

Comandanta Esther in the Congress of the Union

From the San Lazaro Legislative Palace, Congress of the Union.
March, 2001

Honorable Congress of the Union:

Legislators, Men and Women, from the Political Coordinating Committee of the Chamber of Deputies:

Legislators, Men and Women, from the Joint Committees of Constitutional Issues and of Indigenous Affairs of the Chamber of Deputies:

Legislators, Men and Women, from the Committees of Constitutional Issues, of Indigenous Affairs and of Legislative Studies of the Senate:

Legislators, Men and Women, of the Commission of Concordance and Peace:
Deputies:

Senators:

Brothers and Sisters from the National Indigenous Congress:

Brothers and Sisters of all the Indian Peoples of Mexico:

Brothers and Sisters from other countries:

People of Mexico:

Through my voice speaks the voice of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation.

The word that our voice is bringing is an outcry.

But our word is one of respect for this tribune and for all of those who are listening to it.

You will not receive either insults or rudeness from us.

We shall not do the same thing which took place on the first of December of 2000, in disrespect of these legislative halls.

The word we bring is true.

We did not come to humiliate anyone.

We did not come to defeat anyone.

We did not come to replace anyone.

We did not come to legislate.

We came so that you could listen to us and we could listen to you.

We came to engage in dialogue.

We realize that our presence in this tribune led to bitter discussions and confrontations.

There were those who counted on our using this opportunity to insult or to settle overdue accounts, that it was all part of a strategy to gain public popularity.

Those who thought like that are not present.

But there were those who counted on and trusted our word. It was they who opened this door of dialogue for us, and they are the ones who are present.

We are zapatistas.

We shall not betray the trust and faith that many in this parliament and among the people of Mexico put in our word.

Those who chose to lend an attentive ear to our respectful word, won.

Those who chose to close the doors to dialogue because they feared a confrontation, lost.

Because the zapatistas are bringing the word of truth and respect.

Some might have thought that this tribune would be occupied by SupMarcos, and that it would be he who would be giving this main message of the zapatistas.

You can now see that it is not so.

Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos is that, a Subcomandante.

We are the Comandantes, those who command jointly, the ones who govern our peoples, obeying.

We gave the Sup and those who share hopes and dreams with him, the mission of bringing us to this tribune.

They, our guerreros and guerreras, accomplished that mission, thanks to the support of the popular mobilization in Mexico and in the world.

Now it is our hour.

The respect we are offering the Congress of the Union is one of content, but also of form.

The military chief of a rebel army is not in this tribune.

The ones who represent the civil part of the EZLN are here, the political and organizational leadership of a legitimate, honest and consistent movement are here, which is, in addition, a movement which is legal, due to the Law for Dialogue, Conciliation and a Dignified Peace in Chiapas.

We are thus demonstrating that we are not interested in provoking resentments or suspicions in anyone.

And so it is I, an indigenous woman.

No one will have any reason to feel attacked, humiliated or degraded by my occupying this tribune and speaking today.

Those who are not here now already knew that they would refuse to listen to what an indigenous woman was coming to say to them, and they would refuse to speak because it would be I who was listening to them.

My name is Esther, but that is not important now.

I am a zapatista, but that is not important at this moment either.

This tribune is a symbol.

That is why it caused so much controversy.

That is why we wanted to speak in it, and that is why some did not want us to be here.

And it is also a symbol that it is I, a poor, indigenous and zapatista woman, who would be having the first word, and that the main message of our word as zapatistas would be mine.

A few days ago, in these legislative halls, there was a very heated discussion, and, in a very close vote, the majority position won.

Those who thought differently, and worked accordingly, were not sent to jail, nor were they pursued, let alone killed.

Here, in this Congress, there are marked differences, some of them even contradictory, and there is respect for those differences.

But, even with these differences, the Congress does not come apart, is not balkanized, does not fragment into many little congresses, but - and precisely for those differences - its regulations are constructed.

And, without losing what makes each individual different, unity is maintained, and, with it, the possibility of advancing by mutual agreement.

That is the country we zapatistas want.

A country where difference is recognized and respected.

Where being and thinking differently is no reason for going to jail, for being persecuted, or for dying.

Here, in this Legislative Palace, there are 7 empty places corresponding to the 7 indigenous who could not be present.

And they were not able to be here with us because the difference which makes us indigenous is not recognized nor respected.

Of the seven who are absent, one died in the first days of January of 1994, two others are imprisoned for having opposed the felling of trees, another two are in jail for defending fishing as a means of livelihood and opposing pirate fishermen, and the remaining two have arrest warrants against them for the same cause.

As indigenous, the seven fought for their rights and, as indigenous, they were met with

the responses of death, jail and persecution.

In this Congress, there are various political forces, and each one of them joins together and works with complete autonomy.

Their methods of reaching agreements and the rules of their internal coexistence can be looked upon with approval or disapproval, but they are respected, and no one is persecuted for being from one or the other parliamentary wing, for being from the right, from the center or from the left.

At the point at which it becomes necessary, everyone reaches agreement, and they unite in order to achieve something they believe to be good for the country.

If they are not all in agreement, then the majority reaches agreement, and the minority accepts and works according to the majority agreement.

The legislators are from a political party, from a certain ideological orientation, and they are, at the same time, legislators of all Mexican men and women, regardless of the political party someone belongs to or what their ideas are.

That is how we zapatistas want Mexico to be.

One where indigenous will be indigenous and Mexicans, one where respect for difference is balanced with respect for what makes us equals.

One where difference is not a reason for death, jail, persecution, mockery, humiliation, racism.

One where, always, formed by differences, ours is a sovereign and independent nation.

And not a colony where lootings, unfairness and shame abound.

One where, in the defining moments of our history, all of us rise above the differences to what we have in common, that is, being Mexican.

This is one of those historic moments.

In this Congress the federal Executive does not govern, nor do the zapatistas.

Nor does any political party govern it.

The Congress of the Union is made up of differences, but everyone has in common the fact of their being legislators and concern for national wellbeing.

That difference and that equality are now confronting a time which is presenting them with the opportunity to see very far ahead and to make out, at the present moment, the hour to come.

Our hour, the hour of the Mexican indigenous, has come.

We are asking that our differences and our being Mexicans be recognized.

Fortunately for the Indian peoples and for the country, a group of legislators like you drew up a proposal for constitutional reforms which safeguards the recognition of the

indigenous, as well as maintaining and reinforcing, along with that recognition, national sovereignty.

That is the "Cocopa legislative proposal," named because it was members of the Commission of Concordance and Peace of the Congress of the Union, Deputies and Senators, who drew it up.

We are not unaware of the fact that this Cocopa proposal has received some criticisms. For the last 4 years there has been a debate which no other legislative proposal has received throughout the history of the federal legislature in Mexico.

And, in this debate, all the criticisms were scrupulously refuted, both in theory and in practice.

This proposal was accused of balkanizing the country, ignoring that the country is already divided.

One Mexico which produces wealth, another which appropriates that wealth, and another which is the one which has to stretch out its hand for charity.

We, the indigenous, live in this fragmented country, condemned to shame for being the color we are, for the language we speak, the clothes which cover us, the music and the dance which speak our sadness and joy, our history.

This proposal is accused of created Indian reservations, ignoring that we indigenous are already in fact living apart, separated from the rest of the Mexicans, and, in addition, in danger of extinction.

This proposal is accused of promoting a backward legal system, ignoring that the current one only promotes confrontation, punishes the poor and gives impunity to the rich. It condemns our color and turns our language into crime.

This proposal is accused of creating exceptions in political life, ignoring that in the current one the one who governs does not govern, rather he turns his public position into a source of his own wealth, and he knows himself to be beyond punishment and untouchable as long as term in office does not end.

My indigenous brothers and sisters who will be following me in the use of the word will be speaking of this in more detail.

I would like to speak a little about the criticism of the Cocopa law for legalizing discrimination and marginalization of the indigenous woman.

Deputies, Ladies and Gentlemen.
Senators.

I would like to explain to you the situation of the indigenous woman who are living in our communities, considering that respect for women is supposedly guaranteed in the Constitution.

The situation is very hard.

For many years we have suffered pain, forgetting, contempt, marginalization and oppression.

We suffer from forgetting because no one remembers us.

They send us to live in the corners of the mountains of the country, so that no one will come any more to visit us or to see how we are living.

Meanwhile, we do not have drinkable water, electricity, schools, dignified housing, roads, clinics - let alone hospitals - while many of our sisters, women, children and old ones die from curable illnesses, malnutrition and childbirth, because there are no clinics or hospitals where they can be treated.

Only in the city, where the rich live, do they indeed have hospitals with good care, and they have all the services.

For us, even in the city, we do not receive any benefits, because we do not have any money. There is no way to come back, if there were we would not have come to the city. We return to the road, dead already.

Primarily the women, it is they who feel the pain of childbirth. They see their children die in their arms from malnutrition, for lack of care. They also see their children without shoes, without clothing, because they do not have enough money to buy them, because it is they who care for the homes, they see that they do not have enough for food.

They also carry water for 2 or 3 hours, walking, with pitchers, carrying their children, and they do everything that is to be done in the kitchen.

From the time we are very young, we begin doing simple things.

When we are bigger, we go out to work in the fields, to plant, to weed and carry our children.

Meanwhile the men go out to work in the coffee plantations and cane fields, to earn a little money in order to scrape by with their families. Sometimes they do not come back, because they die from illnesses.

They have no time to return to their homes, or, if they do return, they return sick, without money, sometimes already dead.

And so the woman is left with more pain, because she is left alone caring for her children.

We also suffer from contempt and marginalization from the moment we are born, because they do not take good care of us.

Since, as girls, they do not think we are worth anything. We do not know how to think, or work, how to live our lives.

That is why many of us women are illiterate, because we did not have the opportunity to

go to school.

And then, when we are a bit older, our fathers make us to marry by force. It does not matter if we do not want to, they do not ask for our consent.

They abuse our decisions. As women, they beat us, we are mistreated by our own husbands or relatives. We cannot say anything, because they tell us we do not have a right to defend ourselves.

The mestizos and the wealthy mock us indigenous women because of our way of dressing, of speaking, our language, our way of praying and of curing, and for our color, which is the color of the earth we work.

Always in the land, because we live there. Nor do they allow us to participate in any other work.

They say we are filthy, because, since we are indigenous, we do not bathe.

We, the indigenous women, do not have the same opportunities as the men, who have all the right to decide everything.

Only they have the right to the land, and women do not have rights since we do not work the land and since we are not human beings, we suffer inequality.

The bad governments taught us this entire situation.

We indigenous women do not have good food. We do not have dignified housing. We do not have health services, or education.

We have no work programs, and so we scrape by in poverty. This poverty is because of abandonment by the government, which has never taken notice of us as indigenous, and they have not taken us into account. They have treated us just like any other thing. They say they send us help like Progresa, but they do so for the purpose of destroying us and dividing us.

And that is simply the way life, and death, is for us, the indigenous women.

And they tell us that the Cocopa law is going to make them marginalize us.

It is the current law which allows them to marginalize us and to humiliate us.

That is why we decided to organize in order to fight as zapatista women.

In order to change the situation, because we are already tired of so much suffering, without having our rights.

I am not telling you all of this so that you will pity us or come to save us from those abuses.

We have fought to change that, and we will continue to do so.

But we need for our fight to be recognized in the laws, because up until now it has not been recognized.

It is, but only as women, and even then, not fully.

We, in addition to being women, are indigenous, and, as such, we are not recognized.

We know which are good and which are bad uses and customs.

The bad ones are hitting and beating a woman, buying and selling, marrying by force against her will, not being allowed to participate in assembly, not being able to leave the house.

That is what we want the indigenous rights and culture law to be approved. It is very important for us, the indigenous women of all of Mexico.

It is going to serve for us to be recognized and respected as the women and indigenous we are.

That means that we want our manner of dressing recognized, of speaking, of governing, of organizing, of praying, of curing, our method of working in collectives, of respecting the land and of understanding life, which is nature, of which we are a part.

Our rights as women are also included in this law, so that no one will any longer be able to prevent our participation, our dignity and safety in any kind of work, the same as men.

That is why we want to tell all the Deputies and Senators to carry out their duties, be true representatives of the people.

You said you were going to serve the people, that you are going to make laws for the people.

Carry out your word, what you committed yourselves to with the people.

It is the moment for approving the Cocopa legislative proposal.

Those who voted for you, and those who did not, but who are also people, continue thirsting for peace, for justice.

Do not allow anyone to any longer put our dignity to shame.

We are asking you as women, as poor, as indigenous and as zapatistas.

Legislators, Ladies and Gentlemen:

You have been sensitive to an outcry which is not only the zapatistas', nor just of the Indian peoples, but of all the people of Mexico.

Not only of those who are poor like us, but also of people of comfortable means.

Your sensitivity as legislators allowed a light to illuminate the dark night in which we indigenous are born, grow up, live and die.

That light is dialogue.

We are certain that you do not confuse justice with charity.

And that you have known to recognize in our difference the equality which, as human beings and as Mexicans, we share with you and with all the people of Mexico.

We applaud your listening to us, and that is why we want to take advantage of your attentive ear in order to tell you something important:

The announcement of the military vacating Guadalupe Tepeyac, La Garrucha and Ri'o Euseba, and the measures which are being taken in order to carry this out, have not gone unnoticed by the EZLN.

Senor Vicente Fox is responding now to one of the questions which our people made to him through us:

He is the supreme commander of the federal Army, and the army follows his orders, whether for the good or the bad.

In this case, his orders have been a sign of peace, and that is why we, the Comandantes and Comandantas of the EZLN, are also giving orders of peace to our forces:

First. - We are ordering Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, as military chief of the regular and irregular forces of the EZLN, to carry out whatever necessary in order to see that no military advance by our troops is made into the positions which have been vacated by the federal Army, and for him to order our forces to maintain their current positions in the mountains.

We will not respond to a sign of peace with a sign of war.

Zapatistas arms will not replace government arms.

The civilian population living in those places vacated by the federal Army have our word that our military forces will not be employed to resolve conflicts or disputes.

We are inviting national and international civil society to set up peace camps and observation posts in those places, and to certify in that way that there is no armed presence by the zapatistas.

Second. - We are giving instructions to architect Fernando Yanz Munoz to, in the shortest possible time, put himself in contact with the Commission of Concordance and Peace, and, with government peace Commissioner, Senator Luis H. Alvarez, and to propose that, together, they travel to the southeast state of Chiapas and certify personally that the seven positions are free of all military presence, and, thus, one of the three signs demanded by the EZLN for the resumption of dialogue.

Third. - We are also instructing architect Fernando Yanez Munoz to become accredited with the federal government headed by Vicente Fox in the capacity of official liaison for the EZLN with the government peace commissioner, and to work in coordination in order to achieve the fulfillment, as quickly as possible, of the two remaining signs, so that dialogue may be formally resumed: the release of all zapatista prisoners, and the constitutional recognition of indigenous rights and culture according to the Cocopa

legislative proposal.

The federal Executive now has, from this moment on, a secure, trustworthy and discreet means for making progress in the conditions which will allow direct dialogue between the peace commissioner and the EZLN. We hope he makes good use of him.

Fourth. - We are respectfully requesting the Congress of the Union, given that it is here where the door to dialogue and peace have been opened, to facilitate a place within its walls so that there can be - if the government peace commissioner accepts it - this first meeting between the federal government and the EZLN liaison.

In the case of a refusal by the Congress of the Union, which we would understand, architect Yanez is instructed to see that the meeting is held wherever is considered appropriate, always and when it is a neutral place, and the public is informed as to what is agreed upon there.

Legislators, Ladies and Gentlemen:

In this way we are making clear our will for dialogue, for the building of accords and for achieving peace.

If the path to peace in Chiapas can be seen with optimism now, it is thanks to the mobilization of many people in Mexico and in the world.

We would most especially like to thank them.

It has also been made possible by a group of legislators, men and women, who are now in front of me, who have known to open the space, their ears and their hearts, to a word which is legitimate and just.

To a word which has on its side: reason, history, truth and justice, and which, nonetheless, does not yet have the law on its side.

When indigenous rights and culture are constitutionally recognized in accord with the Cocopa legislative proposal, the law will begin joining its hour with the hour of the Indian peoples.

The legislators who today opened their door and hearts to us, will then have the satisfaction of having fulfilled their duties.

And that is not measured in money, but in dignity.

Then, on that day, millions of Mexican men and women, and those from other countries, will know that all the suffering they have endured during these days, and in those to come, have not been in vain.

And if we are indigenous today, afterwards we will be all those others who are dead, persecuted and imprisoned because of their difference.

Legislators, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am an indigenous and zapatista woman.

Through my voice spoke not just the hundreds of thousands of zapatistas of the Mexican southeast.

Millions of indigenous from throughout the country and the majority of the Mexican people also spoke.

My voice did not lack respect for anyone, but nor did it come to ask for charity.

My voice came to ask for justice, liberty and democracy for the Indian peoples.

My voice demanded, and demands, the constitutional recognition of our rights and our culture.

And I am going to end my word with a cry which all of you, those who are here and those who are not, are going to be in agreement with:

With the Indian Peoples!

Viva Mexico!

Viva Mexico!

Viva Mexico!

Democracy!

Liberty!

Justice!

>From the San La'zaro Legislative Palace, Congress of the Union.

Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee

- General Command of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation.

Mexico, March of 2001.

Thank you very much.

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