

## Introduction

If I were joining the Peace Corps and going to Mali I could just say "I'm joining the Peace Corps and going to Mali, which is a very, very poor country in West Africa." Except I'm not. What I'm doing isn't really like joining the Peace Corps or volunteering through an NGO (that means non-governmental organization, or charity) that operates with the blessing of the government of Brazil or Senegal or wherever. For the next nine months I'll be living and working in liberated territory. Chiapas is the poorest and southernmost province in Mexico, bordering Guatemala and reporting an average income around \$500 a year. Some Americans have called it "Mexico's Mississippi." It's a heavily indigenous province, with millions of Mayans. For centuries indigenous people have met racism and dispossession (that means being kicked off their land) from the Spanish colonizers. Basically, for Indians every encounter with any agency of the government was an experience of degradation, so the Zapatistas always refer to "the bad government" rather than just "the government." On January 1, 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement exposed Mexican small farmers to competition with heavily subsidized American agribusiness, and the almost entirely indigenous Zapatista Army of National Liberation (or EZLN in Spanish) launched a war against the Mexican government. (They're named after Emiliano Zapata, a hero of the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s who fought for peasants to have land.) They declared that "We are the product of 500 years of struggle," and that "NAFTA is death," and they seized most of the province of Chiapas. The war proper only lasted 12 days, and the situation has now evolved into a sort of permanent standoff where the Mexican government controls the cities and some of the countryside and jungle, and the EZLN rules where the government does not. (This means that no one can send me mail while I'm in Chiapas. Mail goes through governments, and there's no Mexican post office in Zapatista territory. And it's not like the government bothered setting up post offices to deliver mail to impoverished Indians in the jungle before the uprising anyway.) You can get some idea of the difference in how they rule from the current whooping cough outbreak in the province. There's no epidemic in liberated territory, where the Zapatistas try hard to vaccinate their people, it's only in the government areas. What's more, in the areas where the outbreak is happening, the government didn't notice it, and they're not treating it either. The Zapatistas diagnosed the cases, and they

sent teams of their health promoters into government territory and invited a French medical NGO. I think the best short statement I've read about the uprising came, unsurprisingly, from Subcomandante Marcos, the EZLN's famous, flamboyant and poetic spokesman. It's from very early on. On January 15, 1994, Mexican president Carlos Salinas issued an amnesty pardoning anyone who had been "pressured" into participating in the uprising. Marcos response has become a bit of a classic, and it encapsulates why they revolted and what they're trying to do:

"Why do we have to be pardoned? What are we going to be pardoned for? For not dying of hunger? For not being silent in our misery? For not humbly accepting our historical role of being the despised and outcast? For having picked up arms after finding all other roads closed to us? For having demonstrated to the rest of the country and the rest of the world that human dignity still lives? For having been well prepared before beginning our uprising? For having carried guns into battle rather than bows and arrows? For being Mexicans? For being primarily indigenous peoples? For having called upon the people to struggle in all possible ways for that which belongs to them? For not following the example of previous guerrilla armies? For not giving up? For not selling out? For not betraying ourselves?

"Who must ask for pardon, and who can grant it? Those who for years have satiated themselves at full tables while death sat beside us so regularly that we stopped being afraid of it? Those who filled our pockets and our souls with empty promises?

"Or should we ask pardon from the dead, our dead, those who died of 'natural' deaths from the measles, whooping cough, breakbone fever, cholera, typhoid, mononucleosis, tetanus, malaria, and other lovely gastrointestinal and lung diseases? Our dead, the majority dead, the democratically dead dying from sorrow because no one ever did anything? Because the dead, our dead, went just like that, without anyone ever counting them, without anyone ever saying "Enough!"

"Must we ask pardon from those who have denied us the right to govern ourselves? From those who lack respect for our

customs, our culture, and ask for our obedience to a law whose moral basis we do not accept? Those who pressure us, torture us, assassinate us, disappear us for the serious 'crime' of wanting a piece of land, neither a big piece nor a small one but a simple piece of land from which we could grow something to fill our stomachs?

"Who must ask for pardon, and who can grant it? The President of the Republic? State officials? Senators? Governors or mayors? The Police? The federal army? The great gentlemen of banking, industry, commerce, and land? Political parties? Intellectuals? Students and teachers? The workers? The *campesinos*? The people of the neighborhoods? Indigenous peoples? Our dead?"

So that's what they've been fighting against for the last 13 years. I have some idea of what I'll be doing when I get there, but it may be wrong. One thing I know I'll always be doing is being a *de facto* human rights observer: paramilitaries would really rather not kill anyone when an American's watching. Beyond that I'm hoping to assist Zapatista health promoters, but I won't know exactly what I'm doing until I get to San Manuel and start doing it.

Andrew