

feature

Centuries of exploitation prelude guerrilla uprising

by Angel Figueroa

It was March, 1544, when the Spanish Dominican missionary Bartolomé de Las Casas was appointed bishop of Chiapas, then a large province in the expanding colony of New Spain, but now among the 31 states of modern Mexico — a state that has received sudden worldwide attention ever since an Indigenous guerrilla group declared war on the Mexican government on New Year's Day.

The two events, separated by 450 years, are related.

In fact, an understanding of the recent bloodshed in Chiapas demands a historical flash-back to the Spanish Conquest — hitherto mostly ignored by the media — when Indigenous peoples were slaughtered and enslaved under the Conquistadors' banner of 'Gold, Glory, and God.' As an accompanying missionary who first championed the Conquest, de Las Casas grew disenchanted with the greed and savagery of his 'Christian' compatriots. He became the most prolific critic of the oppression of the Indians, taking up their cause by demanding that the Crown abolish slavery and treat the Indians justly, arguing that once they were converted to Christianity they should be free from exploitation.

After many years of defending the Indian cause, both in the Americas and at the Spanish court, his influence strengthened and he became known as 'Protector of the Indians.' His constant petitioning succeeded with the decree by Charles V that the laws which granted land and slaves to Conquistadors be reformed, and de Las Casas was given the bishopric of Chiapas to oversee the enforcement of the New Laws.

He failed in his mission, however, as he could not overcome the unyielding position of the new landowners, and was forced to return to Spain in 1547. With the servitude of the Indians irreversibly established, the significance of de Las Casas is that he became the first to discern the injustice of the colonial system imposed by Europeans in the Americas. As such, he is also the earliest



Bartolomé de Las Casas

important critic of what has become a long and tragic history of human rights abuses in Mexico and Latin America.

While slavery was eventually abolished, the oppression of the now dispossessed Indians has continued ever since, uninterrupted by independence in 1821, when Spanish lords were merely replaced by wealthy and powerful Creoles. Debt-peonage became the mark of the Indian peasants who lived and died on *latifundios*,

Indian exploitation was the status quo of the 16th century, human rights abuses among the Indians of the region — indeed, across the country — are extensive in modern Mexico. Both Amnesty International and Americas Watch have revealed that violent evictions of peasant families from communal lands and the disappearances of peasant and Indian leaders have been frequent occurrences over the years. (Other reported abuses include torture and extrajudicial killings by the police and military).

The severity of these human rights violations is magnified in the fact that they are in direct violation of Mexico's 1917 Constitution, wherein communal ownership of lands, known as *ejidos*, is enshrined as an inalienable right of the peasant class. It is not for any trivial reason that the guerrillas name themselves after Emiliano Zapata, the peasant-revolutionary who fought for this and other principles of agrarian reform, now ignored and betrayed by the Mexican government, just as Zapata himself was betrayed and killed by his enemies in an ambush.

As agrarian reform was the heart of Zapata's movement, and thus carried with it the arrest of four centuries of oppressive policies, Zapata has been considered, over time, the heart of the Mexican Revolution. While the other players in the bloody infighting — Pancho Villa, Venustiano Carranza, Alvaro Obregón — mixed politics with a stubborn pursuit for power, it was Zapata who was the only revolutionary force to develop an integrated plan for economic, social, and political reform.

Although Zapata's forces did not win the revolution (an extended conflict from 1910 to 1917 that killed more than a million people and laid waste to the countryside) they strongly influenced its outcome, and the wording in the Constitution is testament to this. Still, agrarian re-



Emiliano Zapata

form and the promise for social change have never been completed. Peasants still make demands for land, and extreme poverty continues to characterize their plight, much to the detriment of Mexico's attempts at industrializing its economy.

Industrialization imposed extreme hardships on the underprivileged peasants and Indians, as exemplified in Chiapas when large oil deposits were discovered in the 1960s. As the oil industry became a national priority, amendments to the Constitution granted PEMEX (the government-owned oil company) the power to no longer require permission from the Secretariat of Agrarian Reform in

order to explore for oil. This allowed for the mass expropriation of *ejidos*, often without compensation, and in direct contradiction of one of the basic principles of the Constitution. Urban growth resulting from the oil boom caused housing shortages and food scarcities, and further exacerbated the already poor living standards of its residents. Chiapas to this day remains among the most impoverished states of Mexico, and Indigenous groups are among the most disadvantaged sectors of the population.

NAFTA's implications for this disadvantaged class are severe. While the guerrillas' call to arms coincides with the first day of the trade agreement, it is only the latest strain in a long and tragic history of social injustices that has plagued Mexico since de Las Casas first took note of it 450 years ago. Lacking the sort of social charter that is fundamental to the European Community — where there is a commitment to raising the living standards of its poorest members — NAFTA seems poised to exacerbate Mexico's grim record on human rights, pushing to the brink an already exhausted class of the exploited and impoverished. This is witnessed as much in the advent of the guerrilla group as in the reaction of the Mexican Army to crush it. Elsewhere in the country, there continues the norm of government corruption, arbitrary imprisonment, political disappearances, and child labour.

Canada has a role in all this. Just as NAFTA's implementation has sparked the latest bloodshed, Canada can use its position as a partner in NAFTA to improve Mexico's human rights record by pressuring it to abide by its own Constitution. Americas Watch put it best: "If Mexico adhered to its Constitution, instead of ignoring its laws, its human rights record would be exemplary."

Just as in the 16th century, human rights abuses are extensive in Mexico of the 20th

enriching their masters' coffers and brutally suppressed whenever calls for justice were made.

That the guerrilla movement has reared its head in the same area where de Las Casas centered his cause shows more than just interesting historical coincidence (indeed, it is hardly coincidental). Now, as then, most of Mexico's Indigenous population is concentrated in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (where the modern-day states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Oaxaca, and Vera Cruz are located). Just as



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