalists I'd travelled with had

gotten their interviews, and I joined them for a visit to the village up the road, beyond the river and the army base, where the murder had happened.

Stopping by a tiny collection of shacks and a cement church straddling the road, we were invited to sit and share a cup of coffee. As in the village we'd just left, the air was thick with sorrow and fear. And here, like in the other village, mine was a familiar face, so the normally reticent villagers felt comfortable, maybe even relieved, to share their story with me.

We talked to Miguel, one of the eyewitnesses of the murder, a gentle, firm man who runs the co-operative store right along the road there. He told us the story of the *Priistas* harassing Trinidad in the truck on the way home from Palenque, how they pressured him to drink *aguardiente* with them. He told us how they threatened Trinidad, how they accused him of being a leader of the Zapatistas, saying: “You are going to witness another Acteal here in the North. We have orders.”

Miguel described how once drunk, Trinidad became docile, and how at a crossroads, the five *Priistas* pulled him out of the truck and threw him to the ground and whipped him across the face with a belt, putting his eye out. The driver and another *compañero* managed to get Trino back in the truck, and they took off with the *Priistas* running behind. When they caught up to the truck, at the stop in this village, Trinidad, drunk and half-blind, blood still rushing from his head, confronted the attackers. He named them, roaring that they were leaders of the *Chinchulines* paramilitary, and accused them of having killed his brother-

in-law a year previous.

“You’ll pay for what you’ve done!” he shouted, but he was surrounded by the five of them, wielding stones and machetes, and before he could fight back they had him on the ground and one of the men had taken a piece out of his skull with a machete. The five ran off up the road, towards the river and the army base that lay before it.

Miguel told the story in great detail, how he tried to stop the killers by insisting that violence only brings more violence, how his brother-in-law came running with a machete to join the fray but he begged him off, how Trino, splayed on the ground by the low concrete church, called out for water and repeated, “They’ve killed me, they’ve killed me, they’ve killed me,” until his one eye closed and his voice died into silence. He told us that he was scared, that the killers will come again.

Trinidad died that night in the hospital in Villahermosa, Tabasco, several hours away by truck. It was only the second time in his life that he’d left his home state of Chiapas. The first was a year earlier, to participate in the National Indigenous Congress in Mexico City.

Miguel continued: “They said they want another Achteal, and they mean it. They have the soldiers on their side and they want to kill us all. We don’t want war, we want peace, but they won’t leave us alone. Trinidad wasn’t from our village but he died here. His blood is on the ground here. The war is spreading. We’re afraid of more blood spilling here, we don’t want to fight. We will fight if they make us, but we only want peace. We only want peace.”

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Resources:

» **Excellent information on working as a peace observer in Chiapas: *The Zapatistas: A Rough Guide*, available from AK Press: www.akpress.org
Available online: www.chiapaslink.ukgateway.net/cho.html**

and fly the RTS flag from the roof of the corporate headquarters. The actions trigger a 24 hour strike by tug boat captains. No vessels enter or leave Liverpool, and Mersey Docks shares fall a further 14p, despite the company’s claims of continued normal operations.

>> **October 10** >> During their annual meetings in Washington DC, US, the IMF/WB are stunned by four days of demonstrations when activists from the Native

Forest Network and Earth First! hang banners from a crane at the construction site of the lavish new World Bank headquarters. A crowd of demonstrators gathers on the sidewalk, heckling World Bank and IMF employees on their way to work. Five people are arrested; the two white people are released while the three people of colour are charged.

>> **October 20** >> Security services disperse 20,000

Romanian students after three days of protest against Bucharest government control over education in the post-communist era. The students win a victory when the government withdraws controversial taxes on students who fail exams.

>> **October 31** >> Some 5,000 people participate in a ‘Death of Education March’ in Honolulu, US, to protest against budget cuts totaling \$50 million over two years.