

I remember it well. It was 30 years ago on January 1st, 1994 and my telephone rang. Fabiola and Salvador my two friends from Mexico City had surprising news. A group calling themselves the Zapatistas had taken up arms in the state of Chiapas. They were indigenous and objected to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that came into effect that very day and with which they lost many of the gains of the 1917 Mexican constitution. They had taken over several municipalities, San Cristobal de Las Casas being the most well-known of them, and had declared war on the Mexican army. They rose up to combat the pervasive poverty that was prevalent throughout much of Mexico, especially in their state of Chiapas. Back then, this all seemed unreal, especially given the world state of back then. Guerrilla armies and liberation groups were entering into peace accords and disarming.

What was this crazy Zapatista uprising about? Now that the Berlin Wall had fallen four years earlier armed struggle was no longer fashionable nor viable. The mostly indigenous Zapatistas of Chiapas said they took up arms because their rights as human beings were not respected. But to the modern Mexican government this movement was not the result of the conditions of social injustice but the colluding of a terrorist group. I went to Chiapas to find out, and I worked in the human rights centre in San Cristobal de Las Casas for years. While there I witnessed flagrant violence against civilians, impoverished indigenous people standing up for their dignity.

The war in Gaza throws me back to the feeling of outrage I felt at seeing innocent civilian lives be the price that the most powerful armies demand for rebelling. In the two months since the beginning of Israel's invasion of Gaza, there have been more civilian deaths than in the two years of the Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Why are the lives of some people so much more meaningful than that of others? The Gazan who defends their country from an invading army, are they a terrorist or a patriot? Is the Israeli invader a patriot because in invading Gaza they extend their territory? History did not begin on October 7, 2023, and one war crime does not justify another war crime. The foundation of the state of Israel 74 years ago produced 800,000 Palestinian refugees who had formed 85% of the indigenous population. The 1967 Six Day War produced another 300,000 refugees as Israeli colonies extended into the occupied territories, an illegal practice under international law.

After 100 years the situation of the indigenous people of Palestine and Israel has not improved. After 500 years, the situation of indigenous people in Chiapas has not improved either. In Canada how many Native reserves still do not have safe drinking water? How many other examples can we list here? We as a worldwide community of human beings must do better.

Oscar Hernández, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, January 1st, 2024