

# hiapas

## Not So Sudden, Not So New

Andreas Seppelt has been reporting for the past few months from Mexico. This month, his article on the Chiapas Rebels appears in the Déjà Vu column, however starting next month, he will have his own column entitled, The Latin Quarter. - Ian

Carlos Fuentes, one of Mexico's leading writers and often its "voice of political consciousness" recently spoke about the political problems in Chiapas. "With a state that could be prosperous, with fertile land, abundances for the majority of men and women, it is only because of the local government and its collusion with the powers of exploitation, and the indifference of the federal government that we see such poverty. Cocoa, coffee, wheat corn, virgin forests, and abundant pastures -- only a minority enjoy the rent of these products and if someone protests this situation they are grabbed, imprisoned, violated, killed and the situation continues."

One cannot imagine a situation more primed for social explosion. It was with little surprise, that the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Zapatistas), stormed the town of San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas and officially proclaimed its armed insurrection. The Zapatistas have taken their name from the recognized Mexican hero Emiliano Zapata, who led a successful insurrection and eventual revolution in the 1910's and serves as a solid reminder of the years of injustice and repression.

The rebels in Chiapas did not have to wait long for others to join their call to arms on the first day of the new year. The next night two bombs exploded--one in a shopping plaza in Mexico City, and the other in Acapulco's municipal plaza. This rash of bombings and subsequent bomb threats throughout the country bore the markings of the Revolutionary Worker Campesino Union (Party of the Poor), which has been operating underground for the last few decades. In a letter to Amnesty International, representatives wrote, "For more than 40 years we have asked for agricultural reform, without getting a solution. For that reason, we have formed an independent organization to defend the interests of our people."

The Campesino Union, which is considered the "patriarch" of the country's various rebel

groups, descended directly from a schoolmaster turned underground hero--Lucio Cabañas, who fought the Mexican Army in the jungle mountains of Guerrero (southwestern part of Mexico) for seven years until he was caught and killed in 1974.

Reports of armed groups have increased in eastern parts of the country such as Veracruz and Hidalgo and in the other southern states of Oaxaca and Guerrero. Many of these organizations are believed to have been originally formed as defense groups that indigenous communities and campesinos created to defend themselves against "goon squads" hired by local ranchers. These rural bands have demonstrated the ability to switch from defensive to offensive tactics. It is believed that the Zapatistas were originally a self-defense group, turning to organized aggression when their peaceful protests went in vain.

The Zapatistas are fighting attitudes which are typical of those expressed by the cattlemen and other large landholders such as Bartolomeo Dominguez who argues that the Zapatistas "...are not simply impoverished Indians. People who have no money to buy food have no money to buy machine guns!" Dominguez, who used an alias to protect his real identity and to avoid repercussions, added, "The Indians don't deserve the land because they don't know how to make the land produce what it should."

In perfect contrast to this, the leader of the Zapatistas, Subcomandante Marcos, was quoted "Our form of armed struggle is just and true. If we had not raised our rifles for the Chiapas poor, the government would never have been concerned about the Indians and campesinos in our land."

The uprising in Chiapas sheds light on a problem which is not new. It has its origins as much in a constant political dichotomy as in the economic differences which have long existed. It has also confirmed a national suspicion that without political reform, any economic reform is fragile and even deceitful.

- Andreas Seppelt, Latin American Correspondant