

Zapatista 'commanders' withdrawn from Chiapas

by Ruben Cota Meza

On Dec. 30, on the eve of the sixth anniversary of the armed uprising in Mexico of the self-dubbed Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), commanded in Chiapas by "subcommander Marcos," it was announced that Dominican friar Raúl Vera López had been officially designated bishop of Saltillo, in the state of Coahuila. Up until then, Vera López had served as the coadjutor bishop of the San Cristóbal de las Casas diocese in Chiapas. With the naming of Vera López to a diocese in the arid northern region of Mexico, and with the announced retirement of San Cristóbal Bishop Samuel Ruiz to semi-arid Querétaro in the center of the country, the armed rebellion in Mexico's humid southeastern jungle region now finds itself without its religious commanders.

Separated from the immediate "battlefront," these Theology of Liberation bishops have only the Internet through which to continue to command their demoralized forces. The Vatican, by making the long-overdue decision to extirpate the cancer in Chiapas by dismantling the spiritual tyranny imposed by Ruiz over the Chiapas Indian population, is attempting to reinstate genuine Catholic doctrine in the area. Bishop Ruiz, however, has the backing of the international financial oligarchy, and of the British Crown in particular, in his separatist project in Chiapas, and they are not likely to take such a tactical defeat lying down.

Samuel Ruiz's failed coup

In 1996, the Vatican named Vera López as the coadjutor bishop to the schismatic Ruiz in the San Cristóbal de las Casas diocese in Chiapas, in the hope that he would attenuate the political consequences of Ruiz's grave theological deviations. The latter have fed, and continue to sustain, the armed conflict in the Chiapas region. Instead, Vera López ended up becoming one of Ruiz's "subcommanders." In an act of insolence as "supreme patriarch" of the "indigenous church"—Ruiz has spent the last 40 years building this—and in open defiance of the Pope, the only power in the Catholic Church entitled to name bishops in any diocese on the planet, Ruiz had "named" Vera López as his successor in the diocese. Arguing that the coadjutor bishop has the "right of succession," allegedly established by tradition, Ruiz tried to stage a coup against John Paul II himself.

Historian Jean Meyer, whose book *A Man, A Diocese:*

Don Samuel 1960-2000 was the product of a year-long investigation of Ruiz, told *Proceso* magazine that "parish by parish, community by community, Don Samuel gave very emotional speeches, presenting Don Raúl as his successor." "But Don Samuel," Meyer scolded the arrogant bishop, "you know that you have no guarantee that Raúl Vera will replace you. You are playing a very dangerous game."

"Because of my respect for him," Meyer said, "I never told Don Samuel he was making a mistake, since no prelate is guaranteed possession of the diocese he helps to run, especially because it's not private property that one can inherit." Apparently, Ruiz did consider the diocese his personal property, and "his" church, upon whose altars he tried to enshrine himself. But Ruiz, and with him Vera López, were unceremoniously removed from the pedestal on which they rested.

Leaving a minefield behind

Having suffered an important tactical defeat, and as knowledgeable as he is of the tactics of warfare, Ruiz is now trying to leave a minefield behind him. "I leave the diocese living through an irreversible process, and where a local, national, and international consciousness of the conflict has been raised. . . . What happened was that there was a gradual repression, until people said 'enough.'" Speaking of his upcoming departure from the diocese, Ruiz argues that "the existence of international pressure [on Mexico] is wearing off." That's why government forces "try to make you believe that this is just a problem of an intransigent Indian group, or a group manipulated by one Guillén Vicente who poses as 'subcommander Marcos.'" But no, the Chiapas bishop says, boldly outlining his instructions, "this is an indigenous movement which, although cornered, doesn't surrender. It has grown . . . and [its members] prefer to die with dignity, than to continue dying of starvation."

Vera López, meanwhile, has adopted the use of military terminology to describe what he leaves behind. "I leave in Chiapas a persecuted church," he told the Italian Catholic newsweekly *Christian Family*. To the Mexican daily *El Universal*, he said that the situation in Chiapas has deteriorated further, and is a "time bomb" because "the solution applied is incorrect: [the government] wants to use force. . . . Instead of the Army [presence] being reduced, it increases. All this shows is that they don't want to arrive at peace with justice, but by once again imposing systems of domination. . . . There is irregular warfare, low-intensity warfare here . . . running the paramilitaries; and to attack the insurgency they try to 'drown the fish,' and attack civil society, which is the social stratum sustaining it."

One of the arguments most often heard by many of the schismatic bishop's defenders is that the departure of Ruiz and Vera López from Chiapas "won't solve the problem." It can be assumed that there will be future provocations by the armed movement to "prove" the correctness of this assertion.