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Subcomandante Marcos stands amid Zapatista women and their children in Chiapas, Mexico.

Prayers for a Dignified Life

A Letter to Schoolchildren About the Zapatista Uprising

BY SUBCOMANDANTE MARCOS

The Zapatista uprising in Mexico began on New Year's Day 1994, the day that NAFTA — the North American Free Trade Agreement — took effect. The rebels of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) came out of the Lacandón Forest in the southeastern state of Chiapas, demanding an end to the exploitation and repression of the largely indigenous peasantry of the region.

Chiapas is home to almost a million Indians — Ch'ol, Lacandón, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolabal, and Zoque. At the time the rebellion began, according to government statistics, 35% of the dwellings of the region had no electricity, and 51% had dirt floors. Four out of every 10 workers made less than the official minimum wage of about \$3 a day. But conditions for most indigenous

people of Chiapas and Mexico were much worse.

The region itself is not poor. For example, more than half of all of Mexico's hydroelectricity comes from dams in Chiapas. But, as Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos wrote in 1992, before the rebellion began: "Chiapas is bled through thousands of veins: through oil ducts and gas ducts, over electric wires, by railroad cars, through bank accounts, by trucks and vans, by ships and planes, over clandestine paths, third-rate roads, and mountain passes."

Soon after the rebellion began, Marcos wrote the following letter to schoolchildren in Guadalajara, in response to a letter they had written.

—The editors

To the Solidarity Committee of Elementary Boarding School #4, "Beatriz Hernández," Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico.

Boys and girls,

We received your letter of February 19, 1994, and the poem "Prayer for Peace" that came with it. It makes us very happy to know that boys and girls who live so far away from our mountains and our misery are concerned that peace should come to Chiapan lands. We thank you very much for your brief letter.

We would like you (and your noble teachers) to know that we did not take up arms for the pleasure of fighting and dying; it is not because we don't want peace that we look for war. We were living without peace already. Our boys and girls are like you, but infinitely poorer. For our children there are no schools or medicines, no clothes or food, not even a dignified roof under which we can store our poverty. For our boys and girls there is only work, ignorance, and death. The land that we have is worthless, and in order to get something for our children we have to leave home and look for work on land that belongs to others, powerful people, who pay us very little for our labor. Our children have to begin working at a very young age in order to be able to get food, clothing, and medicine. Our children's toys are the machete, the ax, and the hoe; from the time they are barely able to walk, playing and suffering they go out looking for wood, cleaning brush, and planting. They eat the same as we do: corn, beans, and chile. They cannot go to school to learn Spanish because work kills the days and sickness kills the nights. This is how our children have lived and died for 501 years.

We, their fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers, no longer want to carry the guilt of not doing anything to help our children. We look for peaceful roads to justice and we find only mockery, imprisonment, blows, and death; we always find pain and sorrow. We couldn't take it anymore, boys and girls of Jalisco, it was too much

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pain and sorrow. And then we were forced to take the road to war, because our voices had not been heard.

Boys and girls of Jalisco, we do not ask for handouts or charity, we ask for justice: a fair wage, a piece of good land, a decent house, an honest school, medicine that cures, bread on our tables, respect for what is ours, the liberty to say what is on our minds and to open our mouths so that our words can unite with others in peace and without death. This is what we have always asked for, boys and girls of Jalisco, and they didn't listen. And it was then that we took a weapon in our hands, it was then that we made our work tools into tools of struggle. We then turned the war that they had made on us, the war that was killing us — without you, boys and girls of Jalisco, knowing anything about it — we turned that war against them, the rich and the powerful, those who have everything and deserve nothing.

That is why, boys and girls of Jalisco, we began our war. That is why the peace that we want is not the peace that we had before, because that wasn't peace, it was death and contempt, it was pain and suffering, it was disgrace. That is why we are telling you, with respect and love, boys and girls of Jalisco, to raise high the dignified flag of peace, to write poems that are "Prayers for a Dignified Life," and to search, above all, for equal justice for everyone.

Salud, boys and girls of Jalisco.

**From the mountains of the Mexican Southeast
CCRI-CG of the EZLN
Mexico, February 1994
Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos**

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