



SIPaz



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Claudia Sheinbaum,
President-elect of Mexico
© Eric Lugo (El Economista)

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SIPAZ is an international observation program created in 1995, after the Zapatista uprising in 1994 to monitor the conflict in Chiapas, Mexico.

International Service for Peace (Servicio Internacional para la Paz or **SIPAZ**) is a response from the international community to the request of Mexican human rights organizations and religious leaders in Mexico, asking for a permanent international presence in Chiapas. In February 1995, a delegation of various international peace organizations came to Chiapas. They decided to create an organization encompassing a coalition of faith based and nonviolence based organizations in the United States, Europe and Latin America that shared a common concern regarding the situation in Chiapas.

Today **SIPAZ** supports the search for nonviolent solutions and aids in the construction of a culture of peace and dialogue between the actors involved in the conflict in Chiapas as well as, increasingly, in other areas in Mexico (Oaxaca and Guerrero). **SIPAZ** also serves as a bridge for communication and exchange between other organizations and networks that work to construct a just and lasting peace at a local, national, regional and international level ■

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- Maintains an international presence and accompanies processes that are working towards the construction of a culture of peace in Mexico.
- Provides trustworthy communication that integrates the voices of local actors and mobilizes the local, national and international community in the search for alternative solutions to the causes of violence in Mexico.
- Joins together with organizations, movements and networks in order to share and strengthen the processes that are leading towards building a just peace.
- Maintains contact and dialogue with the many different actors that are present in the conflict.

SIPAZ recognizes and respects the principles of non-intervention and sovereignty of the Mexican State and its citizens upon whom must depend the negotiation and initiative that are necessary in order to achieve an eventual solution to the conflict.

The coalition members of **SIPAZ** represent many years of experience in international non-governmental peacemaking and conflict resolution. Building on that experience, **SIPAZ** seeks to play a facilitative role enhancing the context in which Mexicans are working to solve largely Mexican problems ■



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MORENA Wins Landslide Victory in Mexican Elections

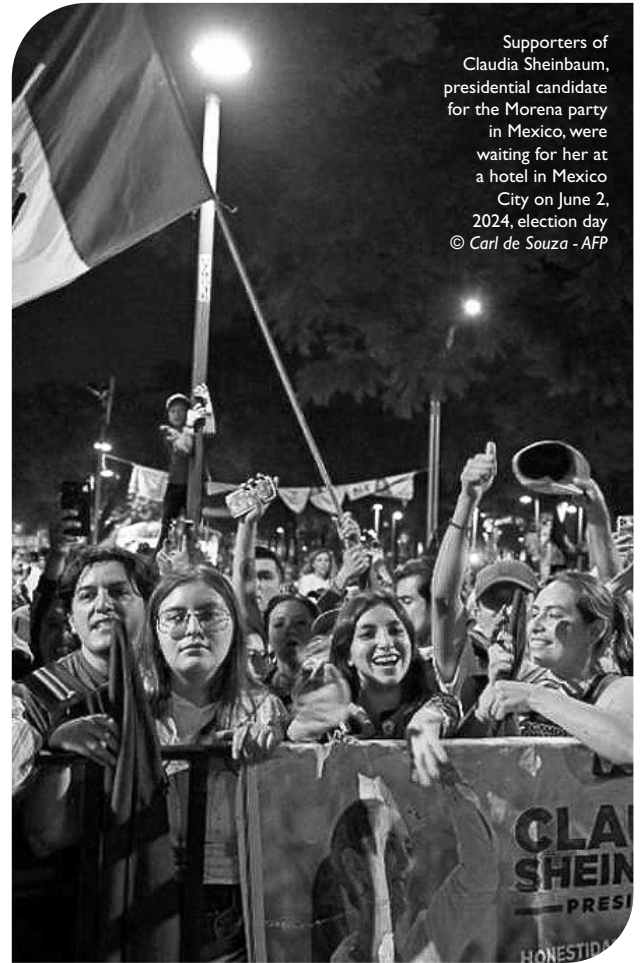
On June 2nd, Claudia Sheinbaum was elected Mexico's first female president, gaining a 30-point lead over candidate Xochitl Galvez (PRI, PAN, and PRD, historic parties in Mexico). Sheinbaum's party, the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA), together with its allies, won a majority in both chambers of the Congress of the Union. This will allow her to carry out the constitutional reforms of the so-called "Plan C," bequeathed by President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO), in addition to consolidating the flagship megaprojects of the current administration. With an electoral roll of 98.3 million people, Sheinbaum obtained 35,923,984 votes, a significant increase compared to the 30.1 million votes that AMLO obtained in 2018. MORENA also won in Mexico City and retained power in five of the nine governorships that were at stake ▀

These overwhelming results cannot hide the fact that the campaigns were characterized by a high level of political-electoral violence in much of the country. The international organization ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data) recorded 540 incidents of violence against political players between September 2023 and June 2024. These data, contrary to what the federal government claims, show that this electoral process has been the most violent in history. Of the 330 violent incidents recorded during the campaign, 216 affected candidates, supporters or their relatives, and at least 95 resulted in one or more deaths. Most of the violent attacks, more than 80% of the cases, occurred at the local level. "Although competition between organized crime groups drives much of the political violence, at least 30% of incidents involve rioting and property destruction, suggesting that local power struggles and community claims of irregularities during the process, or rejection of the results, can also trigger violence against political figures," ACLED added.

Judicial Reform: Improvement or Risk of Greater Political Control and Impunity?

In June, a series of forums were held to debate the Reform to the Judiciary proposed by AMLO. This proposal recommends reducing the number of ministers in the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (SCJN) from 11 to nine. The mandate of the ministers would be for 12 years, three less than in the current formula. The two chambers into which the Court is currently divided would be eliminated, leaving its operation only in plenary sessions, which would be public. In terms of salaries, it is established that the remunerations of the ministers and judges may not exceed what the President of the Republic receives. In addition, the mechanism for electing the representatives of the Judiciary would be modified, they would be elected by the citizens every three years, after being proposed in equal parts by the Presidency of the Republic, the Congress of the Union and the Judiciary itself.

Civil organizations argue that



Supporters of Claudia Sheinbaum, presidential candidate for the Morena party in Mexico, were waiting for her at a hotel in Mexico City on June 2, 2024, election day
© Carl de Souza - AFP

the proposal omits fundamental aspects, such as the need to reform the prosecutors' offices, given that the main problem of impunity in Mexico is related to public ministries. They also highlight the importance of putting more emphasis on local judicial powers, redesigning the structure of the police forces in charge of investigating crimes, improving the technical capabilities and independence of the forensic services, and increasing the resources and staff of the public defenders' offices. "Electing judges, magistrates and ministers by popular vote will not contribute to addressing any of these needs, but it will, unfortunately, generate new and worrying problems," said the PRODH Center.

Margaret Satterthwait, Special Rapporteur for the United Nations on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, expressed her concern about the initiative, especially with regard to



"Pending Rights"
© Artículo 19

the election by popular vote and the reduction of salaries of judicial personnel. *"I am particularly concerned about the context in which these reform proposals are being carried out, given the alleged intimidation of judges and reports of interference in judicial independence by the executive and legislative branches,"* she said.

Meanwhile, the Mexican peso depreciated following MORENA's announcement to implement President Lopez Obrador's reforms in July and August. Investors fear the government will approve *"radical changes"* to the Constitution, which could be seen as a dismantling of democratic checks and balances.

Numerous Pending Human Rights Issues for President-elect

In May, the National Network All Rights for All (Red TDT) presented a report on the human rights situation in Mexico during this government. Regarding human rights defenders, 92

cases of extrajudicial executions were documented, which represents a 50% decrease compared to the previous administration, but it remains *"a tactic used to inhibit and dismantle the social struggle and the defense"* of fundamental guarantees. Most of the victims were defenders of land and territory, the environment, and the self-determination of indigenous peoples; these cases were mainly recorded in Oaxaca and Chiapas. The report also highlighted that, according to the data collected, 44 journalists have been killed during the current administration, compared to 47 during the previous administration. In addition, cases of limitation of the right to freedom of expression and protest have been documented. Also, *"smear campaigns have continued, which have been denounced by various organizations,"* including the President of the Republic.

In July, the organization Article 19 presented the report *"Pending Rights,"* which details the violations of freedom of expression during the Lopez Obrador administration. There were

3,408 attacks against the press, 561 of them in 2023, which represents one attack every 14 hours. In addition, 46 journalists were murdered, and the State remains the main aggressor, responsible for 45.75% of the total. The report highlights that *"During the six-year term of office, 179 attacks were recorded in the 'morning press conferences' and identified that municipal and state authorities from 20 entities of the Republic repeated the same stigmatizing speech 62 times."* It also points out the concentration of spending on official advertising, with ten media outlets accumulating 47.08% of the resources during the six-year term. Despite claims that there was no longer any spying, the report claims that the administration continued to acquire surveillance equipment.

Another worrying aspect on the human rights agenda is militarization. In June, Claudia Sheinbaum announced that she will support the reform proposed by AMLO that involves the definitive integration of the National Guard into the National Defense Secretariat (SEDENA). She indicated that her security policy will be based on addressing the causes, having a more effective National Guard, improving intelligence and investigation, and ensuring coordination between institutions. However, civil organizations have expressed their concern, pointing out that *"the participation of the military in areas of civilian life could undermine the security of the population and increase human rights violations, in addition to putting at risk the principle of separation of powers and judicial independence."*

In July, within the framework of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council, the Mexican State received 318 recommendations related to human rights. The government rejected 14 of them on the issues of militarization, excessive use of force, espionage, unofficial pretrial detention, forced displacement and detention of migrants. Civil, national and international organizations regretted *"the State's position in rejecting so many recom-*

mendations for the first time, which contrasts with the messages of commitment to respect for human rights.” They called on the next administration to take all the recommendations “as a guide for the adoption of concrete government policies and actions with a rights perspective.”

The Role of the United States in Security and Human Rights Issues in Mexico

In June, US President Joe Biden announced a new executive order that will limit asylum applications at the border with Mexico. This measure will allow rapid deportations if a specific number of arrests of people who crossed the border irregularly is exceeded, unless they prove that they are being persecuted or are at risk of torture if they are expelled. AMLO considered that these new measures respond to the presidential elections in November, when migration is a priority issue for the American electorate. He stated that “they are applying a policy that does not correspond to the new reality” and they use “the immigration issue for electoral political purposes, legislators take advantage and sometimes even money, by maintaining positions that, instead of helping to solve problems, complicate them.” By August, the United States had deported more than 92,000 people to more than 130 countries.

More than 20,000 weapons enter Mexico illegally every year, according to the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), as reported by the Stop US Arms to Mexico project, an initiative of Global Exchange in July. However, only a small portion of illegally trafficked weapons are recovered. The report states that “The river of gun iron that transits from the United States to Mexico, empowering organized crime and accelerating forced migration, originates in hundreds of manufacturers and passes through thousands of local armories in the United States.” In reaction to the flow of illicit weapons, “an arms race has emerged, with arms companies exporting

more and more weapons, and more militarized weapons, to police and military forces in Mexico.” In 2023, the United States “exported 12,515 military rifles to Mexico – more than to Ukraine, and second only to Israel,” it stated.

In July, U.S. authorities arrested Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada, one of the historic leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel, in El Paso, Texas. Strikingly, the Mexican Attorney General’s Office announced that it will investigate the arrest as a case of “treason,” since Zambada appears to have been handed over to the U.S. by Joaquin Guzman Lopez, son of Joaquin “el Chapo” Guzman, who was also a leader of the Sinaloa Cartel and is currently in custody. The Attorney General’s Office argued that “anyone who illegally deprives a person of their freedom in the national territory to hand them over to the authorities of another country is responsible for this crime.” Zambada’s statements have already begun to implicate several politicians linked to MORENA.

CHIAPAS: Caught Between Political-electoral and Criminal Violence

On June 2nd, in addition to federal posts, the new governor, 40 deputies, 123 municipal presidents, 875 councilors and 123 mayors were elected in Chiapas. The high levels of political-electoral violence during the campaigns placed Chiapas among the most affected states, with at least 15 murders of politicians, five of them candidates. In addition, 515 candidates for various elected posts, belonging to 11 parties and two coalitions, resigned. Likewise, 108 of the 6,977 polling stations planned could not be set up due to this same situation. Nevertheless, the election day took place with relative calm. Unsurprisingly, Eduardo Ramirez Aguilar (ERA), candidate of the coalition Let’s Keep Making History, won the race for governor with nearly 80% of the votes cast.

The violence resulting from the dispute between groups linked to organized crime remains predominant in much of the state, especially in the



Border and Sierra areas. In July, the Southern Border Monitoring Collective urged the federal government to offer a comprehensive response to the situation of thousands of displaced families (some in Guatemala after crossing the border) or at risk of forced recruitment in municipalities cut off from communication by roadblocks set up by criminal groups. “The population of these municipalities is totally unprotected and abandoned by state and federal authorities, and is also being forced by criminal groups to participate in the blockades, using them as human barricades in case the rival group comes or to prevent the passage of federal forces. Given this situation, the statements of the federal authorities, headed by the President of the Republic, who minimize the humanitarian situation and place the responsibility for the events on the population accused of being the social base of the criminal groups, are of great concern,” they denounced. The Diocese of Tapachula said that the current situation in the Sierra and Border “is desperate because of the permanent presence of drug cartels fighting over territory, coming

Universal Periodic Review
© SIPAZ



Press conference after the Civilian Observation Mission in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec
© Educa Oaxaca

and going in the face of the indifference and apparent complicity of the National Guard and the Mexican Army.” It declared that “it is very difficult to live like this; on the one hand, kidnapped in their own homes, forced to do what they should not, with a deep sense of helplessness in the face of the incomprehensible situation they live in; the people of the cartels who dispose of the population at will, and on the other, the presence of detachments of the National Guard and the Mexican Army who do nothing for the population they see.”

Another red flag appeared in the Northern Zone. In June, a police-military operation was implemented with more than 500 elements in the town of Tila. More than four thousand people, who had taken refuge in their homes due to the violence caused by groups of armed civilians, abandoned the town. These groups left at least two dead, 17 buildings burned, businesses looted and 21 vehicles destroyed. The displaced were taken to various shelters in the state or sought refuge in the homes of relatives in other municipalities. According to testimonies, the clashes arose from the conflict between the “Autonomous” group and the group called “Karma” for control of the ejido. The TDT Network poin-

ted out that “*this scenario of violence has antecedents, which were publicly denounced, without the authorities of the three levels of government having taken the necessary measures to avoid its escalation. Throughout the last few years, several antagonistic armed groups have emerged, causing murders, threats, extortion, and various forms of violence, terrorizing the population in general.*” It also recalled that “*there is a dispute between organized crime groups with the participation of local armed organizations. Different indicators show that this situation could be framed in this context, where legal and illegal economies are disputed, as well as population control of the territory and communication routes.*”

At the end of July in the Highlands, around 800 people from the community of La Esperanza, in Chenalho, were forced to abandon their homes due to an armed attack by the group known as “Los Herrera”. La Esperanza, located on the border between Chenalho and Pantelho, has been the scene of clashes since July 2021 between “Los Herrera” and the “El Machete” self-defense forces of Pantelho. Other communities have also been affected. Parishes in the area have denounced the increase in violence: blockades,

continuous shootings and clashes have led to the forced displacement of entire communities and the death of innocent people. They asked: “*given the pain of the suffering people and the indignation at the lack of governance we are experiencing in the state, the minimization that President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has made of the violence that has gone viral in these municipalities, we do not understand in whose hands the fight against organized crime is, since we see that criminals are becoming stronger every day in the presence of the military and the National Guard.*”

OAXACA: Vulnerability of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists

In May, the Gobixha Committee for the Comprehensive Defense of Human Rights C.A. (CODIGODH) denounced a raid on its offices in Oaxaca City, where laptops, cameras, video cameras, cash, and other goods were stolen. The organization warned that this act “*constitutes a serious violation of our work defending human rights in a context of insecurity and violence.*” After a second raid in the same month, CODIGODH decided to temporarily close its offices.

In July, Lorenzo Santos Torres, a community defender from Santiago Amoltepec, along with his wife and daughter, were ambushed, executed, and burned to death on a road between San Martin Lachila and San Andres Zabache, in Ejutla de Crespo. Santos Torres had survived an attack in 2013, for which the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) had granted him precautionary measures. With this murder, the number of defenders killed in Oaxaca during the six-year term of President Lopez Obrador has risen to 42, of which four occurred during the current government of Salomon Jara Cruz, according to Services for an Alternative Education (EDUCA).

During the Jara Cruz administration, the Ombudsman for Human Rights of the People of Oaxaca (DDHPO)

also reported 17 attacks against journalists. In July, during the Guelaguetza Oaxaqueña, photo-journalist Edwin Hernandez of El Universal was attacked while filmmaker Angeles Cruz was protesting against violence in her community, San Miguel El Grande. Consorcio Oaxaca reported that Hernandez suffered “intimidation and pushing by the Governor’s ‘bodyguards’ in order to prevent him from documenting the filmmaker’s protest. He finally left and on the way out they pulled him and tore up his accreditation.”

One of the areas with the most attacks against defenders is the Tehuantepec Isthmus. In June, a Civil Observation Mission (COM), made up of 22 Mexican and international civil organizations, documented that, from May 2021 to May 2024, 72 attacks were recorded, with at least 226 attacks against defenders. The most recurrent attacks were intimidation (30%), harassment (28%), threats (10%) and physical attacks (7%). In addition, three homicides of defenders were documented: Jesus Manuel Martinez (2022), Felix Vicente Cruz (2023) and Noel Lopez Gallegos (2023). The COM indicated that the presence of the Army, Navy and National Guard “fosters a hostile and intimidating climate, which has generated a systematic violation of fundamental rights against communities and peoples (...) in the Tehuantepec Isthmus.” The Commission recommended that the authorities “urgently and effectively halt the militarization process in order to guarantee effective protection of the rights to self-determination, territory and consultation,” as well as investigate and punish the crimes and human rights violations committed.

GUERRERO: Violence and Impunity

In May, La Montaña Tlachinollan Human Rights Center noted that “the political-electoral scenario is devastating in Guerrero.” “The party leaders do not care about the violence that every day brings mourning to homes and threatens the population that fights for



its survival. The destructive power of criminal groups has placed itself above the authorities.” Guerrero was one of the states with the highest number of victims of political violence, registering at least 80 cases. Despite this, the election took place with relative calm. Guerrero was one of the four states in the country that contributed the most votes to the president-elect Claudia Sheinbaum. MORENA and its allies also won the elections in most of the municipalities of Guerrero and the majority of the deputies.

Violence and impunity continued to mark the situation. In June, the mayor of the indigenous municipality of Malinaltepec was murdered, having been detained by an armed group. Also, the adviser of the Regional Coordinator of Community Authorities (CRAC-PC) and former commissioner of Cuanacaxtitlan, Leonel Felix Flores, was deprived of liberty and murdered in the municipality of San Luis Acatlan, on the Costa Chica of Guerrero. “It is clear that the armed groups that swarm in the region and in the state enjoy total impunity,” Tlachinollan denounced. In July, the Emiliano Zapata Indigenous and Popular Council of Guerrero (CIPOG-EZ) denounced that two of its members were murdered in

the municipality of Chilapa. It declared that in six years 56 of its militants have been murdered and 23 are missing. “We want to make it clear that we are alone, that the STATE has abandoned us to our fate, that it leaves us in the hands of crime, as occurs (...) in practically the entire country,” it stated.

Following the release of a report on the Ayotzinapa case presented in July, AMLO denied the involvement of the army in the disappearance of the 43 students in Iguala in 2014. However, the students’ families stated that the participation of the army “is an irrefutable truth,” backed by “numerous testimonies and ministerial statements that confirm that the army was in the streets that day and shamefully participated in the disappearance of our children.” “From his presidential seat, without any real basis, he tries to give us a summary of speculations and conjectures in justification of a campaign promise that he did not fulfill at the end of his term.” They assured that they will continue to demand the appearance of their children and of the hundreds of thousands of missing people in the country. AMLO, for his part, has maintained that the accusations “without proof” against the army could be the result of “a desire for revenge” against

Vicente Suástegui
Muñoz
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© Tlachinollan Mountain Human Rights Center

the institution, “as they wanted to do in the case of General Salvador Cienfuegos or as they are doing now against me with a smear campaign, without proof.”

In August, three years after the disappearance of the defender Vicente Suastegui Muñoz, the relatives of the member of the Council of Ejidos and Communities opposed to the La Parota hydroelectric project (CECOP) again demanded that he be presented alive. They criticized a judge’s decision to revoke the sentence against two alleged perpetrators of the disappearance for alleged violations of due process. Tlachinollan denounced that

“it is incredible that in Acapulco, where all the State security forces are located and where they have meetings every morning to analyze the situation of violence that occurs in the port, they are incapable of identifying the modus operandi of the perpetrators and of not locating the places where they equip themselves and commit their misdeeds. (...) A larger budget is allocated to build National Guard barracks to guarantee security in the port, however, people do not see tangible results with the arrival of more elements of the National Guard.” ■

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Your donations make it possible for SIPAZ to continue offering international observation and presence in Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Guerrero. We need your help!

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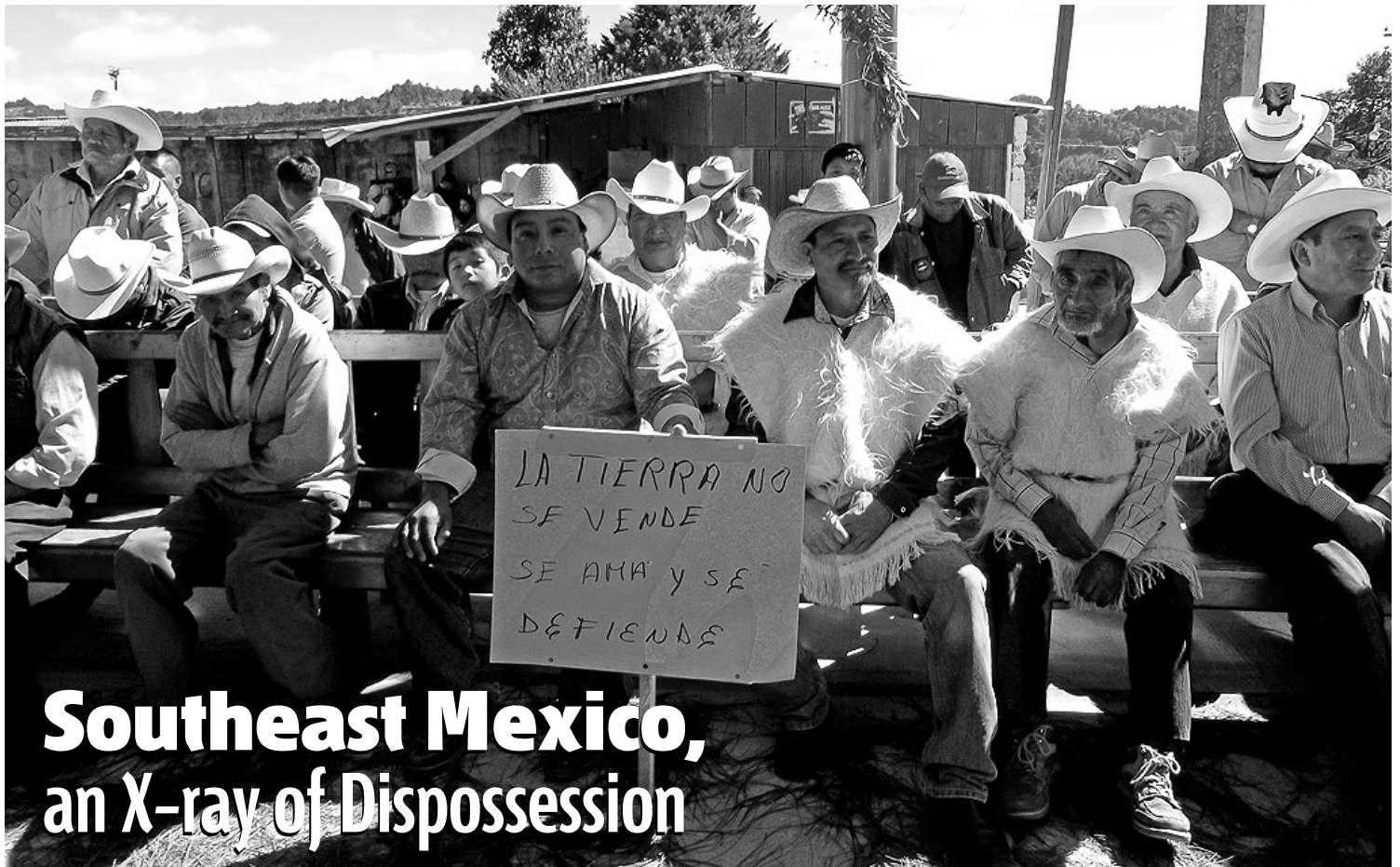
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Southeast Mexico, an X-ray of Dispossession

We see with hope the globalizing force of the excluded, who do not accept that this system is the definitive one, but who vehemently express that another system, where justice and truth shine, is urgent and possible
Pastoral Letter 'In this New Hour of Grace', 2011

The past history, like that with lowercase, is nothing more than the antecedent of the present nightmare. Today the death and destruction of tomorrow are being wrought
'Adagios' Captain Marcos, August 2024

Development... For whom?

The history of the south-southeast region, where Chiapas, Guerrero and Oaxaca are located, has been marked by important social mobilizations. The set of geographic, political, economic and social characteristics, as well as the wealth of resources and strategic geopolitical location, have made this region meet the conditions of conflict conducive to the emergence of various social movements, which have been a historical constant in the territory. Movements that arise as processes of legitimate resistance for the protection of their

territory, their resources and their ways of life.

Since the government of Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), the great promoter of neoliberal policy, the model of economic development in Mexico has been based on the indiscriminate plundering of strategic resources located mostly in indigenous territories; this dispossession is promoted to maximize the control of large companies over natural resources and territory, while the Mexican government has shown no interest in guaranteeing that indigenous peoples can exercise their collective and agrarian rights.

The drive for extractive policy has involved a series of legislative reforms that began in 1992, both in the Mexican Constitution and in secondary laws. The first reform was that of Article 27 of the Constitution, followed by the reform of the Agrarian Law and the creation of a mining law. The modification of article 27 had as its main objective curbing communal or ejido property, as well as weakening collective organization and decisions related to the destiny of territory. The Mining Law implied that this activity legally acquired the character of general interest and public utility. Consequently, mining companies had preferential access to exploit land and water over any other use. This law was reformed in 1996, 2005, 2006 and 2014, strengthening a legal framework that allows the legal plundering of natural resources in indigenous and campesino territories by pro-

Movement in Defense
of Life and Territory
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March of the National Indigenous Congress (CNI), Chiapas
© SIPAZ, Archive

moting and endorsing private investment (national and foreign) in socially owned lands.

On the other hand, the extractive model has been articulated through relations with criminal groups that have positioned themselves and settled in strategic enclaves. Not only have they violated the collective rights of communities to decide on their natural resources, but they have also established conditions of siege, political and social control where companies operate comfortably. In the last stage, criminal groups have competed for territorial control to obtain greater profits and have diversified their economies, not only drugs, arms or migrant trafficking but also legal businesses, mining, for example, being a highly profitable business thanks to million-dollar extortions.

Currently, the neo-developmental model of the 4T continues to privilege extractive activities over the ways of life of people, towns and communities, according to several analysts. The political proposal of the current president, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO), has not implied a change in the development model in Mexico that has been promoted for decades. In the national agenda of this last six-year term there have been at least 1,600 projects and megaprojects to be carried out. In the Southeast of the country, a priority region for the AMLO government, a policy very similar to that of previous governments has been maintained, including the continuity of mining concessions granted by previous governments, the modernization of refineries, the development project of the Tehuantepec Isthmus (or Inter-oceanic Corridor) and the Maya Train.

Even in 2021, the federal government published a decree declaring government-run projects that are considered priority and strategic to be of “public interest and national security,” and giving the order to grant the necessary autho-

rizations, including environmental ones, within a maximum period of five days. With this agreement, the rights of indigenous peoples and communities comparable to territory and autonomy were denied. Added to this panorama is the militarization that is taking place in the country, which further complicates the situation, as several military actions have been observed to contain protests or blockades against state projects.

The Pastoral Letter “*Let Us Walk in the Light of the Lord*” by the Bishop of San Cristobal published in 2020 expressed at the time that, “*the development project at the federal level may be very well thought out and planned, but the intermediate, and above all final, stages frequently cause dispossession of territories, which is achieved through various strategies such as forced displacement, threats, deception in the purchase of land, pressure with social programs, coercion through laws that favor the powerful, and violence that occurs through the federal, state and municipal police, the Army, the Navy and the National Guard, as well as by shock groups, paramilitaries or drug trafficking groups.*”

For his part, Captain Marcos in one of his latest statements called “*Adagios*” points out, “*in its current stage, the system is waging a new war of conquest, and its objective is to destroy/rebuild, depopulate/repopulate. Destruction/depopulation and reconstruction/reordering of an area is the destiny of that war (...)* The so-called megaprojects do not lead to development. They are only the commercial corridors opened so that organized crime has new markets. The dispute between rival cartels is not only about human and drug trafficking, it is above all the dispute over the monopoly of the racket in what is wrongly called the ‘Maya Train’ and the ‘Trans-Isthmus Corridor.’ Trees and animals cannot be charged fees, but communities and companies that settle on



March against climate change, Chiapas © SIPAZ, Archive

that other useless border in the southeast of Mexico can be charged fees.”

For those who defend the territory, extractive, ecotourism and infrastructure projects have become a high-risk factor. In addition, in most cases, megaprojects represent a factor of conflict in the communities where they are carried out, even causing a social division between those who agree with the project and those who do not.

Given this panorama, for years and up to today, different voices from different spaces have spoken out to denounce and highlight what was happening, what was evidently coming and what is currently happening. The context in the region is becoming increasingly violent; the strategies of control, dispossession and plunder continue and seem to be perpetuated before everyone’s eyes, denounce several organizations and collectives. Even though many territories in Chiapas, Guerrero and Oaxaca remain silent and it seems that nothing is happening, they continue to be devastated, “destroyed and rebuilt” in the name of development.

Common Denominator

In its most recent report entitled “*Chiapas, A Disaster*,” the Fray Bartolome de Las Casas Center for Human Rights (Frayba) states, “we are in the midst of a context of continued generalized violence (...). In Chiapas, this is reflected in a series of notable interactions between organized crime, armed groups, and evident links with governments and companies. Its impacts reproduce systematic violations of human rights, in a context where the Mexican State (...) is negligent, permissive, and acquiescent in the face of the current generalized violence and the multiple layers of impunity that historically

add up, exacerbating phenomena such as: forced displacement, arbitrary deprivation of liberty that leads to new forms of use of the judicial system to generate torture; attacks on human rights defenders and journalists in the continuation of social repression, violations of the right to land-territory that disrupt autonomous processes and configure scenarios for new forms of counterinsurgency.”

Although the cited text refers to Chiapas, what is stated there fully describes the reality that is experienced in Guerrero and Oaxaca. These three states in the south-southeast region share very similar conditions and characteristics, the basis of the problems they now face, but also of their strength and historical resistance. Social ownership of the land (Guerrero 79%, Oaxaca 76% and Chiapas 60%) and the collective organization system are an example of this.

In the three states, different organized crime groups have permeated indigenous and peasant communities at different levels and structures. These new conditions have generated a wide and growing fragmentation, often fueled by the actions of political parties. Military, political and corporate interests are intertwined with these criminal groups. They take advantage of the population living in poverty, silence those who denounce their collusion and fuel tensions to keep communities divided, while clearing the territory for lucrative investments in mega infrastructure projects and extractive industries. It has been documented that the greatest presence of crime occurs where such projects are being developed, thereby increasing the number of kidnappings, murders, disappearances and displacements as well as the criminalization of those who oppose them.

“In this adverse context, organizations, movements and communities continue to fight to build decent living conditions, autonomy, justice, security processes, territorial con-



March of the National Indigenous Congress (CNI), Chiapas
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trol, pacification and governability from different approaches and political commitments,” declared Frayba.

Defense of Territory and Criminalization of Human Rights Defenders

The Mexican Center for Environmental Law (CEMDA) 2023 report on the situation of people and communities defending environmental human rights in Mexico documented that last year 20 environmental defenders were murdered in the country. A total of 102 environmental defenders were murdered for their work during the current six-year term.

During this same period, 282 attacks were recorded against 416 people and communities defending environmental human rights, in a total of 123 different incidents. The main aggressor was the government, having a participation in 61 of the 123 events, followed by organized crime, with 37 cases, and private companies, with 19. The sector that had the most incidents was mining, with 30, followed by communication routes with 18, and in third place, forestry with 13 cases. As for the 18 cases related to megaprojects and works related to communication routes, all were for the development of railways. Of these, 12 events are related to the “Maya Train” megaproject and six to the Interoceanic Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

57.7% of the cases of aggression in 2023 were against people from indigenous communities. Jalisco was the most dangerous state for people and communities defending the environment, with 20 documented incidents of aggression. It was followed by the states of Oaxaca with 19, Mexico City with 12 and Chiapas with nine.

The cases of David Hernandez Salazar, a Binniza indigenous defender, opposed to the Interoceanic Corridor, who has been criminalized since 2017 for his fight to defend the Pitayal Lands of Common Use, Puente Madera, Oaxaca; and the political prisoners Agustin Perez Dominguez, Martin Perez Dominguez, Manuel Santiz Cruz Juan Velasco Aguilar and Agustin Perez Velasco, indigenous Tseltal defenders from San Juan Cancuc who are opposed to the San Cristobal-Palenque superhighway are clear examples in the southeastern region of the above.

Against Violence and Criminalization, Organization

In August, the Second Regional Encounter: Conflict, Violence and Criminalization against Human Rights Defenders and the Social Movement was held in the city of Oaxaca, convened by the Fray Bartolome de Las Casas Center for Human Rights, La Montaña Tlachinollan Human Rights Center and Services for an Alternative Education C.A. EDUCA.

Communities, indigenous peoples and organizations from the states of Chiapas, Guerrero and Oaxaca met with the objective of deepening their discussion of defense strategies in the south-southeast region and building joint actions to strengthen resistance and struggles in the three states.

Following the encounter, the public forum “Defense of Territory and Criminalization of Human Rights Defenders and the Social Movement” was held, in which, in addition to sharing experiences and testimonies of struggle against the various forms of violence experienced in the region, a statement was read that was the product of the work and exchange that took place during the previous encounter.

“In the framework of the International Day of Indigenous Peoples (...) in a scenario of deepening and normalization of violence and the systematic pattern of criminalization



towards defenders and social movements in the region (...) We denounce that the neo-developmentalism promoted by the executive branch at the federal and state level operates from deep social inequalities. This model is characterized by the legalization of dispossession or governance of dispossession, we denounce that in this six-year term neoliberal projects par excellence of past governments were materialized, we refer to the Interoceanic Project in Oaxaca, mining projects in Guerrero and Oaxaca and the Maya Train in the south-southeast region. (...) The greatest presence of organized crime is concentrated in the regions where extractive projects are imposed, in Guerrero, Chiapas and Oaxaca. Those of us who are in opposition to these projects are murdered, disappeared, criminalized and delegitimized. This practice has been systematically operated by federal, state and municipal governments. (...) Communities forcibly displaced by violence are not a scandal for organizations and movements. Various reports have documented the shameful figure of 21,000 indigenous people displaced in Chiapas in the last two years. (...) The consequences of the imposition of this model, the negligence of state and federal governments and impunity have been the normalization of violence, irreversible contamination of the environment, a deep-water crisis in the southeast region, the loss of flora and fauna, territorial control by

companies and organized crime, citizen apathy, widespread fear in our communities, community fractures, in addition to serious effects on our social fabric”, the final declaration denounces.

Likewise in the statement they point out that “the peoples, communities and movements of the southeast of the country are committed to a different model of society, in which our common goods are a priority, the social ownership of the land, the integrity of our territory, the strengthening of our social fabric, the promotion of Internal Regulations and Communal Statutes. (...) In the face of violence and criminalization, communities and organizations have agreed to strengthen our processes of resistance and organization for security, the creation of committees for territorial protection against threats, the strengthening of our collective processes and historical memory, mobilization, the visibility of our problems and the construction of broad alliances and articulations at the national and international level.” ■

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Strengthening the Heart to Continue Building Peace



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After 25 years working at the Commission for Support for Community Unity and Reconciliation (CORECO C.A.), Alejandra Rojas Chavez will close this cycle of her life at the end of this year 2024. In an interview, she shared with us her experiences, learnings and the processes she has accompanied during her collaboration with this organization ▀

25 Years of Accompaniment at CORECO

Alejandra Rojas Chavez has lived in the state of Chiapas for 32 years. While she was part of the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Center for Human Rights (Frayba) team, she met CORECO during its formation process. CORECO was founded in 1996 as a civil society organization that accompanies communities and organizations in their efforts and work for unity, reconciliation, and peace-building.

Alejandra joined the CORECO team in 1999 and, since then, has participated in various processes, such as the formation and accompaniment of local reconciliation and human ri-

ghts commissions in the Highlands, the Positive Conflict Transformation (TCP) diplomas, and in mediation and dialogue facilitation processes where participants have found and built positive solutions to their conflicts. In addition, she has accompanied workshops to strengthen the heart and coordinated meetings of peace and reconciliation builders since 2005. She has also accompanied the journey of the Believing People of the Diocese of San Cristobal and, in recent years, of the Network for Peace and Good Living.

Strengthening the Heart

“The strengthening of the heart was born as part of a personal and collective search to find new ways to accompany communities, servers, men and women

who, due to different situations, cannot find solutions to conflicts, feel tired or no longer find hope,” Alejandra shared with us.

The heart strengthening workshops are spaces where people who participate can *“listen to their essence, their heart and their concerns, what hurts them and what hurts them because of the reality they live in.”* These spaces contribute to finding strength and energy to move forward. Through them, participants have managed to heal their hearts, become aware of their true being and their meaning or mission in life, and have been able to establish new relationships and regain hope to continue building peace and good living in their communities.

These workshops have also changed the participants' perspective on their conflicts, helping them to listen to and understand others better, recognizing that each person has their own story. Alejandra told us about moments in which people managed to release resentment and desires for revenge by sharing their experiences. *“Sometimes you don't have the opportunity to have a space to listen to your-*



self in life, so these spaces allow you to stop and listen deeply and to nourish the strengths you have,” she told us.

CORECO has promoted various processes of strengthening the heart. In spaces dedicated exclusively to women, they have been able to recognize and value their identity as such, their qualities, and from that base, support and accompany other women in their own processes. CORECO has also worked with young people who are searching for their own path and how they want to serve or contribute to the community.

“In a meeting with young people on the subject of strengthening the heart where Mayan guides accompanied us, the young people were able to feel and find strength in the community, prayer and the fire ceremony.” In the context of violence, they have found spiritual ways to recognize their ancestors, realize where they come from and that, as a community, they have the strength to continue building life. “Although the outlook may seem difficult and dark, there is also clarity, the strength of the communities that want to care for their territories that connect with life, nature and the strength that comes from their

spirituality. There is a lot of hope in the towns, communities and families,” Alejandra told us.

Recognizing Inner Strength

During her time at CORECO, Alejandra has learned from the personal and collective stories of the men and women she has worked with. She has understood that when people have experiences that hurt their hearts and do not heal, it can lead to violent behavior. She has also come to value the capacities and possibilities that people have to resolve and transform their conflicts, “When there is closeness or accompaniment, you can recognize that they have that strength”, she said.

The lessons learned have allowed her to share these experiences with other groups. According to Alejandra, as CORECO we have accompanied “communities and groups that have found that strength to reaffirm their decision not to resolve conflicts through violence but to find new paths. In this sense, the Heart Strengthening workshops are a space to look at and understand conflict in a different way, they open our eyes and hearts to build di-

fferent solutions. In some cases, which were not resolved at the time, we have heard later that they have been able to resolve and transform their conflicts, they have been able to return to being communities that walk in agreement and unity.”

Faith and Hope in Building Peace

Alejandra tells us that, as CORECO, they have worked with and accompanied people who, even in conflict situations, maintain hope for changes that can occur by “seeing that we are not the only ones in conflict situations, that we can find light and that we can seek to build something different.”

She also shared her personal experience, mentioning that she has always walked with faith and hope, believing that it is possible to live in a different way, to build peace and believe in oneself and in others, establishing more peaceful and harmonious relationships. She recalled a phrase from Gandhi: “There is no way to peace: peace is the way.” She considered that “peace is also built in specific moments where we meet others, where we recognize and value each other and where our experience contributes to others in their lives and work” ■



INTERNATIONAL PRESENCE AND ACCOMPANIMENT CHIAPAS

JUNE

- We attended the discussion on the experience of struggle of former prisoners and their families, and the presentation of the "Factory of the Guilty" Platform, which took place in San Cristobal de Las Casas.

- We accompanied the Forum "Towards Other Narratives: The Reconstruction of Societies that Care - Human Mobility and Transterritorial Citizenship", organized by Mesoamerican Voices - Action with Migrant Peoples, which took place in San Cristobal de Las Casas.

- We attended the press conference on the violence that has affected minors in the state during the last month, which was organized by the Network for the Rights of Children and Adolescents in Chiapas (REDIAS).

- We were present at the photography exhibition "Against Pain, Memory" by Gabriela Sanabria in San Cristobal de Las Casas. Her images capture the pain and struggle of the Mothers in Resistance collective, who continue to demand justice for the femicides of their daughters and the disappearance of their relatives in Chiapas.

JULY

- We participated in a meeting of the Believing People coordination to prepare their annual Assembly to be held in August.

- We were present at the session "The Southern Border and the Structure of a Society Devastated by Organized Crime," part of the "Dialéctica" Forum coordinated by the J'Tatik Samuel Museum.

AUGUST

- We attended several sessions of the 9th edition of the "Social Forum on Other Democracies," convened by the Observatory of Southern Democracies of Mexico and Central America (ODEMCA), which took place in San Cristobal de Las Casas.

OAXACA/GUERRERO

- In August, we participated in the forums, both closed and public, entitled "Defense of Territory and Criminalization of Defenders and the Social Move-

ment," organized by the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Center for Human Rights (Chiapas), La Montaña Tlachinollan Human Rights Center (Guerrero) and Services for an Alternative Education C.A., EDUCA (Oaxaca). These events were held in the City of Oaxaca, where participants were able to share their experiences and testimonies of struggle against the various forms of violence they face.

INFORMATION AND TRAINING FOR ACTION

- In May, we held a meeting with the Colombian Ambassador in Mexico City.

- In June, together with members of the People's Movement for Peace and Justice (MPPJ), we carried out several advocacy activities in Washington, United States. These included meetings with congressmen, human rights officials from the State Department, and representatives of the presidential campaigns, where we shared the reality of the state of Chiapas, the alarming increase in violence, and the serious human rights violations faced by people and communities in the region.

- In July, within the framework of the 190th period of public sessions of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR), we participated as speakers in the virtual hearing "Mexico: Impact of the Situation of Violence in Chiapas on Human Rights."

EDUCATION FOR PEACE

JUNE

- We held a new session on risk analysis, security and protection measures with members of the Luna Maya organization.

- We held a work session within the framework of the strategic planning process of Economic and Social Development (DESMI A.C.).

- We shared an analysis with artisan women who participate in the Mujeres de Maíz collective from various municipalities in the Highlands and the Northern Jungle.

- Together with the organization specialized in digital security Sursiendo, we participated in a space with journalists and communicators in which training and articulation proposals for greater



security for the sector continued to be defined.

JULY

- We had a two-day workshop on Peace Building with young people from the Diocesan Area of Adolescent and Youth Pastoral (ADIPAJ) bringing together representatives of the Ch'ol area that took place in Tumbala.

INTERNAL TRAINING

- A member of the team has started the diploma course in Positive Conflict Transformation, organized by the Commission for Community Unity and Reconciliation (CORECO).

- We attended the 1st training session on digital care for cell phones coordinated by Sursiendo.

NETWORKING

- At least once a month, we attend plenary and commission meetings of the Slamalil Kinal Peace Movement in Chiapas. In July, this platform organized a meeting of civil and social organizations in the state to carry out a post-election analysis and a strategic reflection on the challenges and opportunities. 90 people from 38 organizations participated in the event.

- Every two months, we attend the operational meetings of the People's Movement for Peace and Justice (MPPJ). This process facilitated a series of meetings and activities in which we participated in Washington, United States, in June.

- Every month, we hold virtual meetings of the Accompaniment of Unarmed Civilians (USP/A) - Community of Practice.

- In May, we held a meeting with the organizations that collaborate in the

project "Strengthening the Self-protection Capacities of Human Rights Organizations and Communities in Chiapas", coordinated with Voces Mesoamericanas and Huridocs.

- In June, we participated in a virtual meeting with the partners of the Global Platform for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC).

- In July, we attended a meeting with representatives of the pastoral areas that are part of the Monitoring Commission of the Mother Earth Congress, a component of the social pastoral of the diocese of San Cristobal de Las Casas. In addition, in June, we were at the Meeting held in Cancun to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Mother Earth Congress, which was attended by approximately 80 people.

- In July, we participated in a space for analysis on security in San Cristobal de Las Casas, which was attended by various civil organizations with a presence in that city.

- In May and August, we took part in virtual meetings of the members of the Platform for the Peace Building in Mexico ■

