

Territorial Conflict CHALCHIHUITÁN-CHENALHÓ

October-December 2017 - January 2018

BACKGROUND

In 1973, as part of the process of agrarian organization that the government of President Luis Echeverría Álvarez undertook, agents of the Secretariat of Agrarian Reform (SRA, now the Secretariat of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development, Sedatu) demarcated the boundaries between historic towns of Chalchihuitán and Chenalhó, both of tsotsil language and culture. Without respecting the natural limits that a river marked from ancestral times and were recognized by the two peoples, public servants granted land that had traditionally belonged to Chenalhó to the current municipality of Chalchihuitán, generating a conflict that has had moments of tension and of latency over more than 40 years.

It is pertinent to clarify that during these years, inhabitants of Chalchihuitán were populating the lands previously belonging to Chenalhó, legally, not as invaders. They became, by an unfortunate mistake of the federal government, the legitimate owners of the lands they that today they have taken from them.

The last twenty years of history in the region are marked by violence and confrontation between diverse groups, together with the endemic poverty that characterizes both peoples, but Chalchihuitán in a more marked way. The consequences have been very negative for a large part of the population, which in the case of Chenalhó has had to experience various episodes of forced displacement. The most dramatic example is that of the Acteal massacre on December 22, 1997, the final episode of a series of previous events characterized by the actions of armed

groups trained, sponsored, protected and armed by the government of Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León.

Despite the judicial process that resulted from the massacre, these groups were never totally deactivated. In fact, just a few weeks before the tenth anniversary of the event, the material perpetrators, who had been fully identified by the survivors and who were serving their sentences in prison, began to be inexplicably released, citing flaws in due process. ALL are now free and have returned to Chenalhó, where several of them resumed their actions of harassment of the population.

Through various episodes of aggression against opponents, the armed groups of Chenalhó have consolidated their presence without, to date, the responsible authorities having done anything to at least control them. In an open alliance with the municipal president Rosa Pérez, of the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico and protected by the current governor, Manuel Velasco Coello, these groups have exacerbated the social tension both within the municipality and with its neighbors in Chalchihuitán.

In this context the events that are narrated below take place.

FACTUAL CHRONICLE

In a murky move that today can be interpreted as perfectly planned and calculated to provoke what actually happened, on October 18, elements of these armed groups deprived of his life Samuel Luna Girón, peasant of Chalchihuitán, whose murder served as an argument to rekindle the old border conflict. It is a fact that both the Public Prosecutor's Office and the Indigenous Procurator's Office, who have not taken any measure to impart justice, were aware of this

In theory the solution of the conflict was in the hands of the Agrarian Court, which had to issue a definitive ruling no later than December 15. Meanwhile, the state authorities not only did not intervene to calm things down; on the contrary, they allowed the paramilitaries to act at their leisure, denying, whenever possible,

the seriousness of the situation. For its part, during the first two months of the conflict, the federal government showed absolute indifference to the facts.

After the murder of Luna Girón, the aggressions of the armed civilians were intensified, with destruction and burning of houses and crops, shooting in the air all day and death threats. The accesses to the municipal capital of Chalchihuitán were destroyed by the paramilitaries with heavy machinery, without any authority trying to stop them. The town of central administration was virtually in a state of siege, deprived of food, medicine, gasoline, gas.

In the three weeks following the murder, more than five thousand inhabitants of various communities of Chalchihuitán and almost one thousand of Chenalhó, fearing loss of life, were forced to abandon their land and take refuge, those of Chenalhó in Fracción Polhó (within the same municipality); those of Chalchihuitán several in the administrative center and more in the nearby mountains, as internally displaced persons. They left behind their few belongings, their animals, their implements of work, their entire lives. The conditions in which they currently find themselves are extremely vulnerable. So far, at least twelve people, mainly minors and elderly people, have lost their lives due to hunger and cold.

From the beginning of the hostilities, the parish priest of Simojovel, Marcelo Pérez, undertook the task of touring the camps of displaced people to collect the testimonies of the people and make known the situation in which they are living. At the same time, civil society organizations in San Cristóbal and volunteers began to provide them with humanitarian assistance. However, the process has been extremely difficult since for several weeks, and as a consequence of the blockades created by the paramilitaries, it was necessary to make a seven-hour

detour to reach a place where normally no more than two are required.

It is important to emphasize the lack of response from the state authorities and the total absence of the federal government in the face of the tragedy, for several weeks. But faced with the accumulation of complaints and irrefutable evidence, the state government was forced to implement some cosmetic and belated actions, sending humanitarian aid and Civil Protection personnel to the municipal seat of Chalchihuitán. Despite the circumstances, at first these officials refused to move to the camps to provide assistance to the displaced, demanding that they move to the Municipal seat. Only then did the federal government send humanitarian aid through the Army. Strangely, the soldiers followed the same detour that the civil society organizations had to use to get to the camps, when they had the authority and the means to remove the blockades and arrest those responsible. Meanwhile, the ruling of the court was anxiously awaited, mainly because of threats openly expressed by Rosa Pérez and her armed allies, saying that if they were not favorable, those from Chenalhó would take "drastic measures" against their neighbors in Chalchihuitán. The ruling, which annuls all previous rulings and expresses the need to redefine the boundaries between the two municipalities (decision that those from Chenalhó took as favorable to their cause) was published on December 13. It drew strong attention that the document was dated November 6, that is, a month and a week before its publication and before that most of the displaced had left their land.

This particular fact can be interpreted as an unfortunately successful attempt to "clean" the disputed territory of the inhabitants of Chalchihuitán BEFORE the court issued its ruling. The logical thing would be that, once the decision of the agrarian authorities was published, people instead of belonging to Chalchihuitán would now be under the municipal jurisdiction of

Chenalhó, without having to move from their lands or see their integrity threatened. But it did not happen like that.

It is also noteworthy that, although the main blockades were removed (by elements of Civil Protection, NOT by police or military), the armed aggressions have not stopped happening day and night against the same communities from that the people left and now harassing other communities of Chalchihuitán whose lands seem to be also coveted by those who caused all this.

In fact, the court's ruling did NOT solve the problem, since it is very unlikely that the displaced will be able to return to their lands and rebuild their homes with the minimum security guarantees necessary to do so. As long as the armed groups are still active and enjoying the protection of those who should deter them, this will not be possible. No paramilitary has been arrested so far, even though they are fully identified.

Finally, at the end of December, the Under Secretary of the Interior, René Juárez Cisneros, and the Commissioner for the Dialogue with Indigenous Peoples, Jaime Martínez Veloz, met with representatives of both municipalities. The need to care for the displaced and protect their physical integrity was discussed. A security desk was also installed to meet the demand for separating, dismantling and punishing the armed group of Chenalhó. However, there is, to date, NO ACTION IN THIS SENSE: not a single detainee, nor a single weapon confiscated. NOTHING. The paramilitaries continue to operate with absolute impunity.

The holidays were very bitter and difficult for the displaced. Several thousand of them, desperate and with clear symptoms of depression, decided to return to their communities, as announced by the mayor of Chalchihuitán on January 1, although the conditions for the return have not been realized. They only

wanted to know, they said, the current state of what is left of their homes, crops and other possessions. However, more than a thousand displaced people refused to do so, precisely because of the lack of guarantees.

David Perez Gomez, of the monitoring council of the Committee of Communal Property of Chalchihuitán, explained that until the morning of January 2, 3,858 people had returned to their communities and approximately 1,116 remained in the camps. However, "nobody is sure, because the paramilitaries are still armed and provoking in the strip" (in dispute), he added. This means that, if the aggressions continue, at any moment the returnees could leave their communities again to take refuge in the camps.

The facts support the conclusions of those who do not want to return to their homes: the afternoon and evening of the first of January shots were heard from Majumpepentik (Chenalhó). According to the chronicle of Hermann Bellinghausen, "... elements of the Federal Army, accompanied by an alderman of the city council, picked up discharged cartridges in Tseleltetik, a place of Kanalumtik. The military did not go to the other three places where there were shots: Zacatonal, Ch'en Mut and Tsamtech'en. "

Juan Gabriel Girón Gómez, municipal agent of Kanalumtik, declared: "There is no security provided by the government; we hope that the soldiers return to settle in. " No one has offered to relocate them, he says. Families from all villages remain in the Chalchihuitan administrative center; they are inhabitants of the communities close to where the shots come from. Regarding the help they receive from the Civil Protection of Chiapas, Girón Gómez assures that "they are donations from civil society, not from the government; we can read it on the boxes. "

In view of the above, the obligatory questions are: who is or who are behind all this and what do they gain? Why have the groups of armed civilians been allowed to act, with complete freedom and even with the protection by omission of the authorities? Why the lack of response from the state and federal governments for so long? Where will they relocate the displaced, with what resources?

The reality is that today, the social fabric is seriously damaged for the inhabitants of both towns. The displaced have lost not only their homes and belongings but their peasant way of life. In the following months, they will not be able to sow or cultivate anything, which condemns them to a dependency on the outside that may or may not respond to their basic needs. We face a real humanitarian emergency that requires all our capacity for response and accompaniment. However, we should not do the job that corresponds to the authorities. It is necessary to demand that they comply fully with their responsibility, beginning with the disarmament and detention of armed civilian groups.

Several civil organizations that have been monitoring the conflict since the beginning agree that for now, in Chalchihuitán there is a return to the slaughterhouse,. The risk of a massacre is clear, they warn.