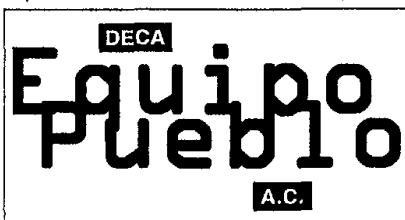


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The Other Side of Mexico

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1 Editorial

Banamex-Citigroup: The end of Mexican banking **2**

3 Mesoamérica.com

Financing for development under global debate **5**

6 Challenges of the local government and civil society

The Peace Process in Chiapas and United States... **7**

10 The National Development Plan only for optimist

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EDITORIAL

THE BURNING SUMMER OF MEXICAN AGRICULTURE

VICTOR M. QUINTANA S.*

Despite the fact that the summer rains should have Mexican farmers worried, the agricultural crisis takes them away from the fields, and has them involved in brave collective actions. During the last weeks, maize farmers have been protesting intensely, paralysing the state of Sinaloa. Cane farmers have taken over various state ministries in Mexico City. Farmers in Chihuahua have taken over toll booths along highways and international bridges. Even pineapple farmers are protesting indignantly.

The North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA, has flooded Mexican agriculture. While Mexican producers are struggle to become efficient, to renovate themselves,

to organise, millions of tons of agricultural products cross the border from the United States, flooding the Mexican markets and displacing Mexican produce.

Up until now, the only thing the President of the Republic and the Ministry of Agriculture have done is invite the peasant to become businessmen, to "forget the culture of subsidy" and become responsible. There is no lack of calls. However, the policy of the Fox administration has done nothing to address the structural causes that are pushing Mexican agriculture over the precipice. On the contrary. If you take a look not at the speeches, nor at the good intentions, but at the truly active policies, the

discourse about options put into practice, a total continuity with the policies of liquidation of national agriculture over the last four six-year administrations becomes evident: In February Fox vetoes the Law on Rural Development approved by Congress.

With this, he deprives producers of a firm and secure base, of a clear policy framework and of multi-annual budgets for the sector. As the planning fanatics well know, this has many more possibilities of being successful, given the unpredictable context. And that is what said law sought: to grant

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funds for this training programme of more than 1000 soldiers in the period 1997 and 98. In these years, while the Mexican government was creating and training paramilitary groups in Chiapas, Mexican soldiers attended the School of the Americas.

The war against drugs: New names for old enemies

The US also justified this sudden increase in support and training for the Mexican army with the war against drugs, sometimes without drawing a line between counter narcotics and counter-insurgency. In 1998, a US official made this very clear: "There is not much difference between the war against drugs and counter-insurgency. We just don't use the word because it is politically susceptible".

After the Cold War, the US needed a new excuse for military control and intervention in Latin America and found a new threat to national security, drugs trafficking. Under the justification of the war against drugs, starting with ex-President Bush in 1989, the Latin American countries were classified as producers and exporters, just as they were identified as a communist threat some time ago. Since 1997, a large part of the counter-narcotics training "low intensity warfare and irregular war tactics" was given to special forces of the Mexican army, as well as to special air force groups and new and developed amphibian counter narcotics units, the Mexican marines and Mexico's naval forces. Today these forces are spread out in the Chiapas conflict zone. The transport of drugs in Chiapas is minimal compared with other places in Mexico, so the presence of these forces there is questionable.

A large part of this aid was allocated in 1999, as a continuation of the counter-insurgency training. In May 2001, the Mexican navy completed a training programme in Puerto Madero, Chiapas, aimed at combating drugs trafficking and armed rebel



PHOTO: ALEJANDRO MELÉNDEZ

groups. According to reports from news sources in Chiapas, this was managed by foreign experts, presumed to be from the US.

Pushing for a false peace: US support for regional stability

At the same time as the US gave military aid to Mexico, it was pushing for peace in Guatemala. During most of the 36 years of bloody war in Guatemala, the US supported the Guatemalan government and the armed forces though direct aid programmes and military training and aid, despite the fact that these forces massacred hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans. The US economic forces were never really interested in a just and dignified peace for Guatemalans, much less if this meant that the economic reforms should go against US interests.

The peace talks began in 1987, but it was not until 1994 that the US began to pressure for the signing of peace accords in Guatemala. The geopolitical interests of the country were behind the pressure for the peace process. When an armed incursion in Mexico (in the southeast of Mexico, bordering Guatemala), threatened US interests and stability for the implementation of the North American Free Trade

Agreement, US officials turned towards Guatemala.

Many profound social, political and economic changes prescribed by the Guatemalan government have had to be implemented. Initially the international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank "in which the US has a strong weight in decision taking" also pressured Guatemala to sign a peace process. After the signing of these agreements in 1997, the pressure on the agreements was minimal, while the war against drugs increased. The Guatemalan economy is currently in ruins, while violence, impunity and exploitation are reaching war-time levels.

In a similar way, US interests are threatening peace in Chiapas. As suggested above, the goals of US foreign policy in Mexico are the acquisition of energy, increasing trade and the war against drugs. As in Guatemala, these priorities compromise the peace accords or dialogue, as they are opposed to local interests. When the conflict in Chiapas begins to threaten the interests of the country again, there are doubts over whether the US government will act in support of the Mexican government as faithfully as in the past.

the region extends over 102 million hectares, where 64 million people live, of which half live in the countryside, some 40% work in agriculture and 18% is indigenous. But the most notable and shared sign of identity is that most of 60% of Mesoamericans are poor. Miserable in the midst of unimaginable biological wealth: 1,797 mammal species, 4,153 birds, 1,882 reptiles, 944 amphibians, 1,132 fish, 75,861 plants, and innumerable micro organisms, make up an opulent biological corridor in the process of international formalization. However, both flora and fauna are attached by the illegal sale of mammals, reptiles, plants, especially orchids. The forest is being lost at an accelerating rate: 11 million hectares between 1992 and 1996.

Deforestation that is especially severe in the Mexican portion: in 1969 the Lacandon jungle had 1.5 million hectares of trees and 12,000 inhabitants, while today 325,000 hectares of trees remain, but 215,000 inhabitants reside there. This biological richness is possible, amongst other things, due to the abundance of sweet water, which is a strategic resource in itself.

In terms of extrovert economic activity, if we separate Mexican oil and industrial production in states like Puebla, and to a lesser degree in Costa Rica, the area is overwhelmingly agro exporting. This includes coffee, which practically all of the countries produce; sugar, which is important in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and Nicaragua; and banana, relevant to Costa Rica and Mexico; and meat, which Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua and Mexico sell. Recently huge forest plantations have been established in Mesoamerica; Mexico has only 60,700 hectares of artificial forests, which the majority, 256,650, correspond to the rest of the Central American countries, particularly Costa Rica and Guatemala.

Another important activity directed externally is tourism, as some 5 million visitors a year come to the region. However, the supposed comparative advantage of the region is also its downfall, as in the last few years the price of tropical agricultural products have fallen, causing a deficit of US\$23.6 billion, which is just about compensated by foreign direct investments and loans. In terms of the introverted economy, the Mesoamericans are people of maize. Ancestral cultivation that is practices over 5,300,000

hectares, where each year some 10 million tonnes of grain are harvested, with more than half a million tonnes of beans, constitutes our basic diet. Even then, the peoples of the middle of America live on the edge of disaster: when coffee, sugar or banana prices have not plummeted, the region becomes suffocated with drought as in 1994 or is shaken by hurricanes with English names such as Lily, George or Mitch.

There are also classes between Mesoamericans, and the economic relationship between Mexico and Central American is deeply asymmetrical: for each dollar in goods that the seven economies of the isthmus export to Mexico, they import four dollars worth of goods from the country. For Mexico, on the other hand, this trade relationship is not very important, as for every dollar of exports sent to the seven southern neighbours, it trades 11 with its northern partners, and in terms of Mexican imports, the percentage of Central American made goods is insignificant. The economies of the poorer countries look north, and the articulation between Mesoamerica and North America, which Mexico as the hinge, confirms this statement. But if Mexico globalises economically towards the north, it is socially tied to the south. As we distance ourselves from the United States, the temperature increases, vegetation explodes, pot-holes become more frequent and poverty takes hold. A good indicator of this descent into the social infernos is wages. A man is not worth the same in the north and in the south. The minimum hourly wage in the United States is US\$5.15m while in Mexico it is 35 cents, 14 times less, although in the case of industry salaries it is only one to ten. But these are misleading national measurements, and the south is predominantly rural, where remunerations are even lower as 70% of workers earn less than the minimum wage. And if salaries fall with latitude, the workers rise up the continent towards the north. It is the law of the market, that cannot be blocked by the bloody Maginot Line which the northern border has become. But there are differences even between the survivors of the south. Poverty is generalized, but the south is more poor than the north, the countryside more than the city, indians more than mestizos, women more than men and young people more than adults. The great march north dramatises this situation, as Mexico and Central America share the condition of expelling their source of work

and generate more than half of the total of undocumented immigrants into the United States. Thus, of about 100 foreigners in the United States, 70 are Latin American or mestizo, 40 are Mexicans, 10 Salvadorans, four Guatemaltecos, 11 Nicaraguans and two Hondureños.

There they suffer equal treatment, but the Latin American states are not the same. The treatment our southern neighbours receive in our country is testament to the true nature of the Mexican authorities. The Mexican government does not act as a big brother to the Central American Diaspora in transit, but as a cohort to the United States. Methods aside, in 1995 it deported 105,932; in 1996, 110,484, in 1997, 86,973; in 1998, 118,786; in 1999, 131,486, in 2000, 168,755, and in the first months of 2001, Mexico's migration authorities sent nearly 30,000 home.

(TO BE CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE)

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