

BEHIND 'ENEMY' LINES

By CATHERINE RYAN SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS, MEXICO—He had driven



Subcomandante Marcos, Lacandona Jungle, Mexico.

several hours on virtually impassable jungle roads for our meeting. He was sitting in his makeshift press salon—three benches on the dirt beneath a weathered tree and black tarpaulin tent in a primitive, adobe-hut Mayan village of Southern Mexico. It was a two-hour dirt-road drive into the neutral zone past the last military roadblock, and then a few hours' hike into the rebel-held territories. The tarpaulin

cracked in the late-afternoon wind, adding to the tension.

His black ski mask was in place; he sat with his elbows on his knees, arms and hands propping up his head, staring at the red clay earth beneath him, apparently lost in thought. Then he stood up and casually walked forward to shake hands, a mythic figure gently puffing at his trademark pipe, waiting while his heavily armed masked men rushed me up the hill. He wore an old brown cap adorned with three plastic stars, a uniform-brown flannel shirt, and a faded red-paisley bandanna slung about his neck. An automatic rifle and pistol hugged his sides. Suspenders, lined with rows of ammunition, held up his blue jeans. An even heavier bandolier of red-tipped shotgun shells crossed his chest. Six masked and uniformed bodyguards with Uzis and various other submachine guns stood stock-still in a circle around him, facing away.

This mysterious figure who calls himself "Marcos" is arguably the most influential—and certainly the most talked about—man in Mexico today. His image appears repeatedly on the front page of every newspaper and the cover of almost every magazine in the nation. Taxi drivers throughout the nation recite poetic passages from his latest communiqués. Society women see him as the new Latin American sex symbol, gossiping about his charm and his handsome eyes. He has become an instant folk hero here and throughout Latin America. He's being called the postmodern revolutionary: a well-educated, multilingual, press-savvy insurgent poet-rebel who, some say, may steal the historical spotlight from such revolutionary luminaries as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.

He may be the first revolutionary in history to deliver his declaration of war via fax.

It was almost a year ago—New Year's Day, 1994,—when he seemed to appear from nowhere, with several thousand troops, to wage war against the Mexican government. They launched their surprise uprising in Chiapas, the nation's southernmost and poorest state, capturing several large villages, including the picturesque tourist haven of San Cristobal de Las Casas, with its roughly 100,000 residents. They burned and axed government buildings and ran local police and politicians out of town, almost without firing a shot—until the army moved in. Several hundred people died in the subsequent conflict as the army drove the rebels back into their jungle strongholds. Many of the dead were civilians.

That day, mingling and conversing with the surprised and curious in San Cristobal's central park, Marcos emerged as the "liaison between two worlds," as he later described his role, "the voice of those who had no voice." Marcos calls himself the subcomandante of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), a guerrilla group taking its name and principles from Emiliano Zapata, the peasant hero of the 1910-1917 Mexican Revolution. Marcos is the EZLN's military chief. He says that he takes his orders from a collective leadership of indigenous Mayan commanders, for who he serves as spokesman.

In one day—the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect—Marcos and his army turned Mexi-

can politics upside down. Not only did they physically take control of part of Mexico, they also sent the Mexican stock market on a wild roller coaster ride from which it has yet to recover fully.

Moreover, they temporarily devastated the Mexican government's long struggle to win investor confidence in NAFTA, which the president proudly told the world would sweep Mexico up into the First World.

"First World, Ha!" Marcos said, calling on all Mexicans to rise up and "liberate" themselves from oppression and poverty. Then, day after day, throughout Mexico, peasants, students, intellectuals and teachers began painting banners and picking up placards that read: "First World, ha!" They started to march *en masse* through the streets of their hometowns and the capitals of every state, demanding an end to Mexico's long history of brutal repression and rampant corruption.

With his eloquence perhaps stronger than his army, Marcos waged a masterful media war during the first months of the rebellion. Mexican and foreign journalists camped out in primitive jungle conditions for weeks at a time in the hope of securing a fleeting audience with the masked enigma. He always made us wait—often finally radioing his "sincerest apologies" for his decision not to grant an interview: "Regretfully, we cannot guarantee your safety at this time."

I managed, somehow, to make my way through the dense security protecting this man, and finally through some of the mystery that surrounds him. Throughout this year, I have had the opportunity to spend time with Marcos in his Lacandona jungle stronghold, riding alongside him in the cab of his beat-up pickup on badly rutted primitive mountain roads; sitting up until all hours of the night at rickety tables perched on dirt floors under thatched roofs. During this time, I got to know him. We have had five lengthy interviews; the conversations below were drawn from those visits.

What parallels do you draw between the Zapatista ideology and other revolutions, for example, in Nicaragua, Cuba, or El Salvador?

No, there are no comparisons. Because the other revolutions aimed at taking power and creating a government. The EZLN

doesn't want to take power or set up a government. We want to ensure that there is democracy for those who participate in the political arenas. This is the fundamental difference. And in military strategy there is also no comparison. No, this is not like the Russian Revolution, not like the Chinese, the Nicaraguan, the Cuban, or the Salvadoran revolutions. We have created a new phenomenon, different in its social and military components and in its political agenda. This is what the people need to understand—that they can't view us through the glasses of the past. They have to understand us by looking toward a vision of the future. We are not fighting for socialism, but for a democratic space in which the people will be free to determine their political direction—be it socialism, social democracy, Christian democracy, liberalism, fascism. That is not up to us. It will be up to the people.

You are not an Indian. But you live here with these people, in the same conditions. Just how bad is life for the indigenous people of Mexico?

For example, if you become ill here in the Lacandon Jungle, if you have the flu or a fever or a stomach illness, you have to walk three days on terrible roads or no roads to come to a place where you can get a ride on a passing cargo truck, and then you must have the money to pay the driver five pesos. When you arrive at the municipal hospital, they won't take care of you because you are indigenous and don't speak Spanish. They leave you outside. This is *miseria*—misery. Because the land doesn't produce well, and because these people are confined to their poverty, the children have to work as farm laborers at eight and nine years old. They can't go to school even if there is a school nearby. This is *miseria*. Half the children that are born here die shortly after birth. The houses here are made of earth and sticks with no form of sanitation. This is *miseria*. The people here live like—live worse than—animals on a farm in developed countries. There, an animal has its food and secure shelter; here, the people don't have even those necessities.

Are the problems of the indigenous population here typical of those of indigenous populations in other parts of the world?

Well in reality we don't have good information about other indigenous people in other countries. But, of course, in the United States the indigenous people were murdered—disappeared. Only little quantities of people stayed. The white people put them in reservations. Like a museum in life.

But in Mexico the indigenous always were, and still are, the base of the growth of this country. I mean the Spanish men, instead of killing them, used them like animals. So, the Indian people here never disappeared. And also, the Indians' skills and their story never disappeared—their tradition and their force. I am talking about *ten million* Indians here in Mexico. And these ten million have a history of resistance, a story of fighting for their rights.

II.

Marcos seems young, perhaps in his late thirties. He won't say how old he is, or give away any information that might betray his identity. His eyes are brown with a faint hint of blue around the edges (not green: the doll-makers and his enemies have it wrong).

The Mexican government and its friends in the national media have ceaselessly attempted to discredit him. From the start, they tried to portray him as an outsider—describing him as a light-skinned, red-haired, foreigner; a communist subversive.

I have experienced first-hand the kind of slander campaign that the Mexican press, in collusion with the government, can wage. Months after our first meeting, we are sitting in the jungle again. He is laughing about a recent flurry of reports in the Mexican press which say that I am masquerading as a U.S. citizen and a journalist, but am actually a spy from Switzerland, and the brains behind the Zapatista revolution. He laughs about the articles that say I am Marcos' highest advisor; that I am the rebels' number one gun-runner. He seems to get a kick out of the fact that I am being portrayed in these reports, all attributed to "military intelligence sources," as a femme-fatal—Marcos' own modern-day Mata Hari.

Journalists working here often joke about phone taps, about being followed, about having notes and records searched. Those of us who have direct access to the guerillas presumably know more about the EZLN's plans than the Mexican military. So we are logical targets of military espionage.

Meanwhile, for his own unknowable reasons, Marcos is allowing fewer and fewer of us into the rebel territories. Those of us who do get in are keeping the rebels in the news, presumably much to the dismay of the Mexican government. Several of us have fallen victim to government-inspired character assassinations. Now, with my newly hired bodyguard at my side, I'm hoping this character assassination is as far as it will go.



Subcomandante Marcos and Catherine Ryan, Lacandon Jungle, Mexico.

The initial flood of military intelligence reports about Marcos weren't remotely accurate either. He's certainly not red-haired. About the only correct information about him is that he's relatively light-skinned—definitely not Mayan. And he acknowledges that he's traveled, earned a bachelor's degree, and that he speaks Italian, French, Portuguese, four of the local Mayan languages, and English.

But Marcos speaks Spanish with the accent of the purest Chilango, like a native born in the nation's capital, and he knows and seems to love Mexico with the zeal of a true patriot.

Do you think the majority of Mexicans are to some extent sympathetic to the EZLN?

We think the majority of the people in the world are sympathetic. Not only Mexicans. It's very difficult to find one person who says the demands of the Zapatistas are bad. Because these are the demands of every person in every part of the world. Some people say that the bad conditions of life make a revolution. Never, never, has a big war begun because of bad life conditions. All the great wars in the history of this world were for democracy. Even in the story of Mexico, the big wars began for democracy.

But some people mistakenly think, "These people have poor living conditions, so just give them some corn, give them some land, some food, some medicine, some doctors," and so forth. They don't understand that what is missing is democracy. I mean, the situation put us in this position. If we could fight for these demands in other ways, we would. But now we cannot. We must wait. Wait with ski masks. And we must fight

with guns. Because we don't have a choice.

What words do you offer those who may want to fight their own large or small battles against similar injustices and inequalities, here or abroad?

These are the words of the Zapatistas to the rest of the people in the world: We say that there is one part of human nature, one quality, that today in many people is often lost. Everyone is looking for richness and for success. But here, our people raise the past, the past of our people, our indigenous forefathers. They say the principle concern of a human being should be about dignity. So, people that want to fight against injustice, in any part of the world, must take a mirror and look at themselves, and decide: "I think that what I do, how I am, is against dignity, or is in favor of dignity."

We think that is the basic principle of a person: Dignity, and fighting for the dignity of all human beings. Not a fight for one social system, not a fight for one party or for one religion or for one race or skin color. No. The principle fight is the fight for dignity. Even if you are leftist, if you are rightist, if you are socialist, capitalist or Catholic or evangelical, or Protestant or white people or brown people, or red people or yellow people—doesn't matter. But what matters is that you are a person with dignity. And you cannot live with dignity if another person in any other part of the world doesn't have their dignity. You can't say "I have dignity but this person doesn't have any dignity." No, if this person doesn't have dignity, then even you don't. So you must fight for all people in all parts of the world to have dignity.

Article 27 of your constitution guaranteed Mexican citizens the "inalienable right" to own the subsistence land that they work. The president canceled that right to pave the way for NAFTA. One of your demands is that this part of the constitution be reinstated in its original form. It seems unlikely, however, that you will succeed in turning the clock back on this international agreement. Perhaps you are expecting too much?

See this land? The good land is in the hands of the wealthy ranchers. It is almost impossible to plant seeds on these steep plots, and, of course, the peasants don't have tractors or any sort of technology. So not only is this life miserable and hard, but the land doesn't have a good production average. These people harvest perhaps a half ton of corn per hectare, while in the fields owned by the ranchers, seven or eight tons per hectare are produced.

Salinas [Carlos Salinas de Gortari, president, 1988-1994] took power and basically said, "No more land for the peasants"—that was the only guarantee they ever had—and he didn't ask them first. He's protecting the NAFTA-related farming interests.

The peasants have been very upset. For years now they've been revolting in small groups and invading the land, taking the land, defending it with their guns. But now they're united. These people have nothing to gain from NAFTA and everything to lose. How are they going to compete, *indigena Chiapaneco and campesino Mexicano*, with the US and Mexican farmers? That is why we say NAFTA is a death sentence for the indigenous.

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Only one small sector of society is set to experience the modernity promised by NAFTA—the wealthy—who already enjoy that modernity. If this continues to happen, this country will break into pieces in civil war, just like Bosnia.

Mexicans emigrate to the "First World" at alarming rates, especially to North America. Do you predict that this trend will continue indefinitely? What will it take to stabilize the situation?

If peace is not achieved, the war will begin again. And the war means not only destruction, not only death and blood, it means an even greater movement of migration. Here in Chiapas, in the first ten days of fighting, about 40,000 people left these lands. But if this war spreads into all the country, into a large war, what will happen with North America?

The effort for peace doesn't concern only the Mexicans. It should also concern the people to the North. Mexico is under the feet of the United States. When Mexico begins to burn, America's feet will begin to burn. And the fight will begin to rise up and up. The people in the First World are accustomed to the worries of the era of the nuclear threat, about big armies like that of the ex-Soviet Union. But we are not that type of threat. The problems here come from little people with pretend guns made of carved wood. These people don't want power, or to conquer territory. But their gun is powerful. It is a weapon of ideas. So it is better that these ideas work peacefully. If there is not a peace, it must be in war. But we must do it. We need to do it. Perhaps peace is less expensive than war. I don't know. Maybe there will be war.

I think the Mexicans abroad understand that our fight is their fight; that we are struggling so that they won't have to leave this country in order to live like humans. They should be traveling north to visit as tourists, not as refugees, because this is their home, their country.

III.

Friends have told me the following story: The Cine Latino—one of Mexico City's oldest and grandest theaters—was overflowing with anxious, expectant moviegoers. The air was charged with the strange, uneasy mix of excitement and trepidation that inevitably accompanies anti-government affairs in any politically repressive land.

Outside, promotional posters were plastered to the walls by the

ticket booth; the title of the controversial documentary, *Voyage to The Center of the Jungle*, printed over a huge, color photo of hundreds of armed, masked rebels running to battle. I've seen the poster. Smaller photos surround the battle scene. In one, the sun streams through the trees in remote, guerrilla-held territory—far away from this comfortable old theater. In another, an indigenous Mayan woman, a lieutenant; beautiful, hard eyes looking out from behind her mask. In many of these photos, the emotional dichotomy permeating Mexico's current conflict is evident—the internal battle of traditionally peaceful native men and women forced to fight for their survival.

But to the crowd still milling about outside—those turned away from the premier of this sold-out show—one photo, at the bottom left of the poster, holds the most interest: a black-and-white picture of Subcomandante Marcos, his eyes staring out from a slit in his ski-mask. He looks off to the right; his gaze could rest at the end of a long journey; far down the road to a vision of a new Mexico.

Back inside the theater, the audience is growing restive. The curtains are still drawn across the screen. A small side table stands centered on an otherwise empty stage. On it, a telephone. Finally the telephone rings, and rings, and rings. The audience falls briefly but instantly silent; then the hum of voices swells back up again, all curious to know who is calling and why the delay.

Meanwhile, the documentary's producer walks in from the wings and strides to the table, answering the phone. (Quizzical expression): "Hello?"

"Hello," booms back a friendly male voice on the other end—the theater sound-system turned up to full volume for all the audience to hear.

A pause. Somewhere in the back of the theater a seat creaks slightly. No other sound, not a whisper.

"Who speaks?" asks the filmmaker in Spanish as the tension builds.

"Subcomandante Marcos," echo the loudspeakers, the voice instantly, totally drowned out by the crowd's screams, cheers, and wild cries of amazement. They can hardly believe what they're hearing; this unexpected, live connection with their Marcos, the man whose vast rebel territory is so poor and distant that its residents have never even benefited from mail delivery, let alone telephone service. How could this be? They listen with amazement to this call from the same land where the primarily Mayan Indian population usually walks barefoot, lives on a

monotonous diet of homegrown beans and hand-ground tortillas, and still depends entirely on horses and burros for transport.

The two men on the telephone banter back and forth. Marcos greets the crowd (his voice devoured again by that of the audience), and then the director asks Marcos the obviously pre-arranged question: "Have you seen the film?" Marcos, of course, answers that he's just received a copy, thank you. The boisterous listeners are still clamoring and chanting for more. Then men exchange their good-byes, the table and telephone are quickly carried off-stage, the curtain rises, and the documentary about the guerrilla uprising begins.

But far from that theater and its enormous city of 20 million, Marcos and the Zapatista Army have more pressing concerns. The peace talks have been stalled for months and no easy solutions to the conflict seem forthcoming. The notoriously oppressive Federal Army seems to be growing aggressive again. Inside the rebel camps, the phone call to the theater is immediately forgotten.

Marcos wastes no time taking advantage of his temporary access to the satellite telephone setup—trucked into the jungle and set up so that he could introduce the documentary. Its owners are on their way back to claim this elaborate, expensive machinery. He unabashedly makes a few more calls. No responses. He dials the United States this time, to California.

A few hours later, I'm half-listening to my telephone messages, distracted by other work. I half-hear Marcos' voice talking in the background. Wait a second. Rewind. It can't be. But that's definitely his voice, his way of talking. In heavily-accented English: "Well, this is a message for Miss Catherine Ryan from Subcomandante Marcos. I will call back at nine o'clock tonight. Nine o'clock. That's all. Over."

I check the fax machine, just in case. Nothing. Later, still waiting, I turn on the computer and surf through the Internet, looking for the latest news out of Mexico. A dismal new Marcos communique pops up. He accuses the government of attempting to provoke the rebels into renewed conflict.

I telephone my various editors, scattered throughout the country, and tell them about the call, the communique and the presumed stories to come. I leave messages for fellow journalists and friends and fax them the communique.

He doesn't call back. The days pass slowly, and I continue to wait. Finally, I head back to Mexico.

Why has this peace been so difficult to negotiate?

Well, the problem is that when we talked with the government in the first months of the conflict, we made a gentlemen's deal. We said that in the process of the dialog, both armies would stay in their place, and would not increase their forces. We agreed to give the peace talks a chance.

But since the 21st of August—when all the media said that Ernesto Zedillo won the presidential elections—then the movement of the federal army began again. They increased the number of soldiers that surround us to maybe about 50,000 men. You don't increase your forces if you want peace. You increase your forces if you want military solutions.

We were not contesting the presidential elections. We did say that the local elections for governor were fraudulent. That we can prove. But about the national elections, we don't have the means to prove anything. But we tell the people about this increase in the federal army, and we said that the military checkpoints are again aggressive with the civilians that live here. The air surveillance began, breaking the cease-fire accords. The planes of the military began aggressively flying over us. Perhaps six hours ago you saw one of those planes? So, while the government said: "I want the peace," the facts said: "I want the war. I will eliminate you."

And what if you fail? What if the government refuses to meet your demands?

The government might try to eliminate the Zapatista Army. We could all be destroyed. But others will rise again, because this political system is the basis of all the injustice that we are suffering. Here it is the Indian people who suffer; in other areas perhaps poor white people, but all suffer injustice. Because this government is part of one party. It must cut its relation with the party. I mean the PRI [the Institutional Revolutionary Party] must be a party, like another party, and must fight in an equal situation with other parties. Maybe it will win—maybe—if there is a good platform for the people. But it should not win because of the aid of the government.

So how many years, how many days, how many hours, how many minutes can you stay in this situation? We cannot trust that agreements with these people will be upheld. Many foreigners see only the part of Mexico that has a mask; a beautiful mask; a modern mask. But behind this mask is a monster. Really a monster, that is capable to kill to stay in power.

Will you project your own future, five or ten years down the line—speculate about what role you might be playing in Mexico's political scene?

This is very difficult to guess. Who knows if Marcos will live another five days? And what role will he fill within the EZLN, if it obtains its goals, and if Marcos is still living? Well, that is a very futuristic question to ask of someone who isn't sure he has a future.

Why did you, the person who we call Marcos, give up your world, your other life, to come here to this remote jungle and fight with the indigenous and the campesinos of Mexico?

Well, it is a real problem for us to talk about this point. I can tell you there are three persons in Marcos. One Marcos is the person you are talking with now. This person doesn't exist. You are talking now with the Zapatista Army. With the voice of the Zapatista Army. With the eyes of the Zapatista Army. With the face of the Zapatista Army. Marcos is only a ski mask, and behind the ski mask is the Zapatista Army—the Indian people.

You can go to any other region of the Zapatista Army and you will listen to the same words, but in different dialects, in Mayan languages, and in different words. But the ideas and the way of thinking are the same.

There is another Marcos that is behind the ski mask; the Marcos that knows the people here with a face, without a ski mask. This Marcos was born ten years ago here and became like an Indian, but with lighter skin. This Marcos is known by the people as the military chief. He is knowledgeable

about military ways. He has organized the army for ten years. He teaches all the officers to fight. This Marcos has a responsibility, a military responsibility, to obey the committee—the commanders above him. He receives general decisions from the indigenous leaders. And he must give accounts to the chiefs. And he cannot take political initiatives. I must talk with my people, saying: "This is the situation, what can we do?" I cannot say: "Vote for this candidate." I cannot say "Begin again the dialogue" or "sign the peace," and so forth. Marcos must ask these questions to each member of the committee.

And there is another Marcos. The third, *tercero* Marcos. The person that came here. This person was dead ten years ago. Doesn't exist anymore. So don't worry, don't speak about him. It's a very hard question.

IV.

Today, December 14, this beautiful city of San Cristobal is again teeming with armored personnel carriers and swarming with federal troops, as it was during the first months of this year. Soldiers stand at the ready up and down these twisting cobble-stone streets, here and throughout all of Chiapas. Marcos' latest communiqué, released Monday, warns that a return to battle is "imminent."

Amid a sentiment of failed national reforms and still-stalled peace negotiations, two governors were sworn into office December 8. Eduardo Robledo, the PRI candidate, who many believe "won" the elections through fraud, was

sworn in "legally." Amado Avendano, the well-liked, heavily supported opposition candidate who officially lost, was "sworn-in" by thousands of his supporters.

I'm sitting on a curb outside Avendano's impromptu office in San Cristobal, amid a long line of indigenous peasants all waiting to meet their new governor. Fifty-eight of Chiapas' 110 municipal districts have pledged their allegiance to Avendano, and the word from Mexico City, from a government afraid of additional conflicts, is that Avendano's parallel governorship will be respected, although not officially recognized, at least for the time being.

So, today, during this Mexican standoff, in this surreal nation, amid a morose mood of dwindling hopes, two governors struggle to maintain order, and two armies prepare for war. While all sides wait for a miracle—someone or something to save the day—the ambiguous countdown has nevertheless begun.

Marcos writes vaguely in Monday's missive: "We are advising you in advance, because we are good people. We lose our advantage of surprise, but then, we have always been at least technologically at a disadvantage." To those of us caught between these two worlds within Mexico, it seems a desperate suicide mission for the rebels to really resume the war—a doomed grand finale; although this struggle seems far from over.

Marcos signs the communiqué with a melancholy good-bye; a poem; and then an exhortation that his readers "don't lose themselves in skepticism, or in the sweet



Catherine Ryan

Time for lunch. A baby nurses while his Mayan mother, an EZLN rebel, waits in line for her lunch rations.

prison of conformity; keep seeking something in which to believe, something for which to fight."

He wasn't so poetic earlier that same day, however, when he radioed back his response to my latest interview request. I was again behind "enemy" lines, again searching in the jungle for the elusive Subcomandante. Major Moises—whom we call *therebelde amable* (the friendly rebel)—was manning the radio outpost. His dark eyes, which usually twinkle from behind his ski mask, weren't twinkling as he repeated Marcos'

terse message to me: *Demasiado tarde*. Too late.

Moises was concerned. He suggested I leave. It was still more than a five-hour drive to get out of the territory. "The war could start at any moment," he said. We exchanged a sad glance. This was not the way it was supposed to be.

But I don't think we've seen the last humble yet noble men and women in *rostros*—without faces. As Marcos says, "If we die, generation after generation will continue to rise up beneath us, and generation after generation will continue to fight for dignity."