



CATHERINE RYAN

cc Catherine Ryan. In since Dr. Pastor explained to you the necessity of our being invited by both sides in order to mediate a dispute. My hope is that Marcos will be able to negotiate a successful settlement leading to a genuine improvement in the lives of those who trust his leadership. Let us know if we can be helpful. Best wishes,
Jimmy Carter

URGENT

ACAD unofficially and off the record. It concerns

Catherine-

Enjoyed meeting you very much. Enclosed is a true letter personal comment on your letter

Bob



MEXICO

THE BLOODY ROAD TO DEMOCRACY
CATHERINE RYAN REPORTS FROM CHIAPAS

RECLAIMING THE REVOLUTION

Mexico's Indigenous Rebellion Has Shaken the Country to Its Foundation—and the Rumbling May Have Only Just Begun

BY CATHERINE RYAN

ZAPATA LIVES

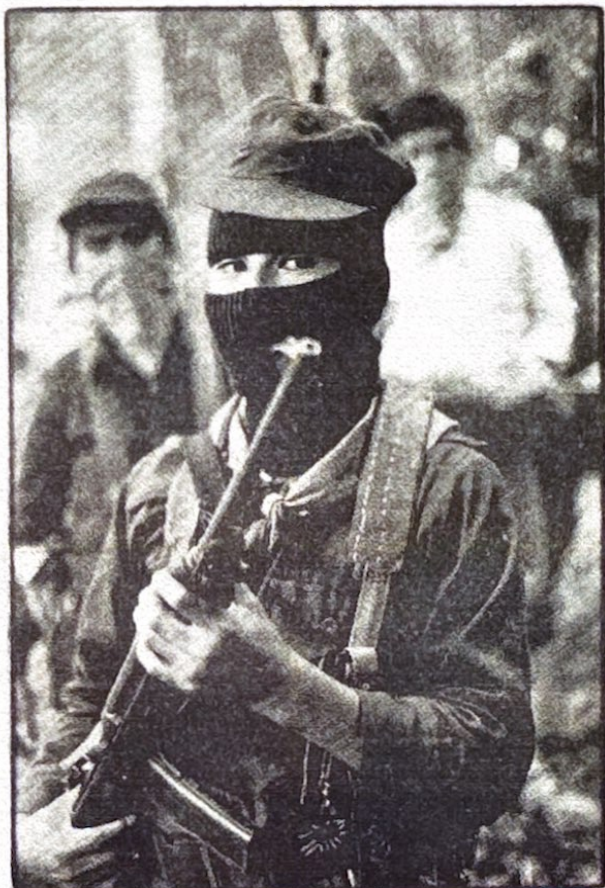
SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS, Mexico—Again, this morning, just before sunrise, the same dark figure scurried down the frigid, empty, narrow stone-paved streets of San Cristóbal. He furtively glanced around, then swiftly reached up and tacked a paper sign to the peeling wall of this ancient hotel. It read: "¡VIVA ZAPATA!" He slipped the remaining pages under his serape and vanished around the corner. Minutes later, the constantly patrolling, combat-clad, helmeted, AK-47-toting *federales* tore the poster down, crumpled it up, and tossed it to the gutter. Across from this window, on the opposite side of the street, the walls have been variously sanded, painted over, and even chipped away where a blood-red "¡VIVA EZLN!" is repeatedly repainted and then obliterated.

The streets in populated areas throughout this southernmost state of Chiapas and all over Mexico are filled with protesters and lined with political graffiti. The list of demands includes an end to notoriously corrupt elections and commonplace tortures and assassinations (490 professors, aspiring politicians, journalists, and indigenous leaders have been assassinated since the election of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari in 1988); the release of Mexico's thousands of political prisoners; the redistribution of wealth to the 61.9 percent of the population who live in "extreme poverty"; the recognition of indigenous rights; and, now, fulfillment of the battle cry of the rebel Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN)—effectively the realization of all of the above.

In this large, remote village of nearly 100,000, tucked away in the fertile but impoverished heights of the rugged sierras, the *federales* humbly try to remove all evidence of insurgency before it reaches the cameras and notepads of the 570 journalists who clog the streets around the municipal palace and neighboring cathedral. It was here, on New Year's Day, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, that the mostly indigenous Mayan Tzeltal "Zapatistas" launched their bloody uprising, first seizing control of this beautiful tourists' haven, and then storming, capturing, and for more than a week occupying five more highland cities and *pueblos*.

And it is here, during this tentative cease-fire, that swarms of military police now roam the streets. They form a continuous, 24-hour human barricade around the cathedral where three key figures—the mysterious hooded Zapatista known as *Subcomandante Marcos*; the bishop of San Cristóbal, Samuel Ruiz, who is considered sympathetic to the Zapatistas; and the commissioner for peace and reconciliation, Manuel Camacho Solís—have been meeting since Monday, February 21, in an attempt to reach a peaceful resolution to Mexico's political crisis.

The Zapatista representatives emerged from their mountain-jungle strongholds on Sunday, arriving in a San Cristóbal overcrowded with journalists, photographers, and peasants visiting from the surrounding countryside. All waited in uneasy anticipation for the rebels to arrive, pushing and shoving for hours to secure a good view of the road ahead. The guerrillas finally sped into the city, passing through the crowds and pulling up to the doors of the



Zapatista rebel in the Lacandona Jungle, February 1994

cathedral. Upon first spotting the caravan, a few peasants tentatively began to applaud, keeping a close eye on the notoriously repressive *federales*. After a few muffled shouts of "¡Viva Marcos!" and "¡Viva EZLN!" the sea of onlookers broke into an excited, spontaneous uproar of cheers and shouts of admiration and support. The scandalously light-skinned Marcos came forward; he was armed, hooded, with a bandolier of bullets across his chest and a heavy pack and gear. Mar-

cos, also known as "The Poet" for his eloquent manifestos, turned for a moment to wave to the crowd, and then, with *Comandante Ramona* and the rest of his envoy, passed immediately into the cathedral.

The surrounding streets were filled with a crush of curious spectators until well into early morning, but the Zapatistas did not reappear. Unarmed *federales* composed only the first ring of a tight security block around the city's central plaza and cathedral. A few feet inside their ranks,

hundreds of human-rights representatives from different organizations throughout Mexico, calling themselves *Conpaz*—meaning "with peace"—formed a second shield. Still another barricade, this one made up of Red Cross volunteers, formed a third circle of protection. The security cordon still surrounds the cathedral night and day, and the curious and mostly pro-EZLN *campesinos* continue to descend upon San Cristóbal.

Meanwhile, the dialogue continues. But there is little chance that the administration of Salinas de Gortari will satisfy the rebels' demands, because it is unlikely that Marcos, already a hero to many, and his army will accept anything less than a complete overhaul of the flagrantly corrupt nation that is Mexico. Because the world is watching, Marcos holds the cards. And it is the Mexican government, not Marcos, that is in a hurry to resolve this national emergency.

After more than a decade of planning, and through a combination of brilliant political strategy and perfect timing, the Zapatistas achieved in days a series of victories heretofore unattained by any such insurrection in this hemisphere. They captured and held six cities, including San Cristóbal—a city ten times as populated as any occupied in battle by the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. And, by coordinating their attack to coincide with the implementation of NAFTA, they managed to demolish twelve years of carefully built-up investor confidence, a confidence they expected would facilitate the foreign buy-up of Mexico. The rebels also ensured their own relative security by waiting until January 1, the day when the forces of power and influence in the North were looking to the South.

In short, the Zapatistas accomplished the unimaginable: they turned Mexican politics inside out and shook the very foundations of the repressive, six-decade-long hegemony of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The Zapatistas have already succeeded in bringing about change within the president's cabinet, and this without trying. Although Salinas de Gortari has far from bowed to Marcos' demands for his resignation, on the eleventh day of the uprising, watching his NAFTA achievements slipping away, the president attempted to pacify the rebels by firing some of his key hard-line ministers, replacing them with liberals who enjoy more widespread respect. Because of the Zapatistas, Mexicans from the Yucatán to Jalisco, from Chihuahua to Chiapas, are for the first time in several generations talking seriously, and enthusiastically, about the potential downfall of the PRI.

The Zapatista rebellion is no mere "indigenous uprising," nor is the EZLN just a new version of the socialist and communist Third World guerrilla movements to which Latin America has long been accustomed. Ironically, what the Zapatistas call for is simply adherence to the principles upon which the Mexican Constitution was founded. Theirs is the same battle for liberty,

democracy, and equality theoretically won by the triumphant heroes of the Mexican Revolution. And it is because their crusade is a "just war," a pro-democracy war, that they have captured the attention of all of Mexico and much of the world. Indeed, because of the perceived legitimacy of their demands, they may eventually succeed in bringing about dramatic political change here in Mexico.

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With appeasement unlikely, the current cease-fire and daily dialogues could conceivably drag out until the presidential elections in August. But come August, even if the elections are clean, this fragile peace will likely shatter if the *campesinos* are the least bit displeased with Salinas de Gortari's successor. And if the elections are again perceived as fraudulent, then not only Chiapas, but all of this vast, fermenting, rugged nation, will likely explode.

The *campesinos* might not wait until August, however. And even if the PRI manages to negotiate a settlement with the Zapatistas in Chiapas, the current crisis will not be over. This entire country is ready to ignite. The state of Oaxaca, bordering Chiapas to the west, may well be the first to join the Zapatistas, or at least to follow their lead. Oaxaca is one of Mexico's poorest and most repressed states. It leads the nation in political assassinations. Fifty outspoken indigenous Triqui leaders, 40 *campesinos*, and more than 80 professors have been assassinated there since 1980. Repressed but never entirely silenced, numerous human-rights groups and political organizations have for years staged daily rallies in front of the state capital's municipal palace. As throughout Mexico, these groups are now taking advantage of the dramatically increased security recently afforded by the international spotlight that keeps the Mexican military in check. The rallies are growing in size and frequency, often bringing traffic to a standstill for hours as placard-waving crowds parade about, crisscrossing the capital city.

Tuesday, February 22, was one such day. The regular gathering of professors, protesting low pay, poor working conditions, jailings, tortures, and assassinations, camped out the night before with their flags, banners, and loudspeaker systems, just down the street from a contingent of several hundred *campesinos*. The *campesinos* were airing their many grievances and marching in support of their *hermanos*, their "brothers," in Chiapas. The peasant march was led by two *campesinos* carrying a banner painted with the image of the peasant hero of the Mexican Revolution, Emiliano Zapata. A group of students had been lodged in front of the state-government headquarters in the city's *zócalo*, or public square, for more than a month, but they folded up their banners and posters the evening before, temporarily stepping out of the limelight to make way for the others. The students, however, were still out in force, still protesting and chanting against injustice and corruption, this time just a block away.

Oaxaca's former archbishop, Bartolomé Carrasco Briseño, is one of many locals who say that *campesino* groups in the mountains of Oaxaca are armed and ready to rebel if land disputes are not quickly resolved. The land-dispute issue is one of the biggest among Mexico's *campesino* population and is one of the topics now being discussed by the Zapatistas and Camacho Solís in San Cristóbal. As part of the changes brought about to facilitate the implementation of NAFTA, Salinas de Gortari reshaped an article in the Mexican Constitution, permitting the sale to private interests of *ejido* property. Mexico's *ejidos*, communal *campesino* cooperatives, were instituted by the leaders of the Mexican Revolution when they granted community-property title to those who worked the land. Until now these properties could not be sold to private buyers, only to the Mexican government, and only with the permission of community leaders. While most *ejido* populations have long suffered under the exploitation and often heavy-handed rule of the wealthiest community chieftains, or *caciques*, the peasants at least knew that their land was relatively secure.

The *caciques* still retain authority over land sales, but now they are also allowed to sell to private interests. So the *campesinos* have good cause for alarm. With the majority of Mexicans already living in abject poverty, and often without the privileges of education, NAFTA—which many believe will mean the loss of their homes—is considered one straw too many.

"Salinas de Gortari has sold our country. Mexico will turn into one big, American maquiladora.... Without a switch to real democracy, without our own government's investment in our own land, we will lose this competition with the U.S."

—Mihuatlán Municipal Secretary Incocete Cortes García

THE ROAD TO SAN CRISTÓBAL

On February 11 in the Oaxacan city of Mihuatlán de Porfirio Díaz, located south of the capital amid infertile bean fields and once-forested, now barren hills, the municipal president looks worn, tired, and serious. Although part of the notoriously corrupt system, he's one of the "good guys," according to some protesters in the capital. "I look serious?" he asks. "Well, look around," he sighs, "what do you see? This isn't just poverty, this is misery. We're working hard in this town to raise

are for hunting, and they are relics from 1910. But the people are angry. Who knows what will happen here. All the *campesinos* in Mexico are ready to rise up."

I mention that I'm on my way to Chiapas. His eyes light up and his Spanish blurs as he speaks faster and faster. "Chiapas woke up the *campesinos*," he says. "Nobody has ever believed in the political parties. They are all corrupt, are all in some way controlled by PRI, or they would not be allowed to be parties. But now we are doing something about it. Before now, here and throughout much of Mexico, we have practiced resistance through abstinence. The people only vote for the municipal president. They refuse to participate in fraudulent elections."



Campesino with Zapata banner at rally in Oaxaca, February 22, 1994

our deplorably low standard of living. But we're running on empty. This is a lonely road. We receive no help, only hindrance." He thinks NAFTA is Mexico's only hope to *subir*, to lift up. His second-in-command, Municipal Secretary Incocete Cortes García, is younger, more hopeful, more talkative, and he doesn't agree with his superior about NAFTA. "Salinas de Gortari has sold our country. Mexico will turn into one big, American maquiladora," a production-line factory. "This country has long been owned by the *caciques*, the handful who control all the money and keep the rest of us in virtual serfdom. PRI is corrupt to the core. Without a switch to real democracy, without our own government's investment in our own land, we will lose this competition with the U.S. This land is burned out. It is no longer productive. We don't even have money for fertilizer, and we still till the fields by hand and by oxen. We have not advanced. We are not ready."

Then he speaks excitedly of the Zapatista uprising, and confirms that the *campesinos* of Oaxaca are ready for insurrection. Are they armed? "They are armed, but not necessarily for revolution. Their weapons

minably while the *federales* search us and the truck, and then radio data from our credentials to faraway receiving stations. We sleep where we can—sometimes in the cottages of hospitable peasants, or on the lumpy bags heaped up in the back of the truck, or in facility-less "hotels" that would elsewhere be termed shacks. Visiting the towns and cities

taken by the rebels in the first days of the uprising, we see the machine-gun-riddled marketplaces and rocket-blasted villages in the heights of the mountains. We speak with stand-ins for municipal presidents whose bosses are conveniently still staying out of town, and we stay up late each night talking with residents who witnessed the "war" firsthand—some who saw the Zapatistas shoot local policemen, and others who watched local policemen and *federales* spray tied-up rebel prisoners with bullets.

In Ocosingo, a town about one hour from San Cristóbal, the public marketplace is pockmarked with bullet holes. The vendors have repaired their stalls and are again selling their wares. But they are afraid to talk. One woman selling fruit says that not too many people saw what happened. The sellers abandoned the market when the shooting began. But she saw everything. She knows the various spots where the Zapatistas were gunned down, but she won't show me—I'm a *gringa*, and the *federales* are watching. She takes Cortes García on an inconspicuous tour. Meanwhile, I pay 50 *centavos* to the man in charge of the filthy public restrooms. In the small, empty, dark women's room, I take my camera out of my pack. The walls and ceiling have been pierced by numerous bullets. The blood has been scrubbed off the concrete floor. Before I can take a photo of this documented massacre site, a guard comes in and pulls me out. "No!" he says. "The municipal president said no!"

In tiny, nearby Altamirano, the truck from Mihuatlán backs up to the municipal palace. The Zapatistas partially destroyed the building with fire and axes when they took the town. Hundreds of peasant refugees gather about, hoping for a handout. The town councilmen bring out lists of the names of those who continue to flee their bombed-out villages, seeking refuge in this town square. One by one they are each doled out a portion of the supplies from Mihuatlán. In the end there are extra sacks of rice and beans.

The mood in Altamirano is hostile. Not all these villages side with the rebels. This one doesn't. "No pictures," says the man who seems to be in charge. "Guera" (white girl) and "Gringa," hiss the filthy, barefoot dispossessed as I walk by. The refugees sit and mill about in the crowded town center; almost every young girl has a sister or brother wrapped up and strapped to her back, and usually another in tow.

Later in the afternoon the sombrero-wearing townsmen all seem noticeably and somehow oddly drunk. The town square reeks of alcohol. The *federales* lounge in the shade against adobe walls and watch from parapets on the roofs of a few houses. A group of six and seven-year-old students, wearing the only clean clothes I've seen here, form an orderly parade line, carrying placards around the square. The placards praise the military and thank the *federales* for guarding their town. The owner of a dry-goods store says that many residents participate in these demonstrations because they fear being denounced as Zapatistas. Several armored tanks are parked nearby.

A truck full of university students from Mexico City, on their way to deliver food and clothing donations to the nearby *ejido* of Morelia, and a following caravan of reporters and photographers are halted by townsmen in front of the provisional municipal offices. An argument ensues, and the gathering crowd of locals force the students to unload their cargo. "Morelia sides with the Zapatistas," says the little mustachioed man disdainfully, who again seems to be in charge.

The *federales* slink away to watch from afar, and the doors to the provisional municipal offices shut.

Now the mustachioed man has a megaphone. He's definitely trying
(continued on next page)

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Zapatistas

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to make trouble. Dusk falls and then darkness, and the nervous students are still struggling to unload their many heavy sacks against the press of the crowd that hems them in. Now the onlookers begin chanting, accompanying the man with the megaphone, angrily and excitedly condemning the students for attempting to bring food to the neighboring community. "Don't take anything more to the Zapatistas," shouts the man with the mustache. "We are just as hungry as them. And we deserve more than them." (He doesn't mention that sacks of food are left over from this morning's delivery). Drunken townsmen suddenly jump on the hood of the truck and climb up and over the wood-slatted sides of the bed of the truck, grabbing the frightened students and frisking them, searching their backpacks and inside the cab for "arms on the way to the Zapatistas." None are found. My friends from Miahuatlán try to convince me to leave as I snap a few shots. "You're a *guerra*, better get out." A few photographers are attacked and their cameras smashed. The mustachioed man shouts, this time at the men he's incited. "Enough," he says. Someone has phoned Camacho Solís, and the government negotiator intervenes via telephone to demand that the students be allowed safe passage out. The caravan finally leaves, with angry townsmen pressed up against the windows of the vehicles, a few locals still banging sticks against the hood and fenders of the truck.

Down an unlit side street, an aggressive peasant, speaking a mix of broken Spanish and one of the 20 indigenous local languages, pulls me aside and demands to know what I'm doing. No, I'm not taking photos. No, I'm not wandering around, I'm going back to my room. Yes, I'm the *guerra* who came with the donation for his fellow refugees early this morning. He lets me pass.

The next day, while the group from Miahuatlán attends human-rights meetings in another town, Rodolfo Valtierra, the Mexican war photographer who's just returned from rebel hideouts in the jungle, suggests that we visit San Juan Chamula. We take a taxi to the tiny *pueblo*, which is inhabited only by indigenous people, and flash our Mexican press credentials to the *federales*, who wave us through. The town is almost deserted. Valtierra grabs my camera and stuffs it in his sack. We get out. The taxi waits. There are no cars, buses, or other taxis here.

A group of young girls immediately attacks me, pulling my hair to braid it from all sides. "*Un peso*," they plead, "*solo un peso*." Another group descends on Valtierra, tying hot-pink and sea-blue cloth belts around his waist and arms. "*Cinco*

pesos." Despite my shouts of protest, they continue to hang onto me, tying knots in my hair from all directions—and the pack of girls keeps growing in number. They're desperate. No tourists lately.

We frantically try to get away. Paying four pesos to get in, we take refuge in the huge, weathered cathedral, which has no priest. Our eyes adjust to the eerie space. A beat-up old cross—a double for the original—leans at an angle against the right-hand wall. Rings of tall, spindly candles are arbitrarily grouped here and there, stuck to the tiled floor, casting a ghostly, quivering glow on the tall walls, but not quite crawling up to the ceiling. There are no pews or chairs. Fresh green pine needles are strewn about. Old wooden saints in tall glass boxes lean up against all the walls, and the chanting of the believers, in their incomprehensible language, echoes and ricochets like something out of a bad dream. In a dark corner, a music box plays an obnoxiously tinny "Jingle Bells" over and over. So this is what conquered the Americas. A woman, hunched over on the floor, sacrifices a chicken. Other peasants are kneeling, heads bobbing up and down, the women sobbing and wailing. Presumably they have lost relatives in this bloody insurgency. Who's to know? No one speaks Spanish.

A dirty, ragged little boy leaves his mother and wanders over. "*Sí*," he says, smiling. Good, someone does speak Spanish. But he answers "*sí*" to everything. What is his name? He holds out his cupped hands. "*Sí. Peso. Un peso*." Finally we leave this strange, dark mix of Catholicism and witchery. The girls lean up against the taxi, laughing and saying they will not let us in. But finally we manage to open the doors and escape.

MORNING IN CHIAPAS

Today, back in San Cristóbal, the sun has finally risen. Near the cathedral, outside the lines of military police, the peasants who are camped on the sidewalk are starting to wake. An indigenous woman pushes traditional, brightly colored cloth dolls up to my face. "Marcos," she says, "*Cinco pesos. Subcomandante Marcos*." She points out that she's sewn a tiny black ski mask onto the doll's face. Nearby, a small, gaunt, whiskery man leans against a column, just out of earshot of the guards. He speaks Spanish. He seems to know most of the peasants. Is he a Zapatista? He keeps looking away, toward the row of military police. "Who do you think we are?" he mumbles, barely motioning sideways, presumably pointing to the other peasants. "The other day you watched with your cameras while a handful of masks entered the church. But the Zapatistas are many, and we are *everywhere*." ■