

Oaxaca: Autonomy Under Siege

Saturday 11 September 2010, by [CAMPBELL Scott](#) (Date first published: 1 September 2010).

ON APRIL 27, 2010, the Mexican state of Oaxaca again garnered international attention as a humanitarian aid and solidarity caravan comprised of national and international activists heading to the Autonomous Municipality of San Juan Copala was ambushed by state-backed paramilitaries, resulting in the deaths of two activists, leaving several wounded, and others disappeared for days.

Using army-grade weapons, members of the so-called Union for the Social Well-Being of the Triqui Region (UBISORT) blockaded the road outside of San Juan Copala and while the caravan attempted to turn around, opened fire on it from the surrounding hillsides, killing Beatriz Alberta Cariño, director of the Center of Community Support Working Together (CACTUS), and Finnish international human rights observer Jyri Antero Jaakkola.

San Juan Copala is an indigenous Triqui town of around 700 people in western Oaxaca near the border with Guerrero. During the Oaxaca uprising in 2006, the town declared itself autonomous of the state government and has fought to maintain its autonomy ever since.

In response, the Oaxaca government, ruled by the PRI, has been funding two paramilitary organizations, UBISORT and the Triqui Movement of Unification and Struggle (MULT). These groups have been carrying out numerous assassinations against individuals and members of Independent Triqui Movement of Unification and Struggle (MULTI — not to be confused with MULT), a group which supports the San Juan Copala's autonomy.

On November 28, 2009, members of the Peoples' Front in Defense of the Land (FPDT) from San Salvador Atenco attempted to reach San Juan Copala, where they planned an event with the town to demand the release of the now-freed 12 political prisoners of Atenco. UBISORT blocked their entry and unleashed a fusillade on the town, killing one child and wounding others.

In January of 2010, UBISORT installed a blockade around the town and cut off electricity and water. They are also preventing teachers and doctors from entering the town, leaving the inhabitants without functioning schools or healthcare. As a result, the municipality called for a solidarity caravan to break the siege. That caravan left on April 27 and was attacked by UBISORT paramilitaries outside of San Juan Copala in the town of La Sabana.

Despite international condemnation, Oaxaca governor Ulises Ruiz shrugged off the ambush, blaming the activists and even absurdly suggesting they ambushed themselves. No serious investigation into the ambush by state or federal officials has been conducted.

Meanwhile, UBISORT and MULT have continued their reign of terror. On May 16, UBISORT kidnapped 11 women and children who left San Juan Copala in search of food, holding them and threatening them for several hours and destroying all their supplies. On May 20, hit men from the MULT assassinated the "natural leader" of the autonomous municipality, Timoteo Alejandro Ramirez, as well as his wife, Cleriberta Castro.

A second caravan, the "Bety Cariño and Jyri Jaakkola Humanitarian Caravan," comprised of hundreds of activists, PRD congress members, and media, along with several tons of aid, attempted

to enter San Juan Copala on June 8. Despite being accompanied (and alternatively harassed) by state police, they were stopped by an UBISORT blockade and were forced to turn back.

Most recently, on June 24 and June 26, San Juan Copala was attacked by UBISORT paramilitaries, leaving two women and one child severely wounded. Plans are still underway to get aid to the autonomous municipality and to break the state-backed paramilitary siege. Options such as having the Red Cross bring the aid, or sending an all-women caravan are being considered.

Members of the European Parliament visited Oaxaca on July 3 to investigate the ambush, meet with individuals from San Juan Copala and talk with ambush survivors. Governor Ulises Ruiz refused to meet with them.

It is unclear what actions governor-elect Gabino Cué will take regarding the siege of San Juan Copala — as of this writing he has remained silent on the matter. Regardless, it appears that at the moment, it remains up to civil society to organize and defend the inhabitants of San Juan Copala and their attempt to construct autonomy amidst a paramilitary siege.

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For more information (in Spanish), see:
<http://autonomiaencopala.wordpress.com/>.

P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) 148, September-October 2010:
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/3037>