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Mexico

# "To speak with the people of Mexico"

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**"A willow of crystal, a black poplar by the water, a high fountain that the wind bends, a well planted tree, but dancing, the journey of the river that curves, goes forward, goes back, the long way around, and always arrives." (Octavio Paz, Stone Of The Sun)**

[[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/subcomandante\\_marcos.jpg](https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/subcomandante_marcos.jpg)] Marcos enters the Zocalo, Mexico City

On the 2nd of December 2000, when the Zapatistas announced that they would travel to Mexico City to engage in dialogue both with civil society and with the National Assembly of the Union to persuade the legislators to be so kind as to approve the Law on Indigenous Culture and Right, no one, not even the most optimistic, would have imagined the tremendous success of this mobilisation.

In the period before this, those intellectuals in Mexico organically tied to the political regime (those of whom Octavio Paz had a low opinion - they have none of his extensive abilities as a poet or essayist), fabricated stories that the EZLN had lost the limited social force that had supported it, even among the indigenous peoples. According to them, the idea of surrender was the only viable scenario open to the Zapatista movement and especially to Marcos.

And among the team that surrounded the newly elected President of the Republic, a layer was favourable to the hypothesis above and therefore inclined to promote a series of actions that suggested there was no reason for the march.

The same president Vicente Fox, from the first moment refused to take a clear position towards the march. Instead, he designed a new media policy, which would encourage people to observe his good will towards the march. Every day, from the December 3, 2001 until the end of January, his position against the march became clearer. He tried to achieve two things: on the one hand to discourage the march itself, on the grounds that the Zapatistas would meet with failure given the massive support in society for Fox, (a series of opinion polls were released - that the Fox camp sought to use as a substitute for any possibility of debate and opinion - giving Fox 80% of popular support and Marcos only 17%); on the other to convince the EZLN that before the overwhelming situation in front of them, the only possibility for success would be to sit down and negotiate with Fox.

For this gentleman, having his photo taken with Marcos became an obsession, and in a spectacular act, he signed the peace agreements, even hoping that Marcos would participate in some way in his government.

Despite all this, the Zapatistas prepared for their long march. They had asked for three signs of good faith to be given to them by the Government to be able to renew the negotiations:

- ▶ the liberation of more than one hundred political prisoners by the Government;
- ▶ the dismantling of seven of the army's 249 military encampments in Chiapas;
- ▶ the approval of the Law of Indigenous Culture and Rights, which had been drafted on the basis of the San Andres Agreements reached in December 1996, by deputies from the Commission of Reconciliation and Pacification, in which all the political parties had participated.

Despite the spectacular actions of Fox and the overwhelming results of the polls, the Zapatistas kept their word.

Starting from the beginning of February, the Fox government had to change its position before the irremediable fact: the march was going to take place without a prior meeting between Fox and Marcos. The pressure then apparently became subtler: Fox sought to take advantage of the march, seeking to pose as its sponsor and baptising it as "the

march for peace".

Thus he created so many expectations that the media began to open up and announced coverage such as they have never ever given to any previous citizens' action.

## March of Indigenous Dignity begins

*"A peaceful road of stars or spring without pressure. water that with closed eyelids pours forth prophecies all the night"* (Octavio Paz: Piedra de Sol)

In the days prior to the start of the march, new rumours circulated through the media: "Marcos will not march! He never thought that Fox would approve this mobilisation." On the 24th of February, with the new moon, close to twenty thousand Indians met in San Cristobal de las Casas to see off 23 commanders including Subcommandante Marcos.

At the meeting, Marcos baptised the mobilisation with the title, 'The March of Indigenous Dignity', therefore denying any possibility that Fox would talk about it and interpret it in the same way. Beginning from this moment, no one could doubt that the march would be a success. In the course of the meeting he introduced the architect, Fernando Yanez as the intermediary from the EZLN to meet with the deputies of La Copa and in general with the members of the legislative power.

This action provoked new suspicions among some in the media who began a veritable campaign of hate towards the Zapatista movement, including beginning to push the idea that Fox had made a mistake in permitting the march to be welcomed.

In a statement, one of the richest men in Mexico, Juan Sanchez Navarro, (he is known as an ideologue for big business) declared that the difference now from the time when the Zapatistas were first invited by him to speak in the Manufacturers Club, was that he personally would not now invite the Zapatista delegation to the Club because their actions were permitting the poor - among whom there was much anger - to come together and join the march, saying finally he was locking up his wife and family during the Zapatista's stay in Mexico City. Without perhaps wishing it, and very likely without even knowing it, he repeated what the rich of Mexico had said in 1914 when the original Zapatistas entered the city.

Wherever the new Zapatistas march went, its actions became much larger and more combative. The reaction of society to the march was impressive, including in cities such as Orizaba and Puebla where the rightwing is a strong force. The immense majority of the people who live in those cities participated, going to the meetings and going to the reception in the streets.

Consistently, as the march moved forward, the various Indian peoples brought the Zapatistas their batons, their signs of authority. At each turn it became more and more clear that the government had no other Indian force to look to for an alternative discussion.

The Zapatistas had succeeded in making the National Indigenous Congress, (CNI-created initially when the EZLN invited representatives of the indigenous peoples to participate in discussions with the government), the only valid interlocutor with the government. The indigenous people not only emerged from the process as a solid and socially coherent subject, but they spoke through a body that represented them.

The Mexican right, gathered around the National Action Party, (PAN-the party of Fox), the leading members of big business and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church began to put together a new hysterical campaign.

Most conspicuous were the legislators of the PAN whom for various reasons - such as that the EZLN wore masks, that they were "criminals" and that they should have met with Fox previously - indicated they could not receive the EZLN in Congress. Some of these legislators even threatened the caravan, saying it would be better if it did not pass through their states because there was a risk to life. This aroused a general feeling of solidarity with the Zapatistas.

The 'Right' that had recently celebrated its electoral triumph, felt it had an exceedingly large social consensus behind it and could not believe what was happening before its eyes. Those "infamous" Indians, not only were they going in the streets and city squares but they were acclaimed everywhere and were now seen by everyone as the fundamental factor to be able to determine whether Mexico had begun to travel towards the construction of a democratic country.

At the same time, inside the PAN, Fox's opponents began to hatch a plot for vengeance against him. A distinguished PAN member stated that Fox had delivered to the PAN only 75 positions in the government structure out of the more than 5,000 available. No doubt within the PAN movement innumerable disgruntled members grumbled about the shape of the cabinet. This discontent was, at the very least, late. From the design of the electoral campaign until the campaign itself, one of the key points of Fox's strategy was to keep a healthy distance from the PAN. For Fox's friends who took control of his election campaign and policies, the reason was very simple: the game that was being played was too important to be left in the hands of a party that never exceeded 26% of the popular Mexican vote.

We should not forget the anger of Ricardo Garcia Cervantes, Diego Fernandez de Cevallos and the same Felipe Calderon, (PAN legislators and the principal leaders of the conservative wing of this party) about the totally secondary role the PAN played after the start of the election campaign. It would seem then that what was taking place in these squabbles was the settling of old accounts.

## Nurio: The March Of The Colour Of The Earth

*"A presence like a sudden song, like the singing wind in the fire, a look that is suspended, in the world with its seas and mountains."*

Nurio is a small town in Mexico on the Tarasca plateau, a town in the Purepecha nation with a population of thirty thousand people. Here about 6,000 representatives of the various Indian peoples of Mexico participated in their third Congress. The Indian communities from the whole country had agreed to meet there, including those who had never before participated in the National Indigenous Congress from the north of the country. In Nurio, the indigenous peoples of Mexico decided to accompany the Zapatistas to the national assembly, putting forward the demand for approval of the Law for Indigenous Rights and Culture. The Indians had made their appearance and with this all the strategies and tactics they had endured from the country's political regime and its political parties broke into a thousand pieces.

In a communication read to the Intercultural Meeting at which José Saramago [Portuguese Nobel literature laureate], Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, Bernard Cassen [editorial director, Le Monde Diplomatique], Alain Touraine [French sociologist], among others, participated, Marcos set out clearly what was his vision about the way in which the Zapatista movement would operate politically at this moment.

## "To speak with the people of Mexico"

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Marcos told a story: a group of chess players were absorbed in an important game of chess being played at a high level. An Indian approached, watched and asked what they were playing. No one answered him. The Indian came near to the chess table and considered the positions of the pieces, the serious and grim faces of the players and the expectant attitude of those watching them. He repeated his question. Only one of the chess-players bothered to reply: "This is something you wouldn't understand, it is a game for important and knowledgeable people."

The Indian watched silently and continued observing the board and the movements of the contestants. After a while, he ventured a question, "And why are you playing if you already know who is going to win?" The same player, who had responded to him before, replied: "You'll never understand. This is for experts, this is outside your intellectual reach." The Indian said nothing. He continued watching, and then left. After a short time, he returned bringing something with him. Without saying anything, he approached the chess table and planted in the middle of it an old bottle full of mud. The players were upset and looked angrily at him. The Indian smiled maliciously and said, "Checkmate!"

In Nurio, the Mexican Indians decided that the time was ripe to participate in national politics, that it was essential to act by confronting the nation, claiming their rights. They knew that this is what they must do, confronting the Mexican "political class", one of the worst in the world, if it is possible to make such a risky comparison.

One part of Mexican political life and the people who write on its behalf, rubbed their hands: the EZLN and the Indian people would now finally arrive on this class' terrain, which no one knows like they do. In their opinion, the Zapatistas and the Indian people left their communities, the open country, and even worse, they wanted to head towards the national assembly, whose rules and norms are only known to a few initiates.

Behind this assumption, not totally mistaken, was the idea that when rebel or revolutionary movements in the past headed in the direction towards a peaceful road, they are entering into contact with a political framework that will force them, in the end to change themselves into hostages of the same thing against which they were struggling.

The Zapatistas clearly announced, for those who wanted to read it, that they preferred to try a hitherto unheard of road; to remain as a rebel force, independently or not, of leaving aside their arms. Of course, to achieve the former they must inevitably break with the traditional form of understanding politics. With their usual modesty, the Zapatistas asked the Mexican political class, "Checkmate?"

As this political class is accustomed to letting the whole world see how they play among themselves, but without allowing anyone else to play, nor even explain the rules of the game, it was not possible for them to understand that suddenly tens of thousands of Mexican Indians, representative of millions more and supported by millions of non-Indians can put a bottle full of mud on the chess-board and put the state institutions into check-mate. We will return to this a little later.

## The Zocalo: 1914 - 2001

*"Oh life to live and already lived, time that flies in a heavy sea and withdraws without turning its face, that which is past, was not, but is." (Octavio Paz, Piedra de Sol)*

Following exactly the same route into the city as Emiliano Zapata and his Liberation Army Of The South in 1914, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and the National Indian Congress entered the Zocalo [central square] in Mexico City.

## "To speak with the people of Mexico"

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Hundreds of thousands of people were out in the streets to welcome them on their journey from Xochimilco to the Zocalo. Some calculated there were around 500,000 people in the streets. After a climactic entrance into the central square where more than 350,000 people were gathered together, many of who had arrived the night before (some 30,000 spent the night there), other people arrived after nine in the morning and waited until three in the afternoon until the meeting began in a temperature of 30°C.

Throughout the march, the EZLN unveiled a new method of convening massive concentrations of people, never telling the hour when they would begin and never notifying in advance the route which the caravan would take. In spite of that, thousands, and tens of thousands of citizen listened to the radio stations, simply to find out the route and to be present in the streets.

In the Zocalo, the Zapatistas achieved a first objective. To place in centre stage of national politics a unique social movement that was neither controlled by the old PRI corporatist bonds; nor by the new, but equally corporatist supporters of the PRD; nor by the dynamic of the "useful" vote that brought Fox to power.

In the meeting at the Zocalo, the Zapatistas not only spoke of the need to approve the Law of Indigenous Rights and Culture, but also they spoke about something that in classical terms of left thought, could only be considered as a strategic vision. They explained with simple words why they are not a vanguard, why they are not so irresponsible as to make a call for a general insurrection, starting from what and how a social movement is built, how it is the product of a large experience of life. (The historian E. P. Thompson would have been a happy spectator at this meeting.)

In an unusual speech that criticised some policies of the right and the left, the EZLN, in the voice of its Subcomandante, stated the following:

"We are here and we are a mirror. Not reality, but merely its reflection. Not light, but merely a glimmer. Not path, but merely a few steps. Not guide, but merely one of the many routes which lead to tomorrow ... When we say 'we are,' we are also saying 'we are not' and 'we shall not be' ... we are not those who aspire to make themselves power and then impose the way and the word. We are not those who put a price on their own, or another's, dignity, and convert the struggle into a market, where politics is the business of sellers who are fighting, not about programs, but for clients ... We are not those who wait, naively, for justice to come from above, when it only comes from below. The liberty which can only be achieved with everyone. The democracy which is all the floors and is fought for all the time. We will not be.

We are not the passing fashion which, made ballad, is filed in the calendar of defeats which this country flaunts with such nostalgia. We are not ... we are not he who is regretful in the morning, he who is transformed into an image even more grotesque in power; he who pretends to have good sense and prudence where there is nothing but buying and selling. We are able to be without a face, armed or without arms, but Zapatistas we are, we are and always will be.

Ninety years ago the powerful asked those from below which Zapata was called: 'With whose permission, Senores?' And those from below responded, and we respond: 'With ours.' And with our permission, for exactly 90 years, we have been shouting, and they call us 'rebels.' And today we are repeating: we are rebels. Rebels we shall be."

In my now long life as a militant (I experienced the entry of the Sandinistas into Managua, the national work stoppages in Peru, the March of Hunger of Oruro at La Paz in Bolivia, several general strikes in Ecuador, the triumph of Mitterand in France - with so much emotion for many - the preparations for the General Strike actions in Lodz, Poland, the surrender of arms at the Guazapa Volcano in El Salvador, the Sandinista defeat in Nicaragua, some civic stoppages in Colombia, various congresses of the Workers' Party of Brazil, various meetings of the Foro of Sao

## "To speak with the people of Mexico"

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Paulo [Forum of the Latin American Left], I have listened to great and spirited orators like 'Lula', Hugo Blanco, Daniel Ortega, Rosario Ibarra, Alain Krivine, Fidel Castro, Douglas Bravo, Emeterio Fernandez Huidobro, Ernest Mandel and so on), I have never heard such a speech in a meeting of hundreds of thousands of people.

Marcos never tried to raise his voice, never gave an instruction and never looked for applause. It was a speech in which he conversed with 350,000 people. He chatted with us as people chat among themselves, unhurriedly, calmly, as they say the old Zapatistas used to chat when in the Ajusco mountain, on the outskirts of Mexico City, having met there to await the order to take the city whilst with patience they lit their bonfire, illuminating the night and chatted.

Almost ninety years later, the new Zapatistas chatted with us about what they have been, what they are and what they never will be. It would be good if the Mexican and international socialist left begin to believe them. This is about a rebel movement and I would say a revolutionary one (here I believe there is a pending debate with the comrades of the EZLN) that does not exist for the taking of power: not because of a tactical problem or because they are unable, but because they don't want to because of something more profound, more Zapatista. I don't know if that is better or not (I believe yes) but here it is not important. If someone wants to make an analysis of Zapatismo, they must take seriously what the Zapatistas say about themselves.

It serves nothing to assume the attitudes of "red professors" and from on high and after years of failures, try to tell the Zapatistas what they should do. Or to tell them that their march was very good, but there was not sufficient struggle and not enough resistance because an alternative programme is necessary. Or, that they do not understand that the Indians are not able to change the country and the world, that it is indispensable they be subordinate to the working class. Or, more naively, to tell the Zapatistas they should transform themselves into a political party. This is the height of not understanding anything. Those who lament the inexistence of an independent organisation that might be a bridge between Zapatismo and socialism, between the Indian movement and the other social movements, only echo what is in the national press pointing the supposed non-existence of the Zapatista Front For National Liberation (FZLN), without noticing something that is very Zapatista, that is to work without looking for the spotlight and recognition, but simply to work. The Zapatista movement is very much another thing (as they themselves would say), neither better nor worse (as they themselves would say), simply different.

The echo that Marcos' speech and his approach has should force the Mexican and international left, which is outside the Zapatista movement, to reflect upon the significance of this new expression of emancipatory thought.

In the Zocalo in Mexico City, the Zapatista Indians spoke, without any exaggerated display of feeling in a very simple manner, crystal clear and almost inaudibly. Never before seen in a meeting, the 350,000 people were silent. It was and it is a speech to think about and to discuss. The real Zapatista movement can be found as the mirror image of the old Zapatista movement.

## Some Black Eyes On The Highest Tribune Of The Nation

*"Faces of llamas, devouring face, Persecuted adolescent face ghostly years, circular days that gives the same floor, the same wall, burning the instant and they are a single face the successive faces of the llama, all the names are a single name, all the faces are a single face, all the centuries are a single instant and for all the centuries of the centuries a pair of eyes closes the passage to the future."* (Octavio Paz, Piedra de Sol)

After the events of the Zocalo, the Mexican political regime began to toy with the idea that they would have to manage the stay of the EZLN in Mexico City.

## "To speak with the people of Mexico"

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When it became clear what the real position of those in power was, regarding the demands of the Indians, the EZLN expressed the view that the national assembly could not come to an agreement with them. The political authorities had proposed to the Zapatistas that they could meet only with ten deputies and ten senators to present their demands. Because the Congress had not wanted to listen to the Indians, they, the Zapatistas, returned to the forests of Chiapas to report to their communities - to put a similar question to the Indigenous National Congress - that there did not exist on the part of the Mexican political institutions any desire for peace.

As a consequence, a true crisis unravelled inside the Mexican political class. No one wanted to pay the price for the break-down of the negotiations, of course, with the exception of the party of the President, the PAN, that which - as is indicated above - is as much because of its biological racism as the need to arrange the outstanding accounts with "their" President, they preferred to appear as intransigent.

In a very close vote, 220 for, 210 against, the Chamber of Deputies decided to invite the Zapatista commanders to the "highest tribunal of the nation". In a sui generis alliance (which always happens in Mexico), the PRD, the PRI, the PVEM-Mexican Green Ecological Party (which supported Fox and has the characteristics of being neither a party, nor green, nor ecological, nor Mexican) and other small parties, were successful in getting the Zapatistas invited. Of course there were some PRI deputies, those mostly connected to the previous regime and those of military origin who voted against - firstly - or abstained - secondly.

Six days passed between this vote and the participation of the EZLN and the Indigenous National Congress (CNI) in the Chamber of Deputies. Meanwhile, in the national media a rough hypothesis was proposed about what the attitude of the EZLN would be and especially the appearance of Marcos. A few supported the PAN thesis about the kind of speech that Marcos would give. Others said that in the middle of his speech, Marcos would leave for the mountains. There was such heightened expectations around this, quite different from what happened in the Zocalo, that three television channels, the three private ones, announced they would broadcast, live, the participation of the EZLN and the CNI in the Congress. The broadcast lasted seven hours. Three television channels and four radio stations broadcast everything that happened, live.

The next day began with great uncertainty as rebel Subcommandante Marcos had not yet arrived at the entrance to the Chamber of Deputies, leaving the television announcers in a halo of deception. Equally, some deputies were really annoyed, including a PRD senator who made a most pathetic declaration. "I'm annoyed," he said, "by the leading role of Marcos". It was the first time that an influential person has been accused of something as a result of not being there.

Then the Zapatista movement made their final and most effective move. The decision that Marcos would not go to the Chamber of Deputies completely changed the co-relationship of forces in the country. An Indian woman, Commander Esther, made the central speech in the Congress on behalf of the EZLN. She said: "The rebel Subcommandante Marcos is that, a Subcommandante. We are all commanders, we give orders in common, we order obedience on behalf of our people ... This tribunal is a symbol. And so it has convoked so many polemics. Therefore we wanted to speak about that because some people did not want us to be here. And it is symbol also that I am, a poor woman, an Indian woman and a Zapatista woman, who speaks first and I make mine the central message of our words as Zapatistas ... My name is Esther, but that's not important now. I am a Zapatista woman, but that's also not important at this time. I am Indian and I am a woman, and that is the only thing that is important now."

It was a Mexican Indian festival and nothing or no one was able to tarnish it. Millions of Mexicans from their homes, in their work places, in the streets, in the stores and in their automobiles saw and heard an unusual historical event. The Indians were speaking in the "highest tribunal of the nation"; arguing the worthiness of autonomy; questioning themselves the Indian habits and customs that marginalised women and subjected them to violence, but reminding the PAN and PRI deputies that the marginalisation and violence against women still exists in the habits and customs



of the rest of the country; defending their right to be different, to dress differently, to speak another language, to have another culture and to establish a different relationship with the rest of the nation.

Without saying it to us, they told us that Mexico has no future without their Indians and that in some way this is the last chance to close the wound in the body of the nation, in more or less peaceful terms. If society was evenly split before the arrival of the EZLN at the Congress, after the participation of the male and female commanders and of the representatives of the Indian people on the Congress tribune, organised under the auspices of the Indigenous National Congress (CNI), these proportions became radically changed, and the majority of society responded with great feeling in favour of the Indian people. The costs for any party that is opposed to the Law for Indian Rights and Culture will be tremendous.

A Mexican Indian woman, poor, Zapatista, but above all a woman, through her speech and her presence won the battle of the symbols and it cannot be forgotten that many times that this is the central battle that frees people on their way to emancipation. The legislators of the "highest tribune of the nation" saw the black eyes of the history of Mexico, this history full of rebellions, overturns and revolutions which they spoke of, the black eyes, that the poet tells us about, the black eyes of Cajeme, Canek, Vicente Guerrero, Morelos, Emiliano Zapata, Jaramillo and the millions that in a little more than five hundred years have carried out more than 350 rebellions and three revolutions. The black eyes that close the passage to the future, but the future that does not want to include them, by accepting them as they are; poor, Indian or not, women, Zapatista, rebels.

Outside of the Congress, Marcos arrived and waited with the people until the EZLN leadership and the CNI left. Then in a very emotional meeting, he took his leave: "Thank you, Mexico! We are going away, truly." And the people responded and almost pleaded: "No!" A young woman said: "What will we be without the Zapatistas?" Already, some days before, Commander Zebedeo had given an answer to this question when he said: "We are going away, but we are not going away." During the whole march, the Zapatista representatives did not weary of explaining that they are not a vanguard that they are not trying to lead the people towards a shining path, pre-established by the basic documents of an organisation. As was said in what has been today turned into "a folk tale", by the great story teller, Antonio Garcia de Leon: "On the first of January we discovered that the insurrection was inside ourselves." We are going away, but we are not going away, represents the idea that the rebels not only exist in Chiapas, but in the whole country.

## Return with glory

*"When history sleeps, it speaks while dreaming: on the brow of the sleeping people the poem is a constellation of blood. When history wakes up, the image becomes an act, the poem makes its appearance; poetry enters into action."* (Octavio Paz, Towards the Poem).

The Zapatistas attained their objective: to speak with the people of Mexico. To show not only that they have not been forgotten but; that they are present in the discussions and debates on the construction of a democratic Mexico. To show that they are the other legitimacy, the indigenous legitimacy, that of the poor of Mexico, that which was not defeated by the electoral road, that which has not bet everything on an election, that which is not sold to a corrupt system, that of those who, without openly calling themselves socialists, represent the original spirit of socialism before it was perverted by the market socialists and the state socialists (two aberrations theoretically and practically incompatible with socialism). The legitimacy of those at the bottom who dream of changing the world and deserve this change.

PS. Some ask what will follow. Patience, Zapatism "bends, advances, retreats, makes a detour, and still arrives".

## "To speak with the people of Mexico"

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*This article first appeared in the Spanish review Viento Sur No. 56, May 2001 and was translated by Ernest Tate and Jess Mackenzie. It was written before the draft law on indigenous rights and culture was adopted in the national assembly by the deputies of the PAN, PRI and PVEM (at the end of April). The CNI, then the EZLN, rejected this text, which reduces indigenous autonomy to its simplest expression. The EZLN decided to break off negotiations with the government, accusing the senators and deputies of sabotage of the peace process and said it would continue the struggle.*