

## ENTREVISTAS PBI MÉXICO

Number V/2009 • July 2009

Entrevistas is a publication of PBI Mexico that highlights situations that increase risks to the physical or psychological integrity of Mexican human rights defenders, or that damage the legitimacy of their work. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the opinions of PBI Mexico.

### Militarization in the Sierra de Petatlán

*On June 9<sup>th</sup>, 500 soldiers arrived and besieged two communities of about 40 inhabitants in the Sierra de Petatlán, Guerrero<sup>1</sup>. During four days they stole food, mistreated women and children and tortured two people. Because of the serious nature of the situation, members of NGOs, the State Commission for the Defense of Human Rights in Guerrero (Coddehum) and reporters traveled to the area to document the situation. Juan Castro Castro from the Tlachinollan Human Rights Center and Javier Monroy from Tadeco were part of this mission and met with PBI to talk about what they found:*

#### **How did you find out about what was going on in Petatlán and how was the observation mission created?**

**Javier Monroy:** We have been working in the Sierra for some time (...) - since 2003 - with various projects in community development (...). This relationship that we have had with the sierra has helped us maintain connections with many communities. (...) When the confrontation happened, when the military arrived in Las Ollas, we were alerted and within two hours we had direct communication from affected community members who called us to let us know what was happening.

**Juan Castro:** The Collective against Torture and Impunity (CCTI) let us know that the military was committing unjustified actions and abuse of authority in the Sierra of Petatlán. (...) Because of this, it was important for us to go up to each of the communities, Las Ollas, Las Palancas and Jiliero in the municipality of Coyuca de Catalán to check and affirm that the military was actually present in the communities, and that it wasn't just hearsay. Those that went up to the communities were: Coddehum, CCTI, Tadeco and Tlachinollan among others, and from the press, La Jornada and El Sur along with other local media.

#### **What was the situation like when you arrived?**

**Javier Monroy:** (...) When we arrived the military had just left the community, the women greeted us. All of them were still assembled together and recounting the events, the soldiers had left only half an hour before we arrived. Because of this they were trying to figure out and prepare themselves for what would happen next, they thought that the military was going to return and open fire on the village. (...) Soon after we arrived, each of the women wanted to tell us what happened, we had to organize the women and ourselves in order to speak to each of

them individually. (...) First we took the witness accounts, what came up first were the human rights violations and the violent way that the military arrived, firing at the houses. (...) They arrived yelling "long live Rogaciano" and asked for the Commander Ramiro from the ERPI [Revolutionary Army of the Insurgent People]. Immediately after their arrival there was a very violent siege of the village, they destroyed motorcycles (...) the military verbally assaulted and pushed the women, they ransacked the community store, they entered many houses supposedly looking for weapons. In this lapse of time they emptied a sack of drugs in the soccer field of the village. (...) The military kept the women from communicating among themselves during these four days, they slept in their houses, using their bedrooms, and constantly threatened to assault them. None of the women specifically mentioned any physical sexual aggression. This was what happened in Las Ollas. Five minutes from there is La Palanca, basically the same thing happened in this community. (...) This is nothing new; this is something that has been happening throughout the sierra for some time.

#### **According to the press, all of the men sought refuge in the mountainside when the military arrived and the women and children stayed behind, how did they know when the military was arriving?**

**Juan Castro:** Well, the families were in their houses. In Las Ollas there are about 50 families who live there. They knew the military had arrived when they heard the gunshots from the military convoy—the men ran up to the hillside to hide so that nothing would happen to them. The women and children stayed in the houses because they couldn't run as quickly as the men. One man who had health problems also stayed behind [...] they seized him, tortured him and asked him for names of people

1 Information from the press. *El Sur*, 15 de junio de 2009

involved in crime. They stabbed him in the back with a knife and with a needle in his fingernails; they covered his head with a bag and punched his ears. They did not succeed in getting any information out of him.

**What are you going to do with this information?**

**Juan Castro:** [The Coddehum] sent the complaints to the CNDH (The National Human Rights Commission). *Tlachinollan* presented a document detailing the gravity of the situation in the Sierra of Petatlán. We also asked the Coddehum to provide precautionary measures for the men whose lives are in grave danger and for the women and children in their homes.

**What is your overall analysis of the Costa Grande?**

**Juan Castro:** From my perspective the situation in Petatlán will get more complicated since this is the first time the community has publicly reported this situation. Many officials on a national level know that these people have suffered a lot of aggression and violence from the military, and in order to suppress and to disintegrate the communities and social organizations, the Mexican government is using military force.

**And what about the alleged confrontations between the ERPI and the military?**

**Javier Monroy:** We don't have any confirmed accounts of confrontations, it is very surprising to me that the ERPI would speak of confrontations, but if they are doing it, they must know what they are doing. What is interesting is the way the ERPI and the Military have used the media in this situation. This has made us realize that it is important to mobilize civil society to prevent this situation. (...) We are already talking about the importance and necessity of implementing international

agreements for these types of cases. We have urged the state government to exercise their role as a civil authority and that they reestablish rule of law in Guerrero. We have asked the military to return to their barracks and that the local civil authorities take charge and control over their own state. If this does not happen, Guerrero will return to how it was seventies. And no one would ever want that. (...)

**In what way do you see that this situation could affect the environmental movement?**

**Javier Monroy:** I think that for all of the environmentalists that are organized and live in the sierra, the message is very clear. The message that the local bosses have told them: "that they go - or that they die!" This puts all of the people in the communities of the Sierra at risk. Perhaps what is most threatening for certain community members is that they are known by the local bosses, and they have confronted them in the past. What I see here is that environmentalists like Felipe [Arreaga] and his wife are at risk because they are symbols of this fight (...) The local bosses have been put in charge of creating a huge divide between the communities, they have confronted them, they have made them compete against each other, they have given them misconstrued information, it is really common to find in the Sierra that one village is the enemy of the next, and we understand that the environmentalists have faced these struggles in working with the communities. The message that we would like to share from La Morena is that these communities need to overcome these small differences so that they can create large communal projects. I think that this is the best way for them to protect themselves (...)

**Juan Castro** is a lawyer for the *Tlachinollan* Human Rights Center, A.C. This non-governmental organization was founded in 1994, and works for the promotion and integral defense of human rights. PBI has accompanied *Tlachinollan* since 2003. For more information: [www.tlachinollan.org](http://www.tlachinollan.org).

**Javier Monroy** is the coordinator for the Workshop for Community Development (TADECO). This civil society organization is dedicated to the promotion of economic, social, cultural and environmental rights (DESCA, acronym in Spanish) in Guerrero and works on three main branches of work: the promotion of the DESCA, the promotion of children and adolescent rights, and the construction of communities with gender equality and equity. For more information: <http://www.tadeco.org.mx>