LATEST: Mexico Perceptions and contradictions

FOCUS: The Trans-Isthmus Corridor, a not-so-new project of the new government

ARTICLE: 25th Anniversary of Civil Observation Brigades When solidarity becomes present

SIPAZ ACTIVITIES: From mid-November 2019 to mid-February 2020
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 (Gaxaca 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.

**The SIPAZ International Team in Chiapas :**

- 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.
In December, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) offered a message celebrating his first year of government. He stressed that of the 100 commitments he made during his campaign, he has already fulfilled 89. He listed a series of achievements such as the reduction of fuel theft, the creation of 648 thousand new jobs, a 16% increase of the minimum wage, an annual inflation of 3%, the stability of the peso against the dollar, the coverage of government programs (at least one welfare program reaches half of Mexican households and 95% of indigenous peoples, he said). On the issue of security, he noted that “between 2006 and 2018 the government sought to solve insecurity and criminal violence through actions of military and police force, without addressing the substance of the problem,” a strategy that left a “dreadful balance” of deaths, disappeared and a human rights crisis.

National and international media questioned, however, the administration of AMLO over zero economic growth in its first year, as well as its inability to reduce violence, as there were more than 28 thousand violent deaths between January and October. The government itself also recognizes that in the first year of government, 9,164 missing persons were reported, of which only 43% were located; so there would be 61,637 missing in the country (still missing data from 11 state prosecutors).

**Human rights crisis: “When Words Are Not Enough”**

In November, Amnesty International (AI) presented the report “When Words Are Not Enough” in which it takes stock of human rights after the change of government. “The government of President López Obrador has shown a willingness to move forward partially in some initiatives, especially
on the issue of disappearances in the country. However, (...) there are no substantial changes in the lives of millions of people facing a very serious human rights crisis that has lasted for more than a decade. The very high levels of violence that undermine the right to life, the torture that is still widespread, the alarming rates of violence against women, and a more lively militarized security strategy than ever, are a sign of the tragic reality”, Erika Guevara Rosas, director of Amnesty International for the Americas, said. AI said it sees “an abysmal incongruity between what the government says and what it then does. It promises a more humane treatment for migrants in need of international protection, but sends the National Guard to persecute and detain them. He says he will protect human rights defenders and journalists, but publicly discredits them.” AI concluded that “the government has to stop blaming previous administrations for the situation and, instead, accept responsibility for what is happening in the present and seek solutions to address the serious outstanding issues.”

In a similar assessment in January, the National Network of Civil Human Rights Organizations “All Rights for All” (Red TdT) stated that “good intentions do not guarantee the consolidation of an adequate model of justice procurement (...) The questioning of the importance of autonomy and independence for a more efficient and expeditious justice seems worrying to us.”

Another controversial issue took place in November, when the Office in Mexico of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) emphasized the importance of guaranteeing the independence and autonomy of the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) after Rosario Piedra Ibarra was elected as the new president of the organization, despite opposition political parties as well as human rights groups and victims calling for her not to take office. There was evidence of incongruities and alleged fraud in the election process. In December, a judge agreed to process the injunction brought by the independent senator Emilio Alvarez Icaza against the irregularities that were recorded in the process. One of the requirements to fill the position is “not to perform, or have held the position of national or state leadership in any political party in the year prior to appointment.” It has been confirmed that Piedra Ibarra was a national adviser of the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA, the party in power) until last November. Although it is the first injunction that has been successful, it is far from being the first complaint linked to this appointment.

In February, Frontline Defenders (FLD) reported that Mexico is the fourth most dangerous country for human rights defenders. It is also the most dangerous country for environmental defenders and those who oppose megaprojects. The TdT Network sees a connection between violence against defenders and government policies: “There is a clear clinging [by the President] to the construction of his projects. The Mayan Train (...), the Dos Bocas Refinery, Tabasco, and the Santa Lucía airport are the flagship projects of this sexenium and the three are being imposed on communities, all three face injunctions, and large opposition movements. Currently, an extractivist policy continues, where economic development is based on the dispossession of peoples.”

**Megaprojects and rights of indigenous peoples: clashes of different visions**

In December the Indigenous Consultation regarding the Mayan Train ended. According to the authorities, 93,000 participants voted in favor, while 7,500 participants voted against. The UNHCHR said that this process “has not met all international standards.” Regarding the limitations of the informed nature of the process, it noted that “the call, the protocol, and the information presented only referred to the possible benefits of the project and not to the negative impacts that it could cause.”

The UNHCHR also observed that “as a consequence of the way in which the project was presented (...), the people of the communities expressed their agreement with the project as a means to receive attention to basic needs (...), a logic that affects the free nature of the query.” It also expressed concern about the cultural adequacy of the process, when “the definition of who to consult, where to do it, and at what time it was established unilaterally by the authorities.” It deplored the low participation and representation of women and that “the majority of those who participated were municipal and ejido authorities, leaving out other groups and people
who are part of the communities.” It also stressed that the informative and advisory assemblies sought to “establish agreements with the communities regarding their participation in the implementation and distribution of benefits, which could imply that the project will be done independently of the outcome of the consultation.”

Indigenous communities belonging to the Peninsular and Ch’ol Maya people, settled in Xpujil, Calakmul, Campeche, members of the Indigenous and Popular Regional Council of Xpujil (CRIPX), reported that in January, the Judicial Branch of the Federation granted them a provisional suspension of project execution. Fonatur reported that none of the corresponding institutions were officially notified about the suspension.

It is not surprising that the possibility of presenting a reform to the Federal Injunction Law “to prevent (...) stopping public works” has been debated. According to Proceso, some legislators consider that “the current federal government has promoted important projects from its inception, which have been halted by suspensions granted through injunctions, causing damage to economic and social progress.”

CHIAPAS: Governor reports progress, NGOs report setbacks

In December, Governor Rutilio Escandon Cadenas (MORENA) presented his first government report emphasizing that “in Chiapas there is governance and the rule of law prevails” and that “we are a government that privileges permanent dialogue with all social sectors and there is justice for everyone.” He stated that “the ostentation of the rulers is over.” He said that one of the achievements is that “more than 32 thousand hectares have been rescued recently, between privately owned buildings and protected natural reserves.” He also affirmed that the level of crime went down and that impunity has ended.

Several media outlets, however, published critical assessments regarding the performance of the Escandon Cadenas government. Regarding crime, the Chiapas Citizen Observatory (OCCH) documented that Tuxtla Gutierrez, San Cristobal de las Casas, and Tapachula recorded high-impact crimes with rates above the national average in 2019. These media organizations highlighted that within this period, six of the 24 murders of human rights defenders in Mexico happened in Chiapas. They also stressed that the state is one of the ten main authorities indicated in the CNDH Recommendations Follow-up Report. In November, several civil organizations indicated that since the beginning of the year there had been 166 violent deaths of women, of which only 76 were classified as femicides.

Opposition to megaprojects: parallels with the national context

In December, members of several parishes and the department of human rights of the diocese of San Cristobal delivered a letter with seven thousand signatures to UN agencies expressing their disagreement because they have not been consulted for the construction of megaprojects such as the Mayan train and the San Cristobal-Palenque highway. They denounced that “it has ignored our disagreement and the destruction of our territories continues. Simulating a consultation, the State intends to strip us of our culture, traditions, and customs, dividing us to achieve the extermination of the original peoples.”

In February, in a pastoral letter the bishop of the diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas, Rodrigo Aguilar Martinez, stated that in Chiapas there are megaprojects “with which the people are affected.” He asked “how can they not mean enormous benefit to some and dispossession of others? How to integrate development - always with human and ecological criteria - into the most disadvantaged populations?” Aguilar Martinez also said that “the dispossession is also present through the loss of cultural roots caused by racism and discrimination, and government policies that do not take into account the word of the original peoples.” He said that the national security project “may be very well thought out and planned, but intermediate, and especially final instances often result in the dispossession of territories, which is achieved through various strategies such as forced displacement, threat, deception in the purchase of land, pressure with social programs, coercion through laws that favor the powerful,
and violence that occurs through federal, state, and municipal police, the Army, the Navy, and the Guard National, as if through armed groups, paramilitary, or drug trafficking groups.”

Other human rights concerns

In December, the Fray Bartolome de Las Casas Center for Human Rights (Frayba) announced that it presented an injunction for the “freedom of the survivor of torture, victim of violations of due process, and currently in arbitrary deprivation of liberty, Juan de la Cruz.” Frayba filed the injunction, noting that since 2016 there was a recommendation for freedom for Juan de la Cruz with a suspended sentence issued by the Reconciliation Board. In addition, they denounced harassment against its staff and those who make up the Collective of Relatives of Prisoners in Struggle “who we received in November and so far in December have received threats of death, surveillance, harassment, and intimidation, in the context of the struggle for the freedom of indigenous prisoners, in particular of Juan de la Cruz Ruiz.” In light of these facts, Frayba declared that “an adequate protection response has not been obtained from the mechanisms of the Mexican State (...) minimizing the situation of risk that due to the circumstances, we believe is coming from agents of the State itself.” De la Cruz was released a few weeks later.

In December, human rights centers documented a new forced displacement of a community in the municipality of Chilon. They pointed out that 65 people were displaced from San Antonio Patbaxil and that “the same aggressor group displaced the population of the Carmen San Jose community” in 2018. They denounced that those displaced from the two communities “are in neighboring communities, in the municipal center, and scattered in the mountains, mostly without food or shelter, surrounded by armed civil group that are preventing their safe return.” They stressed that three more communities are at risk of being displaced.

Combo for Life: December of Resistance and Rebellion

The month of December was marked by multiple activities convened by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and parts of the “Combo for Life: December of Resistance and Rebellion”. This event included the Second Edition of the Puy Ta Cuxlealtic Film Festival; the first Dance Event “Báilate otro mundo”; the Forum in Defense of Territory and Mother Earth in coordination with the National Indigenous Congress (CNI); the Second International Meeting of Women who Struggle; and, the celebration of the 26th anniversary of the beginning of the “War against Oblivion.”

In the midst of these activities, the Fourth National Assembly of the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) and the Indigenous Council of Government (CIG) stated that “the bad government is committed to the dismantling of community fabrics, by promoting internal conflicts that stain communities with violence, among those who defend life and those who decided to put a price on it, even at the cost of selling future generations for the millionaire benefit of a corrupt few, who are served by the armed groups of organized crime.” They affirmed that “our peoples, nations, and tribes will continue to care for and defend the seeds of resistance and rebellion in the midst of death.” During the event to commemorate their armed uprising, the EZLN...
stressed that: “They say there are no more Zapatistas. That we are very few in resistance and rebellion. (...) And every year the bosses congratulate each other saying that they have finished the indigenous rebellions. (...) But every year (...) we show and shout: here we are!”

OAXACA: Land and territory in the center of many struggles

In January, before the implementation of the Trans-Isthmus Corridor in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the Union of Indigenous Communities of the Northern Zone of the Isthmus (UCIZONI) submitted a complaint to the CNDH denouncing that “the ‘consultation’ exercises (...) were carried out without complying with the minimum established standards.” It requested that a new consultation be carried out in accordance with Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO). For its part, the various municipalities of the Isthmus requested from the Secretary of the Environment Natural Resources (SEMARNAT) the holding of a public consultation that confirms the environmental impact of the expansion of the railroad between Salina Cruz, Oaxaca, and Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, one of the central works in the Corridor proposal. In February, Victor Manuel Toledo, head of SEMARNAT, acknowledged that a year after the Commission for Truth and Justice was constituted, the results are almost null and contrary to this, to the problem of femicide, the increase in the disappearances of women, girls, and adolescents is added.” In addition, 1,562 sex crimes were reported, and only 502 are being investigated.

GUERRERO: a tragic picture

In January, parents of the 43 students of the Ayotzinapa Normal School who disappeared in 2014 and the Federal Government agreed to reinstate the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (IGIE) in the investigation of the case. The subsecretary of Human Rights, Alejandro Encinas, acknowledged that a year after the Commission for Truth and Justice was
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created in the case, one of the most emblematic in the country, there are no “tangible results”. A month earlier, at the headquarters of the Ayotzinapa School, relatives of students who lost their lives in other events since 2011 announced the formation of the Committee The Forgotten Others that will seek justice in their cases.

In the few advances, in December the chief of staff of the MORENA city council of Tlapa de Comonfort, Marco Antonio García Morales, was arrested for his alleged participation in the October disappearance and murder of activist Arnulfo Ceron Soriano, leader of the Popular Front of La Montaña (FPM). He is one of the people that Ceron Soriano himself had pointed out for corruption and for having links with organized crime and for whom he had held responsible for what could happen to him.

In recent months, clashes between criminal groups caused further forced displacements in the mountain region of the state. According to the “José María Morelos y Pavón” Human Rights Center, some 6,500 people have been forcibly displaced due to violence in the state. Milenio newspaper reported that there are nine thousand more people at risk of displacement in the same area due to disputes between criminal gangs.

At the end of December, an incident that reflects the desperation of the displaced population occurred when “a convoy with members of the National Guard, the Mexican Army, and the Special Forces Unit of the state police, went up to the community El Naranjo”, generating “expectations among displaced families” who are located in Chichihualco and who believed that their arrival would allow a return to their homes. Upon retreating, federal troops met “about 100 displaced (...) who blocked the road.” Tlachinollan Human Rights Center reported that these officers “not only assaulted some elderly people but also human rights defenders and journalists. The director of the Morelos Center, Manuel Oliva-Bernal, for championing the claims of the displaced persons, was detained and deprived of his cell phone, computer, and documents related to the case. His vehicle was damaged. The defender Teodomira Rosales was subjected to blows and had a gun pointed at her by a policewoman. They jumped on journalists to prevent them from registering their misdeeds.”

Also in January, the murder of ten musicians in Chilapa and the presentation by the Regional Coordinator of Citizen Authorities-Founding Peoples (CRAC-PF) of children as new members of the community police again highlighted the situation of insecurity. The incorporation of these children (mostly orphaned by violence) in which they were making tactical movements for combat, generated multiple reactions. The Network for the Rights of the Child in Mexico (REDIM) considered this integration a “desperate act” to get the attention of the State. It urged the authorities to “attend to the so-called citizens and human rights organizations to build a national strategy to stop armed violence against children and adolescents.”  

SIPAZ interview with displaced people from Chichihualco, Mountain region of Guerrero © SIPAZ

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During the first years of the 16th century, the Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes made multiple expeditions to find the best way to move merchandise and raw materials to Spain. For this purpose, King Carlos V ordered that the three narrowest areas of the continent be examined: the Darien Gap, Nicaragua, and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. In the end, no river connection for cargo ships between the two oceans was found in the isthmus.

The Trans-Isthmus Corridor, a not-so-new project of the new government

In the mid-nineteenth century, interest in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec re-emerged as a means of transporting goods, this time by the United States. They made several attempts to appropriate the territory, beginning with the signing of the Tehuantepec Treaty in 1850. In this agreement, the Mexican government promised to give guarantees to the Tehuantepec Railway Company to carry out a railway project through the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and protect the business and its employees during construction. However, the treaty was annulled two years later, and the technicians who were surveying of the area were forced to leave the country.

The Mexican rail system under Porfirio Diaz

The economic strategy of Porfirio Diaz (1876-1911) focused on granting endless concessions to European businessmen, thus seeking prosperity and a counterweight to the intimidation of the United States. Among others, he hired Weetman Pearson of the London company Pearson and Sons to build the Port of Mexico, which today is named after Coatzacoalcos. Pearson was also hired for the construction of the Veracruz-CDMX railroad, and the remodeling of the Tehuantepec railway, whose works had begun in 1859, and which were finally inaugurated in 1907.

After the economic boom generated by Diaz’s foreign policy, although without benefits for Mexicans, a period of crisis followed, influenced among other things, by the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914, which “monopolized most of the cargo that previously passed through the Isthmus”, and devalued the area as an interoceanic route.
Reviving and formalizing the idea of the interoceanic route

Although during the presidency of Gustavo Diaz Ordaz (1964-1970) the revival of the railways of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was considered, it was not until the 1990s with the government of Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) that the plans began to formalize. While there was talk of an expansion of the Panama Canal, Zedillo proposed the Comprehensive Economic Development Program in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which provided for the development of 11 sectors, including the Interoceanic Transportation Corridor from Salina Cruz, Oaxaca, to Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, in order to integrate the region into world development.

His successor, Vicente Fox (2000-2006), presented the Puebla-Panama Plan, which was signed in March 2001 and intended to cover the Mexican states of Puebla, Veracruz, Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatan, Quintana Roo, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Chiapas, as well as Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Panama. It tried to improve the infrastructure of the area through the construction and remodeling of roads, railways, airports, ports, hydroelectric plants, and oil facilities. Its intention was to generate jobs through the implementation of micro-industries and the promotion of joint development plans and strategies between the South-Southwest of Mexico and Central American countries.

In 2007, during the presidency of Felipe Calderon (2006-2012), the Logistics System of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was announced. It sought to implement a multimodal channel that would complement the Panama Canal through the modernization of roads, railways, and ports on the Isthmus.

None of the three projects succeeded, either because of economic conditions or for other reasons, one of them being the indigenous resistance in the Isthmus. Milenio magazine estimates that more than 15 billion dollars have been lost in the last 35 years due to resistance actions against the implementation of projects in the region, to the extent that it considers the area a “cemetery of projects.”

With Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) and his Isthmus Door to America Plan, the proposed project was further expanded. This plan sought not only the transportation of goods but also the export of raw materials out of Mexico. In 2016, Peña Nieto presented the Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which, through industrialization, sought to reduce poverty by allowing access to basic services.

With the SEZs, the establishment of an industrial corridor was planned in order to connect the Pacific and Mexican Gulf coasts. Seven SEZs were established throughout the country: Lazaro Cardenas-La Union (Michoacan and Guerrero), Coatzacoalcos (Veracruz), Salina Cruz (Oaxaca), Puerto Chilapas (Chiapas), Progreso (Yucatan), Seybaplaya (Campeche), and Dos Bocas (Tabasco). The Isthmus of Tehuantepec project appeared to be in the first stages of development; in 2018 the federal Chamber of Deputies allocated 100 million pesos to start the project.

In April 2019, the new Mexican president, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO), announced the “disappearance” of the SEZs, considering that they had not fulfilled their goal. He justified his decision stating, “It was supposedly to help, but they never did anything to help; they did business, bought land, and wasted resources.” He clarified that his administration would prioritize regional development projects such as the Mayan Train, the Dos Bocas refinery, and the Trans-Isthmus Corridor.

The Transistemic Project today

Five centuries after the plans of Carlos V, on June 14, 2019, a decree was issued that gave birth to the so-called Program for the Development of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, promoted by the AMLO government. The main axis of the project will be the Interoceanic Multimodal Corridor that seeks to realize what many had planned before: the transportation of merchandise between the two oceans through the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The Program will include the construction of different means of transportation and the expansion of industry in the region in order to compete in world markets.

In a letter addressed to the US President in the summer of 2018, AMLO mentioned his plan for the first time: “An economic and commercial corridor will be created in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. […] It is a 300-kilometer corridor where a railway line for container transport will be built. This project implies taking advantage of the strategic location of this strip of national territory to unite the Pacific with the Atlantic, thus facilitating the transport of goods between the countries of Asia and the east coast of the United States.”

Rafael Marin Mollinedo, appointed General Director of the Trans-Isthmus Project and previously responsible for the Special Economic Zones, highlighted the development of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as “an urgent task”, due to its “economic lag and social marginalization.”
The future of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec according to the government

On December 23, 2018, the project was officially presented to the public during a tour conducted by the Mexican president in Oaxaca. He affirmed that one of the main objectives must be to promote a new model of economic growth, the conservation of biodiversity, water, soil, and air, as well as the reinforcement of the culture and regional identity of indigenous peoples.

According to the government’s proposal, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec Interocianic Corridor will be the “backbone” of the Isthmus Development Program. First, the project of previous years will be resumed: a railway line between the ports of Salina Cruz, Oaxaca and Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz. The proposal intends to modernize this 304 km railway, and rectify some curves and slopes, in order to increase speed from 40 to 60–80 km/h. The modernization works alone will take about three years. In addition, they want to expand the ports on the respective coasts, in order to receive cargo ships. Another part of the project will be the construction of a new highway along the corridor, the modernization of the MEX-185 highway, and other roads.

In regards to industry, the project plans to increase the production of petroleum derivatives through the rehabilitation of the Minatitlan and Salina Cruz refineries, and improved maintenance of the 220 km pipeline that would transport natural gas that must supply the industries and communities in the region. To guarantee an electricity supply and provide communications to the industries and communities of the Isthmus, the development of wind power plants is intended, including the construction of five electrical substations and the installation of underground optical fiber. It was also announced that in 2020, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec will be declared a free zone, meaning that taxes will be lowered for companies in that territory and that there will be fiscal support to attract investments that generate jobs.

Mollinedo described the Interocianic Corridor as “the spearhead” for more projects based around it. These include six other industrial parks along the corridor. There, raw materials can be transformed in order to generate added value and strengthen the economy. Alejandro Murat, governor of the state of Oaxaca, expressed that “this project means for Oaxaca and southeastern Mexico what the Free Trade Agreement did at the time. […] Oaxaca is celebrating.”

Objectives and intentions: “Development curtains”

Rafael Marin Mollinedo believes that the main causes of economic lag and poverty in the Isthmus have to do with low and declining levels of public and private investment, as well as weak local markets and fragile and poorly diversified economic structures. The modernization and construction of physical and digital infrastructure is intended to attract private investment, so that the State can “direct the economy and orient it towards the generation of welfare” for the population. Mollinedo says that those who will benefit most from the project are the most vulnerable and least favored groups of the population.

As AMLO had already mentioned in his letter to Donald Trump, one of the objectives of the project is the creation of jobs in order to keep the population in the region and prevent “young people from the region continuing to emigrate north in search of work.” It should be noted that the free zone of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec coincides with the containment zone defined in the Southern Border Program.
for immigration control. The National Development Plan of
the current government seeks that "regional development
projects act as "curtains" to capture the migratory flow in its
transit to the north."

In terms of logistics, it should be mentioned that the
transport of goods by the interoceanic route of the Isthmus
of Tehuantepec would be much faster than crossing the
Panama Canal, where one must wait about ten days. "The
Panama Canal is saturated, so this can be a relief valve for
the demand that exists and has not been able to be served in
the Panama Canal," Mollinedo said.

**The Transistmic Corridor in relation to other megaprojects**

The Transistmic Corridor is closely related to other
megaprojects such as the Mayan Train or the Dos Bocas re-
finery. They represent the three main projects of the AMLO
government for the South and whose operation was thought
out in an interconnected manner.

Dos Bocas will be built in the state of Tabasco, finishing
in 2022, in order to extract oil (84% of proven oil reserves in
all of Mexico are in this area.) The Mayan Train will pass
along the Yucatan Peninsula from Cancun to Palenque,
functioning as a tourist attraction during the day and as a
freight train at night. Together with the Trans-Isthmus Cor-
rider they combine the extraction and commodification of
resources with the export to the markets of Asia, Europe,
and the United States.

Geocomunes emphasizes that companies established in
the free zone of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec will have "con-
trol of the right of way" over their territories which will allow
them to "limit the mobility of people according to their inter-
est." According to Geocomunes, this means that "this par-
ticular region would be the starting point in the New South
Frontier."

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**Indigenous consultations questioned**

When the project was announced, Rafael Marin Moll-
linedo said that one of the basic criteria will be respect for
the opinion of the communities and indigenous peoples of
the Isthmus. He promised to "do nothing without consulta-
tion" but also said he was sure "that people will support this
project."

In November 2018, a citizen consultation had already
been carried out in which around 946,000 Mexicans par-
ticipated nationwide, who decided on ten projects of the
MORENA government. The Isthmus of Tehuantepec train
received 90% support.

The Indigenous Consultation of the indigenous peoples
of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was held on March 30 and
31, 2019. At the end of April, AMLO said that "the consult-
tation has already been done and people are in favor of the
Trans-Isthmus Project; because people do want work and
well-being." He stated that 3,397 people had participated
(there are more than one million indigenous people living
in the Isthmus region). Community activists and advocates
criticized that only some community representatives were
invited, and that most of the representatives were consulted
under pressure that their construction projects and other
needs could not be granted if they did not approve the rail-
road project first.

"You cannot approve any megaproject without discussing
in assembly without knowing what the positive and negative
impacts will be," said Carlos Beas, adviser to the Union of
Indigenous Communities for the Northern Zone of the Isth-
mus (UCIZONI). He added that "there is no specific infor-
mation regarding the megaproject of the Isthmus" and also con-
sidered it serious that "the populations consulted were 80km
away from the project, but those at the foot of the railway were
not consulted."

Between August 19 and 30 of last year, the Federal
Government held meetings under the Agrarian Attorney
and Rafael Marin Mollinedo in the 31 ejido nuclei where
the section of the trans-Isthmus train will pass. During
these meetings the ejidatarios were informed about the
megaproject and its impacts in just 15 minutes. The UCI-
ZONI leader, Juana Ramirez Villegas, denounced that the
information shared with those affected by the project was
"vague and general."

The Isthmus of Tehuantepec is an area of strong commu-
nity organization in defense of land and territory as apart
from the Trans-Isthmus Corridor there are 47,000 hectares
of concessions for mining companies and 28 wind farms
in the region. UCIZONI, being just one of many organiza-
tions that demonstrated against the megaproject, current-
ly brings together 84 communities and colonies from nine
municipalities in the state of Oaxaca in the Isthmus of Te-
huantepec.

The National Indigenous Congress (CNI) and the Zapa-
tista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) rejected the con-
sultation one day after its completion, considering it "a
March 2020

The members of UCIZONI have stressed that the consultations carried out in March and August 2019 have not met the standards stipulated in Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO), according to which indigenous consultations must be prior, free, informed, and culturally appropriate. In January 2020, UCIZONI filed a complaint with the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) for violation of the rights of indigenous peoples. Dagoberto Toribio, president of UCIZONI, said regarding the query that “the information was insufficient and biased, was not prior and was not free because the acceptance of the Trans-Isthmus Corridor megaproject was obtained in exchange for receiving social programs.”

They demanded that the Ministry of the Environment Natural Resources (SEMARNAT) hold another public consultation on the ecological impact of the modernization of the railway. In the forum “Nature, Indigenous Rights, and National Sovereignty in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec” that took place on February 11 of this year, the head of the Semarnat, Víctor Manuel Toledo, emphasized that although the government is considering “respect to biocultural wealth”, “the trains will go ahead.”
N ational and international solidarity has been able to take many forms at different times, in different locations, and in different situations of conflict. In Chiapas during the 1990s, it meant that thousands of unprotected and threatened people were sheltered against the extreme violence suffered in the region. In those years the Civil Camps for Peace (CCP), which today are known as Civil Observation Brigades for Peace and Human Rights (BriCo), began operation. This year, that project celebrates its 25-year anniversary.

The history of the project is inseparably linked to the armed uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in 1994, which generated a reaction of solidarity from national and international civil society to the systematic human rights violations that were pointed out, as well as for the systemic marginalization of indigenous peoples in Chiapas. Initially, the primary objective was “to open a civil space to help maintain hope, preserve peace and community dynamics in a context of war, in addition to witnessing a state war strategy and denouncing those actions.” Progressively it became clear that “not only have the communities in the so-called conflict zone been affected; there are also other communities that are daily beaten by a policy that believes in the establishment of the rule of law through repression, harassment, and torture,” states Rosy Rodriguez and Jorge L. Hernandez on the annual agenda of the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Center for Human Rights (Frayba).

As of August 1994, the Coordination of Non-Governmental Organizations for Peace (CONPAZ) installed “Casas de la Paz” in Morelia, Altamirano municipality, in addition to organizing Information Missions and caravans for humanitarian aid and monitoring. Then, the first CCPs were established in 1995, with the installation of camps in Altamirano, Tila, El Bosque, Ocosingo, and Las Margaritas. After restructuring in 1998, the program was renamed BriCo and is still coordinat-
ed today by Frayba. To date, it has had the participation of 12,728 observers from 60 countries of origin who have stayed in 108 camps in 23 municipalities of the state, an expression of "a lively and practical solidarity, full of reciprocity and gratitude", recalls the Frayba 25 years after.

The work of the observers has involved "inserting the body" between the population and its aggressors, documenting possible violations of human rights and sometimes, for example with forced displacement, bringing food, medicine, and clothing. They have been accompanying organizational processes in defense of their territory, internally displaced persons, migrant caravans, and communities that suffered a natural disaster or who are in a risky situation.

In the BriCos, you end up sharing everyday life in all its facets. In this, otherness also arises: "I never thought that you can speak with a white person as an equal," the indigenous compañera Guadalupe reflects. "One feels, sometimes, special, useful for thinking that one's mere presence is important for the people of the color of the earth. But precisely that same issue makes you rethink the racist-class world we inhabit. May our skin, our non-being-of-color-of-the-earth be a safeguard for those who are," reflects a Catalan campaigner.

"We see that the observation of human rights establishes relations of dialogue and respect, despite all the differences," including a minor one - the language - says another German campaigner.

From the 90s to date, "the Mexican political scene has become more complex, violence has spread and intensified. The aggressions to the historical processes of struggle and resistance, as well as the alternatives “below” have remained constant. For this reason, the commitment to protect, strengthen, and encourage these processes from national and international solidarity has remained relevant", Marina Pages, coordinator of the International Service (SIPAZ), reminds us in a text of the annual Frayba agenda.

On the other hand, modern communication technologies and globalization, which make solidarity possible in its current effectiveness - even in manifestations such as the BriCo - are also factors that hinder it. In the midst of a barrage of news, any given event is not contemplated independently, but rather is digested in relation and comparison with the hundred other incidents that occurred on the same day or the previous day or the day before that. It is easy to feel that the needs are so overwhelming that there are no longer solutions or capacity to support others. Globally, it is increasingly difficult to generate a political cost to States for possible repressions, as since 9/11, human rights have increasingly been considered acceptable "collateral damage" by government players. At a more local level, in projects such as the BriCo the consequences of these changes are directly reflected in the available resources, monetary and human, and raise questions about their effectiveness and future.

However, despite all the challenges, the deterrent impact of BriCo is undeniable. National and international solidarity has made possible the protection of thousands of lives and the strengthening of organizational processes. Any space that facilitates the exchange between people who normally would never interact is another step towards a more comprehensive and fair world. "The BriCos are proof that another globalization exists, very different from that of capital. It is the globalization of love and hope that is built from and in the communities of Chiapas and that is spread all over the world," recalls the Frayba...
From mid-November 2019 to mid-February 2020

INTERNATIONAL PRESENCE AND ACCOMPANIMENT

CHIAPAS

Highlands region
- In November, we participated in an analysis meeting with other civil organizations and with members of the Simokhoveli Parish Council, who for several years have suffered threats and aggressions because of their complaints about the social-political situation that has prevailed in the municipality.
- In November, December, and January we accompanied the displaced families of Banavil, municipality of Tenepapa, in various procedures that allow them to advance in their search for justice and return.
- On December 10, we attended the events held in the framework of the 27th anniversary of the formation of Las Abejas Civil Society; on the 21st and 22nd of this same month, we attended events remembering the 22nd anniversary of the Acteal massacre, municipality of Chenalhó.

Northern Jungle region
- In November, we participated in a space for risk analysis and defense strategies with the Center for Indigenous Rights (CEDIAC AC) and the Jesuit Mission of Bachajón in their accompaniment of indigenous peoples’ movements that seek to exercise their right to self-determination through the constitution of community governments in Chilón and Sitalá.
- In January, we attended the Second Forum in Defense of Territory and Self-Determination, which was convened by various civil and social organizations and held in Ocosingo.

Border region
- In February, we met with several civil organizations and religious actors to discuss the situation prevailing in the Border region of Chiapas.

Gender
- On November 25, we were present at several activities held in San Cristóbal de Las Casas in the framework of the International Day for the Eradication of Violence against Women.

Prisoners
- At least once a month, we visit the indigenous prisoners organized in the organizations “Solidarity of the Voice of Amate” and “The Voice of Indigenous People in Resistance,” both groups adhering to the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in the San Cristóbal de Las Casas prison.
- From mid-November to December, we accompanied members of the Collective of Familiaris of Pressos en Lucha who have received death threats in their efforts to demand justice for their prisoners.
- In February, we attended the press conference in which it was announced that four prisoners in San Cristóbal and Comitán were to begin a new hunger strike in order to speed up the process of reviewing their files.

Events
- In November, we participated in the Assembly of Believing Peoples in San Cristóbal de Las Casas.
- In November, we were present at the press conference in which members of the Mission to Observe the Humanitarian Crisis of Migrants and Refugees in Southeast Mexico reported on the impacts of Mexico’s migration policy on the southern border.
- In November, we participated in Tuxtla Gutiérrez in a workshop organized by the Joint Service for the Characterization of the Internally Displaced Population (JIPS) in which authorities, organizations of displaced persons, and civil organizations participated.
- In November, we were present at the “Mariano Abarca” Environmental Defense Forum in Chiapas, which was held in San Cristóbal de La Casas and in which the first recognition of environmental defense in Chiapas was given to the indigenous organization Movement in Defense of Life and Territory (MODEVITE).
- In December, we attended the press conference in which the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center, A.C. (Frayba) denounced death threats against its staff and those who make up the Collective of Relatives of Prisoners in Struggle who received in November and December “death threats, surveillance, harassment, and intimidation, in the context of the struggle for the freedom of prisoners of indigenous peoples”, particularly Juan de la Cruz Ruiz.
- In December, we attended the press conference in which members of the parishes of Oxchuc, Tenejapa, and Huixtán, accompanied by the human rights area of the San Cristóbal de Las Casas Diocese, expressed their discontent because the federal government has not consulted them on the construction of mega-projects such as the Mayan train and the San Cristóbal-Palenque highway.
- In December, we attended the press conference in which the release of Juan de la Cruz Ruiz was made public. He was imprisoned from February 28, 2007, to December 9, 2019.
- We attended various activities as part of the “Combo for Life: December of Resistance and Rebellion” to be held in Chiapas in December including the Forum in Defense of Territory and Mother Earth; the Fourth Assembly of the CNI; the Second International Meeting of Women Who Fight; and the celebration of the 26th anniversary of the beginning of the “war against oblivion.”
- In January, we accompanied the pilgrimage of the Believing People of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas organized to honor Fray Samuel Ruiz García, former bishop of this diocese who died 9 years ago, and to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Diocesan Synod.
- In February, we participated in the Assembly of the Believing Peoples in San Cristóbal de Las Casas.

INFORMATION AND TRAINING TOWARDS ACTION
VISITS, DELEGATIONS, AND TOURS
- We received delegations, students, journalists, and members of our coalition interested in knowing or deepening their knowledge of the situation in Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Guerrero, and the work of SIPAZ.

EDUCATION FOR PEACE
- In November, we presented a context analysis at the parish meeting of Indian theology in Teopisca.
- In December, we facilitated a discussion with the Mesoamerican Voices team as part of their annual evaluation and strategic planning for 2020.