

# **The Assault on Autonomous Education in Southeast Mexico**

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## **Zapatista Autonomous Education**

Before the Zapatistas set up their own education system, many communities had no schools at all. Others had poorly-funded, and run, government schools, many of which had teachers irregularly, if at all. Often, lessons were not taught in the communities' indigenous languages, nor were they based on the local customs and traditions. The children had to wear uniform.<sup>1</sup> So, "we decided to set up our own autonomous schools".

"The difference between the government schools and the autonomous schools is that in our schools we are working for our brothers and sisters. The government imposes education designed for the rich, it imposes its own ideas. It imposes another language. We develop our own language, our own culture." In their own schools they can learn their own history, how to care for their land, in their own way and according to their own needs.

Education in these schools is free and is open to all ages and all people, regardless of whether they are Zapatistas. There is no competition; learning is a shared experience. The schools are staffed by education promoters, based on the belief that education is a collective experience. "The education promoters work voluntarily. They are not working for a wage or for personal interest, they are acting on their conscience, teaching for the sake of the community." Usually, the community provides food and shelter for the promoter. "Here we share learning and learn from each other, it's not like the promoters know everything. Even the youngest child can contribute."

Education is based on the needs of the community, and hours are agreed accordingly. Pupils are educated to take up positions of responsibility and to work for the good of the community. "We want our children to learn about freedom and dignity and to value all human beings." Agroecology is an important part of the school program: how to work the land and to care for the earth, how to save seeds, how to use and prepare natural remedies, the importance of conserving water sources and forests, the need to work together to build and strengthen the community and the resistance. Both the indigenous languages and Spanish are used. It is forbidden to hit, punish or disrespect the children.

All this is undertaken despite seemingly overwhelming odds: grinding poverty, no resources or equipment, and increasingly, direct attacks conducted with total impunity aimed at breaking the will to resist and thereby destroy the entire movement.

## **The current situation in the communities**

For nearly 18 years now, the Zapatista communities in resistance have been enduring a counterinsurgency war designed to put an end to their movement. In recent years, acts of aggression, repression, intimidation, violence, theft, land eviction, and provocation have increased, and in 2011 their frequency and cruelty have markedly intensified. In August and September 2011, therefore, an Observation and Solidarity Brigade visited some of the communities to listen to the voices of those under attack, to document the repression, to witness continuing advances in autonomy, and to show solidarity with the men, women and children surviving this daily reality.

The Brigade reported the testimonies of communities who have no doubt that while the attacks represent a concerted effort to take their land, crops and possessions, they also represent

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<sup>1</sup> Forcing indigenous children to wear uniform means that children cannot wear traditional Mayan clothes and so is an attack on their identity.

an attempt to destroy and put an end to all the progress these communities have made in the construction of autonomy, and in the development of their own services of education, healthcare, justice, government, community work, co-operatives, the participation of women, appropriate technology, and other social and economic projects. They believe that the aggressions are also aimed at provoking a response from the EZLN, and are determined not to respond with violence: “We are all brothers and sisters here.”

## **Primary schools targeted**

An area of extreme concern highlighted by the Brigade was that the Zapatista autonomous education project has become the pretext and focus of attacks in the escalating level of violence. In August 2010, the EZLN General Command called for the building of autonomous schools in all Zapatista communities. Several communities did not yet have a school, and the need was recognized to offer all children the opportunity to be educated in their own language and culture, according to their own customs and traditions. Immediately after this call was made, the attacks on communities proposing to set up a school began. The majority, though not all of these aggressions, have been in communities in the highland region, the Caracol of Oventik, leading to situations of acute emergency in these areas.

## **San Marcos Avilés**

The Zapatista Support Bases (BAZ) within this community started to set up their autonomous education project in August 2010, with the construction of the first Zapatista Rebel autonomous primary school Emiliano Zapata. They informed the official ejido authorities that they would be withdrawing their children from the official school. The response was one of taunts, threats and harassment, and a promise to destroy the new school. On August 21, two BAZ were tied up and held hostage for 25 hours in an attempt to force them to renounce the school and the Zapatista movement.

The next stage was to threaten to steal their land, and to increase the level of intimidation. The aggressors, who are members of three Mexican political parties (PRI, PRD and PVEM), stationed themselves at locations throughout the community on August 22, firing gunshots into the air until late at night. On August 24 and 25 they carried out their threats to steal the land, taking over 29 hectares of BAZ recuperated land throughout the community, while 8500 coffee plants (equivalent to 360 sacks of coffee) were also stolen, along with 10 hectares of corn and beans, a hectare of bananas, seven cows, six horses and three humble dwelling-houses.

The BAZ wrote a polite letter to the community officials, asking for the attacks to cease; but this was met with more humiliations and insults. The threats and harassment continued, culminating, on September 9, 2010, in the forced displacement of 170 BAZ from San Marcos Avilés. As a result, in order to avoid responding to another act of aggression when their homes were broken into, 47 men, 50 women and 77 children took refuge in the wild bush and surrounding mountain area without any food or belongings, “enduring the cold and rain, without a roof to protect them, with very young children and two pregnant women who had to give birth on the mountain.”

This they endured for 33 days, before an accompanied return to find their homes looted and their possessions stolen, their lands taken over, their fences broken down, their animals killed

and their crops burned. The death threats, bullying and harassment from the political party supporters have continued, preventing members of the community from performing their daily activities, and severely undermining their mental and physical health.

The aggressors are heavily armed with guns of different calibers and semi-automatic pistols, allegedly provided by an ex-member of the local Chilon police. They behave exactly like a paramilitary group, carrying and firing arms openly and threatening to take the Zapatista women as spoils of war. It is reported that much of the land of the BAZ has been put up for sale, and when it is sold, the money is used to buy more weapons.

As negotiations with the official authorities completely broke down following the eviction, the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Centre (Frayba) has been monitoring the situation. They helped set up a Civil Peace Camp in April 2011, to observe and report occurrences; this has since also been the victim of unprecedented threats and hostility. Frayba have on several occasions informed the government authorities of the situation, to request compliance with the government's obligation to ensure the integrity and personal security of the inhabitants and to seek a solution to the conflict. There has been no response. On June 27, 2011 they issued an Urgent Action about the situation.<sup>2</sup>

For the simple action of asserting their right to self-determination, to set up their own school, the BAZ of the ejido San Marcos Avilés are now in a desperate and critical state. The theft of their crops and the plundering of their land have left them without access to food; they are threatened if they try to go to work on their lands. They are thus being deprived of their basic right to food.

The lack of food and free access in and out of the community have contributed significantly to a state of acute malnutrition, and to what the observers describe as a 'severe health emergency'. There have been outbreaks of acute fever, and Frayba refers to a 'rampant typhoid epidemic which has led to the death of at least one child'. While the Brigade was visiting the community, a 10-year-old girl, Maria Ignacia Velasco Martinez, died during a very high fever. The Brigade

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<sup>2</sup> Death threats, harassment and risk of forced displacement in San Marcos Avilés

According to information documented by the Centre for Human Rights (Frayba), in the ejido of San Marcos Aviles, Chilon municipality, there are death threats, harassment, looting and the risk of forced displacement of support bases of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (BAEZLN) at the hands of some residents of the same ejido, members of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) and Green Party of Mexico (PVEM).

In response, Frayba is making known its concern at the imminent risk to life, personal integrity and security faced by BAEZLN, inhabitants of the ejido of San Marcos Avilés, as these death threats and harassment have increased during recent days, further, the plundering of land is preventing work in the fields and the harvest of their crops, which results in those affected suffering from a lack of food, causing serious damage to the health of children, women, men, and the elderly.

Given these facts, BAEZLN families fear being displaced again, for which reason the Centre of Human Rights states:

The responsibility of the state by default, as to date government authorities have not acted to ensure the integrity and security of BAEZLN and access to land despite the many interventions submitted by the Centre for Human Rights; and demands:

- An end to death threats, harassment and theft against BAEZLN by members of political parties in the ejido San Marcos Avilés;

- To protect and safeguard the life, integrity and personal security of the members of BAEZLN, respecting their autonomy process that they have been building for years under the right to self-determination of peoples, established in the Convention (No. 169) concerning Indigenous and tribal people in independent countries, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

commented “the health of indigenous children is not a priority for this government...It is clear that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the children of Mexico are still dying of curable diseases.”

All reports comment on the very severe psychological and emotional toll the daily threats are taking on the BAZ community; that all the men, women and children are living in a state of constant fear and anxiety, reflected in their very tense mood, and depressed state of mind. “The women in particular express the suffering resulting from their displacement, and the pain and suffering caused by having no security of any kind, neither for themselves, nor, above all, for their children. As a direct result of asserting their legitimate right to education, they do not have food, shelter, or water for their children.”

Because of the continual threats and aggressions, the primary school is still not functioning. Between 60–80 children are therefore denied their right to education.

## **Tentic**

Tentic is another ejidal community situated in very poor lands in the Caracol of Oventik, and is split between BAZ and supporters of the PRI political party. For a long time, children of Zapatistas and non- Zapatistas had received education in the same school. In 2004, the Zapatistas and the PRI agreed to have separate schools for the primary education of their children, and different sites for the schools were agreed. The Zapatistas were to keep the original school and the government would build a new one for the PRI. However, problems emerged in 2010, following the call to build primary schools in all the Zapatista autonomous communities.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of May, 2011, a group of about 50 PRIistas<sup>3</sup> from the community of Tentic arrived at the autonomous school Compañero Salvador where they broke down walls, put chains and padlocks on the school doors to prevent access, and stole the hoops from the basketball court. Since that date the school has remained closed, and there has been no education for the children of the BAZ, who do not want to break the chains and padlocks for fear of provoking more aggression. No representative of the BAZ has been invited to, or present at, any of the meetings held to discuss the situation, despite their children’s right to education being denied.

The Brigade reports: “The BAZ of Tentic have stated that if the problem is the small piece of land where the school buildings are, they only ask that both sides have the goodwill to resolve this conflict peacefully, because as BAZ, they do not want problems between brothers and sisters from the same community.”

## **Las Mercedes, in the municipality of Tenejapa**

As in the previous two communities, the BAZ in the community of Las Mercedes, which also comes under the Caracol of Oventik, have, since the call to build primary schools in all the autonomous communities in rebellion, found themselves under threat of displacement and loss of their lands, as well as experiencing persecution and harassment, mainly from members of the PRI. Criminal proceedings have been instigated against some of the BAZ, their supplies of electricity and water have been cut off, and the road to their homes has been blocked. The threats and hostile actions are constant, and the authorities and PRIistas are waiting to take over

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<sup>3</sup> Members of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)

the Zapatista lands. The BAZ see these actions as an attempt to prevent the progress of their autonomy, and as acts of provocation.

In the words of one of the BAZ compañeros: “We are continuing to resist even though we do not have electricity, water or land, we will still continue the struggle....Even though they take away our land, if we have to die we will die, if we can live, we will live.”

## **San Juan Cancuc, in the community of Cruzton, Caracol of Oventic**

Since the call to build autonomous primary schools, the 13 BAZ families in this community have been deprived of electricity and drinking water. They have been forbidden to travel on the road or to leave or enter the community, yet they are denied service in its shops. This means they have no water or electricity and have difficulty getting food because they are forced to get it from other communities.

## **Other schools under threat**

In the ejido Tierra Madre in the Caracol of Morelia, members of the paramilitary-style group ORCAO have prevented access to a women’s collective shop and autonomous kindergarten. In the ejido Patria Nueva, in the same Caracol, ORCAO are threatening to destroy classrooms, houses and a shop. Meanwhile, in the community of Peña Limonar, in the Caracol of La Garrucha, PRIistas have stolen land and school supplies, such as blackboards, chalk, desks and benches. PRIistas in the ejido Arroyo Carrizal, La Garrucha Caracol, attacked the walls of the Emiliano Zapata school with a hatchet, took the tin off the roof and destroyed the door. A child was beaten there by a PRI activist “just for going to a Zapatista primary school”.

## **Response from the Zapatista authorities**

“We will not remain silent about any threats or aggression against our compañeros...we want to make clear to public opinion that we are going to continue with autonomous education throughout all Zapatista territory, our sons and daughters will not go to government schools because they will never teach them the truth about how we live as indigenous peoples...” – JBG Central Heart of the Zapatistas before the World, Caracol II, Oventik, July 2011

## **Conclusions of the Observation and Solidarity Brigade**

“It is clear that the Zapatista Autonomous Education is a threat and a hindrance to the national project of the bad government. In all reported cases, the attacks, threats, humiliations, dispossessions and displacement have as their sole cause the implementation of the Zapatista autonomous education project. Apparently, the three levels of the bad government: municipal, state and federal, are afraid to see

the autonomy project strengthened, perhaps for the reasons suggested by the BAZ compañero/as:

Because the indigenous have the right to better education, because with autonomous education we better understand our life, and our situation for the development of our struggle. It is important that our young people understand the reason for our struggle, why we live in this condition of poverty and misery, the reasons for their own life. We know that the country's wealth is appropriated by the bad government, so it is important that the children understand the causes of this plunder. It is important to understand that official education is opposed to the Zapatista project. The official education is a form of domination, making us believe it is intended to make life better.

“Right now the Zapatista autonomous education project is the focus of attacks from the bad government. By attacking Zapatista autonomous education, they are attacking the fundamental human rights, not only of adults, but above all of the indigenous children of the state of Chiapas, that is to say that Mexico is violating the rights of children.

“Moreover, it is urgent to denounce the alarming situation of extreme poverty in which indigenous communities are still living in our country. As for the speeches about progress and welfare in the state of Chiapas, we observed the facts, the conditions of marginalization in which the autonomous communities live due to the blockade of food and products that the repression and harassment of these same communities generates, simply because they want to defend their autonomy.”

At the same time the Brigade were inspired by the Zapatista achievement: “we found that the Zapatista autonomy project continues to advance in gigantic steps. The equal participation of women in various areas of work is increasing every day, clothing and crafts cooperatives are being brought to fruition by the women themselves. Organic coffee cooperatives sell their produce in Mexico and the world, new agro-ecology projects are being implemented in each of the caracoles, where people can obtain organic produce friendly to Mother Earth. In all the autonomous communities there is at least one health house (casa de salud) or micro-clinic, in addition to the central clinic in each caracol.

We see that, in fact, the Zapatista autonomy project asserts the rights that are enshrined in the declarations, conventions and treaties related to the rights of indigenous peoples, especially those related to autonomy and free determination. We witnessed terrible humiliations perpetrated by the bad government, but we also saw with our own eyes that despite the threats of repression, suffering, pain and poverty, not one of the compañero/as wants to give up. This belief in the process of liberation means that the Zapatista movement is stronger than ever.”

## **Human Rights**

Frayba has stated clearly: “indigenous peoples have the right to construct their autonomy, to defend their ancestral territory and to create an educational system that supports and reflects their cultural and intellectual practices”.



In response to the desperate situation they have witnessed there, in November 2011, Frayba, in conjunction with the Movement for Justice in el Barrio (MJB), issued the Worldwide Declaration in Support of the Zapatista Support Bases of San Marcos Avilés, Chiapas, Mexico. This powerful document, signed by organizations, groups and individuals all over the world, concludes:

“It is clear that violence is utilized against the exercise of Zapatista autonomy, as embodied in its educational system, in order to undermine this historical process which the Zapatista Support Bases continue to develop via this new institution of learning. As indigenous peoples, they have an undeniable right to build their autonomy, defend their ancestral lands, and create educational systems that support and reflect the cultural and intellectual practices of their own community. This right, furthermore, is endorsed by the San Andrés Accords, Convention #169 of the International Labour Organization, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, 2007

Ratified by Mexico, 2007

Article 14

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

Article 1

Indigenous peoples have the right to the full enjoyment, as a collective or as individuals, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms as recognized in the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and international human rights law.

Article 3

Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

Article 4

Indigenous peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions.

UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 26.

(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

ILO 169 Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 1989,

ratified by Mexico 1989

Article 2

1. Governments shall have the responsibility for developing, with the participation of the peoples concerned, co-ordinated and systematic action to protect the rights of these peoples and to guarantee respect for their integrity.

2. Such action shall include measures for:

(a) ensuring that members of these peoples benefit on an equal footing from the rights and opportunities which national laws and regulations grant to other members of the population;

(b) promoting the full realisation of the social, economic and cultural rights of these peoples with respect for their social and cultural identity, their customs and traditions and their institutions;

(c) assisting the members of the peoples concerned to eliminate socio-economic gaps that may exist between indigenous and other members of the national community, in a manner compatible with their aspirations and ways of life.

Article 3

1. Indigenous and tribal peoples shall enjoy the full measure of human rights and fundamental freedoms without hindrance or discrimination. The provisions of the Convention shall be applied without discrimination to male and female members of these peoples.

“In light of the ascending severity and frequency of these acts, we demand the following:

1. An immediate and permanent end to the harassment, death threats, plundering, dispossession, sexual violence, and forced displacement perpetrated against the Zapatista Support Bases of San Marcos Avilés.
2. Respect for the right to self-determination, particularly as expressed in the construction of autonomous governance, justice, and education of indigenous peoples.
3. That the right to adequate nutrition be guaranteed and upheld, as it constitutes the foundation of the right of all human beings to enjoy the highest level of mental and physical health.”

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2. No form of force or coercion shall be used in violation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of the peoples concerned, including the rights contained in this Convention.

Article 27

1. Education programmes and services for ITPs shall be developed and implemented in co-operation with them to address their special needs, and shall incorporate their histories, their knowledge and technologies, their value systems and their further social, economic and cultural aspirations

3...governments shall recognize the right of ITPs to establish their own educational institutions and facilities...

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*This article is being published to coincide with the issuing of the Worldwide Declaration in Support of the Zapatista Support Bases of San Marcos Avilés, Chiapas, Mexico by The Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center (Frayba) and the Movement for Justice in el Barrio, the Other Campaign, New York (MJB), November 2011*

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