

RALLYING to the cry of "Land & Liberty!", 1,000 Mayan Indians came out of the jungle and took control of six towns - just as the Mexican government was signing the trade pact with the USA and Canada.

The Indians, calling themselves the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, drew the world's attention to the economic policies that will enrich a few Mexicans and further impoverish the poor.

The Zapatistas come from the southern state of Chiapas, one of the poorest in the country. Their complaints echoed the complaints of the Mexican peasants who followed Emiliano Zapata during the revolution of 1910-17.

Zapata, famous for his drooped moustache and sombrero, insisted: "It is better to die on your feet than live on your knees." He defended the right of poor peasants to seize land from wealthy farm owners. And that is the aspiration of the new Zapatistas. They complain that President Carlos Salinas's "revolutionary" government is about to remove even more of them from the little land they still occupy.

For the government has changed the land tenure rules. "Market forces" will now determine land possession - a policy that abandons the communal landowning structures that were established by the revolution 70 years ago.

THE IMMEDIATE focus of the insurrection was the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The peasants know that the living standards of the average citizen is likely to decline further. NAFTA removes all barriers to grain imports. So prices for the cereals which Mexicans grow will be driven down by cheaper imports from US producers. According to one estimate, US farmers will help to put about 1.6 million maize farmers out of business.

The NAFTA threat gave a cutting edge to the simmering discontent in peripheral states like Chiapas which, despite the inflow of substantial sums from the World Bank, continue to suffer from unemployment and illiteracy.

The discontent was summarised in the statement issued by the Zapatistas on January 1, which said: "The dictators have been waging an

U P R I S I N G

down Mexico Way

by Peter Poole

undeclared and genocidal war against our peoples for many years, wherefore we urge your full participation in

- Mexico (pop: 85 million) has 32 million people living in poverty, according to the World Bank.

- Governed by the Institutional Revolutionary Party for nearly 65 years.

- Chiapas ranks last among Mexican states in households with electricity, in the number of children under 14 who attend school, and in the number of people over 14 who can read.



support of the Mexican people and their struggle for work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence and freedom, democracy, justice and peace."

Over the past decade, Mexico opened its economy, brought the budget into surplus and reduced the

public sector. That transition to the open economy, however, was accompanied by hardship: unemployment grew to 18 per cent. To find work, over 2m workers emigrated to the US. Average food consumption fell sharply.

According to a report from the Mexican news agency Notimex, official statistics reveal that even the volume and circumference of the brains of children living in the urban ghettos have been affected by the deterioration in living conditions.

And yet, reports Forbes, the US business magazine, Mexico is one of the countries with the largest number of billionaires - fourth in the league table behind the US, Germany and Japan.

Which is why the Zapatistas took as their hostage a retired general and former state governor, who owns a large ranch in Chiapas. General Absalon Castellanos represents the corrupt politics which the Zapatistas hold responsible for their plight.

The Zapatistas resorted to violence after peaceful persuasion by people like their Catholic Bishop had failed. The Bishop, Dom Samuel Ruiz Garcia of San Cristobal de las Casas, appeared on a hit list after he had campaigned for social justice. The assassination plot was traced to landowners who objected to his campaign for human rights. The Bishop is reported by Alberto Huerta, of the University of San Francisco, writing in *Commonweal* (Dec 17 1993) to have identified "the real needs of the people" with their being "deprived of their own lands and harassed indiscriminately by the landowners and the law enforcement authorities

- The Zapatistas have denied involvement in the slaying in Tijuana of Luis Donaldo Colosio, the governing party's presidential candidate.