
Mayan pacifist group Las Abejas pressures Chiapas military base to close, 2000, Mexico

- [\(mainly or initiated by\) indigenous participants](#) [1]
- [\(mainly or initiated by\) people of color](#) [2]
- [local community or neighborhood-level campaign](#) [3]

Timing

Time period notes:

March 1999 to April 2000

March

1999

to:

April

2000

Location and Goals

Country:

Mexico

Location City/State/Province:

San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

Las Abejas campaigned to close the Mexican government's military base next to the refugee camp where the Mayans were living. The Christian Peacemaker Teams' (CPT) group joined them to share their goal and reduce the chance of violent reprisal by the military.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 029. Symbolic reclamations>plant corn on a military base
- 034. Vigils

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 167. Pray-in
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 041. Pilgrimages

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 029. Symbolic reclamations>make peace sign using rocks, carve sun and moon into ground
- 040. Religious processions
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 167. Pray-in
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Segment Length:

2.2 months

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Peace

Group characterization:

- Internally displaced Mayans (indigenous Mexicans)

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Las Abejas and Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) members

Partners:

Catholic diocese in Chiapas, other community members of X'oyep

External allies:

five displaced men from another village (Yaximel), county's parish priest (Father Rodrigo), Father Pedro, Sister Josefina, Jose Vasques, university students from Mexico city, internationals from the United States and Europe

Involvement of social elites:

Mexican congressman

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Abejas
- CPT

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Abejas
- CPT

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Abejas
- CPT

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Abejas
- CPT

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Abejas
- CPT

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Abejas
- CPT
- Father Pedro
- Jose Vasques
- Sister Josefina
- county's parish priest (Father Rodrigo)
- five displaced men from another village (Yaximel)
- internationals
- other community members of X'oyep
- university students from Mexico city

Segment Length:

2.2 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Mexican government, more specifically the military commanders and soldiers on the military base adjacent to X'oyep refugee camp).

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Soldiers play the music (the Eagles and Whitney Houston) to annoy the occupiers of the base and encourage them to leave.

Campaigner violence:

not known

Repressive Violence:

not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Total points:

6 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

I gave the campaign 3 points because a major goal of the CPTers (to engage in public nonviolent actions that would show the Abejas' similar actions as legitimate and reduce the chance of military reprisal) was achieved, but the goal of the Abejas (to abolish the military presence) was not achieved. However, the campaign influenced some soldiers who personally decided to leave. Organizationally both Las Abejas and CPT survived the campaign. Lastly, I gave 2 points for growth because numerous allies and supporters joined in the sixth segment and the number of participants grew.

Las Abejas is a Christian pacifist group of about 6,000 Tzotzil Maya indigenous people who live in Chiapas. Las Abejas means "The Bees" in Spanish, reportedly indicating the value of collective work and life that shares the honey with those who need it. Forty-five members of the group were killed on 22 December 1997 when caught in a cross-fire between the Mexican army and the rebel Zapatistas, the Acteal Massacre.

Both Abejas and Zapatistas were forced to flee their homes in the thousands; many Abejas went to the X'oyep refugee camp, in the county of Chenalhó.

Next to the refugee camp was a Mexican governmental military base with a heavy presence. The military took "civic action" and tried to win over the refugees with free food and medical services. Las Abejas continually refused these provisions stating they wanted justice, not handouts from the perpetrators of their suffering. The political position of the group was more aligned with that of the Zapatistas, although they chose a nonviolent commitment for struggle.

Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), a pacifist group based in the U.S., accepted in May 1998 an invitation from the Catholic diocese in Chiapas to set up a permanent peacekeeping team at the refugee camp. CPT began working with the Abejas to organize nonviolent actions with the message that the military should leave.

In March and April of 1999 Las Abejas and CPT held prayer vigils at the military checkpoints in the area. On 4 April numerous Abejas of Xoyep and a few CPTers went to plant corn on the military base itself.

On 23 May 23 about 70 Abejas went to the military base and occupied the road in prayer. Later that year, on 28 December Las Abejas took their prayer demonstrations to four different military bases in the region, calling on the soldiers to lay down their guns. The campaigners organized a fifteen-mile walk -- "The Pilgrimage for the Renewal of Our Hearts" -- which began in the refugee community of Acteal and traveled through the mountains of Chenalhó.

Jointly, CPT and Las Abejas decided to establish a Lenten presence on the military base the following year (2000). Lent is a Christian tradition observed for about six weeks before Easter. This mini-campaign within the larger campaign was centered on prayer and fasting within the military base itself. Fifteen Abejas and six CPTers headed towards the base on 19 March 2000 and arrived at 8:00am. They began by reading the Gospel and building a shelter to house them for 35 days.

The press release announced that "Tent for Lent" acknowledges the role of the Mexican military in stimulating

the paramilitary violence and subsequent division in Chiapas. The campaign called for: 1) a return of the displaced back to their homes and 2) a return of soldier to their barracks. The fasting began as a rotation, usually including two CPTers and two or more Abejas living in the tent. Other community members came to show their support and join in the prayers carried out every four hours.

The Abejas and CPTers engaged in discussion with the military. They asked the soldiers that if they are there to provide social services, why are they carrying guns? The general responded that they must because they are an army, and returned with questions about pacifism.

On the second day ten more displaced Abejas joined the fast, along with two foreign women. The tent was full this night! Conversations with soldiers continued.

Another day, five men displaced from a different village, Yaximel, came to join the fast and tell their story of the Acteal massacre. One afternoon, the county's parish priest, Father Rodrigo, joined the group for prayer.

During the third week of the fast, members of the original community of X'oyep came to take part in a day of fasting, including two individuals over the age of 80. In an effort to drive the group off the military base, the soldiers played the Eagles and Whitney Houston, but they underestimated the strength and resilience of the Abejas.

As Holy Week approached, many more people visited the fast, including Mexicans and internationals. Supporters Father Pedro and Sister Josefina along with four others had been distributing their press release throughout Mexico. Over the course of the fast, a new commander was assigned to the base and addressed the group at great length about his good intentions as a commander doing his job. However, Father Pedro challenged the commander to make a choice to follow God's laws rather than human laws.

The weekend before Easter, Holy Week arrived and a Mexican congressman visited the group and said that the CPTers are famous in Mexico. That afternoon, CPTers gave copies of their "letters to soldiers" to the men on duty; these letters were an invitation for the military to leave. On the Monday of Holy Week, the group had one of their prayer times on the helicopter pad of the base. Over the course of Holy Week, many others, including university students from Mexico City and internationals from the United States and Europe joined for short periods.

On Wednesday of Holy Week, 19 April 2000, several hundred Abejas entered the military base in a procession behind the Virgin of the Massacre (a statue of Mary that was shot during the 1997 Acteal massacre). This bright, vibrant exhibition sent the soldiers running for their buildings.

On Good Friday 21 April 2000, the entire CPT team fasted, as did Jose Vasques (one of the leaders of X'oyep) and his family. The group formed a large prayer circle on the helicopter pad and read the crucifixion of Jesus from the Gospel as the soldiers hack at overgrown vegetation nearby. This time was moving as the cold steel razors contrast the peaceful action of prayer.

On Holy Saturday 22 April 2000, the group created a large white "PAZ" (peace sign) using rocks on the helicopter pad. They also carved a large sun and moon into the ground representing symbols of the Creator. The Tent for Lent was dismantled and flags of peace were raised in replacement. At the conclusion of the fast, the Abejas presented a statement to the Mexican soldiers announcing their understanding and compassion towards the soldiers, but also stressed their request to be heard and for the soldiers to return to their barracks.

In conclusion, the symbols of peace that were left at the end of the fast were removed, but returned upon

request. The success of the campaign is difficult to measure, but one CPTer was satisfied when hearing later that a couple of the soldiers he had previously spoken with decided to leave the army.

In late 2001 CPT closed its office in Chiapas. The organization continued its regular communication with the Catholic diocese and the Abejas. Life was calm in the following years, but violence threatened to return. The hope of Christian Peacemaker Teams was that the recollection of the fast would inspire others to entrust in the power of fasting and prayer.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Christian Peacemaker Teams office in Chicago suggested the Lenten Theme: Tent for Lent. This theme was derived from the work of the CPT team in Hebron, where communities were impacted by demolition of their homes. The theme in Chiapas for the CPTers and Abejas to occupy the military base come out of this idea. (1)

Sources:

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