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Zapotec Indigenous People in Mexico Demand Transparency from U.S. Scholar

By Saulo Araujo
January 22nd, 2009



The **Union of Organizations of the Sierra Juarez of Oaxaca (UNOSJO)** - a longtime partner of Grassroots International based in Mexico - denounced a recently conducted study in the Zapotec region by U.S. geography scholar Peter Herlihy. Prof. Herlihy failed to mention that he received funding from the Foreign Military Studies Office of the

U.S. Armed Forces. The failure to obtain full, free and prior informed consent is a violation of the rights of indigenous communities as codified in the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted by the United Nations in 2007. In addition, UNOSJO fears that this in-depth geographical mapping of indigenous communities may be used in some harmful manner by the military.

According to UNOSJO, University of Kansas geography professor Peter Herlihy approached local communities of the Sierra Juarez, Oaxaca, Mexico to collect information for his project and declined to fully disclose his purpose or his funding sources. In addition to this failure to fully inform indigenous communities of the nature of the study, Mr. Herlihy's team took advantage of the good-faith of the Zapotec indigenous communities to undertake a study that appears to be of no benefit to the local people.

For 518 years, indigenous people in the Americas have been abused, lied to and exploited in the name of "progress," including in the fields of education and research. It is regrettable that a U.S. scholar misled indigenous people in the Mesoamerican region in a way that undermines their sovereignty. Echoing the concerns of our partners and allies, Grassroots International hopes that these U.S. military-sponsored studies will be terminated immediately. Further, we request that the University of Kansas hold Prof. Herlihy accountable for his violation of ethics in research, including abusing of the rights of UNOSJO and the indigenous communities of the Sierra Juarez of Oaxaca, Mexico.

Read UNOSJO's full statement below.

PRESS BULLETIN FROM UNION OF ORGANIZATIONS OF THE SIERRA JUÁREZ OF OAXACA (UNOSJO, S.C.) - Oaxaca, Mexico

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TO ALL STATE, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA SOURCES:

We kindly request that you publish the present bulletin in your respective means of communication.

Towards the end of 2008, the results of the research project **México Indígena** (Indigenous Mexico) were handed over to two Zapotec communities in the Sierra Juárez in the form of maps. Research had been undertaken two years earlier by a team of geographers from **University of Kansas**. What initially seemed to be a beneficial project for the communities now leaves many of the participants feeling like victims of geopyracy.

In August 2006, the México Indígena research team arrived at the Union of Organizations of the Sierra Juárez of Oaxaca (UNOSJO, S.C.) to present research objectives and garner support to commence work in the Sierra Juárez region. At the time, the team included a Mexican **biologist Gustavo Ramírez**, an Ixtlán native well known in the area, who was responsible for initially approaching UNOSJO.

Project leader and geographer **Peter Herlihy** explained the project objectives to UNOSJO, S.C., initially stating that it was to document the impacts of PROCEDA [a Mexican Government program has had on indigenous communities. He failed to mention, however, that this research prototype was financed by the **Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO)** of the United States Army and that reports on his work would be handed directly to this Office. Herlihy neglected to mention this despite being expressly asked to clarify the eventual use of the data obtained through research.

Herlihy mentioned that his team would collaborate with the following organizations: the **American Geographical Society (AGS)**, Kansas University, Kansas State University, Carleton University, the Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí and the Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT). He failed, however, to acknowledge the participation of **Radiance Technologies**, a company that specializes in arms development and military intelligence.

Although UNOSJO, S.C. participated in some of the México Indígena Project's initial activities, the organization soon ceased participation due to unclear project intentions. The Santa Cruz Yagavila and Santa María Zoogochi communities also ended up feeling the same distrust and they too abandoned the Project. For these reasons, the México Indígena research team localized activities within the San Miguel Tiltepec and San Juan Yagila communities, both located in the Zapotec region known as El Rincón de la Sierra Juárez.

In November 2008, México Indígena members Peter Herlihy and **John Kelly** attended a meeting of the UCC, the Unión de Comunidades Cafetaleras "Unidad Progreso y Trabajo" (the Union of Coffee-Producing Communities "Unity, Progress and Work"), held in the community of Santa Cruz Yagavila. They announced the completion of the Yagila and Tiltepec community maps and offered their services to other organization-member communities. They went on to mention that research had been carried out with the collaboration of UNOSJO, S.C.'s own Aldo Gonzalez, a fact that was immediately refuted.

Following the aforementioned UCC meeting, UNOSJO, S.C. began looking into the México Indígena Project. Investigation revealed that México Indígena forms part of the **Bowman Expeditions**, a more extensive geographic research project backed and financed by the FMSO, among other institutions. The FMSO inputs information into a global database that forms an integral part of the **Human Terrain System (HTS)**, a United States Army counterinsurgency strategy designed by FMSO and applied within indigenous communities, among others.

Since 2006 the Human Terrain System HTS has, since 2006, been employed with military purposes in both Afghanistan and Iraq and according to what we g=have been able to determine Bowman Expeditions are underway in Mexico, the Antilles,

Colombia and Jordan.

In November 2008, the México Indígena Project completed the maps corresponding to Zapotec communities San Miguel Tiltepec and San Juan Yagila. Contrary to the often-mentioned promise of transparency, México Indígena created an English-only web page, a language that the participating communities do not understand. Before the communities received the work, said maps had already been published on the Internet. Furthermore, the communities were never informed that reports detailing the project would be handed over to the FMSO.

In addition to publishing the maps, the México Indígena team created a database into which pertinent information was entered: community member names and the associated geographic location of their plot(s) of land, formal and informal use of the land and other data that cannot be accessed via the Internet.

According to statements made by those heading the México Indígena research team, this type of map can be used in multiple ways. They did not specify, however, whether they would be employed for commercial, military or other purposes. Furthermore, as the maps are compatible with Google Earth, practically anyone can gain access to the information. Yet only community members can decipher information expressed in Zapotec (toponyms), unless, of course, one has the capacity to translate them, as in the case of FMSO linguistic specialists.

UNOSJO, S.C. is against this kind of project being carried out in the Sierra Juárez and distances itself completely from the work compiled by the México Indígena research team. We call upon indigenous peoples in this country and around the world not to be fooled by these types of research projects, which usurp traditional knowledge without prior consent. Although researchers may initially claim to be conducting the projects in "good faith", said knowledge could be used against the indigenous peoples in the future.

We hereby demand that Peter Herlihy honor his promise of transparency and that the Mexican public be made aware all his sources of funding and the institutions that received information on findings obtained in the communities.

We further demand that, in light of these facts, the Mexican Government, firstly the Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources for having financed part of the research, as well as the Department of Internal Affairs, the Department of External Affairs, Deputies and Senators for possible violations of the Indigenous Peoples' National Sovereignty and Autonomy, clarify its position on the matter.

Oaxaca de Juárez, Oax., 14 January 2009

**UNION OF ORGANIZATIONS OF THE SIERRA JUÁREZ OF OAXACA
(UNOSJO, S.C.)**

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