

Villagers doubt peace will prevail in divided Chiapas

By MICHAEL RILEY
Special to the Chronicle

NUEVA PROVEDENCIA, Mexico — A little girl in a torn red dress stares at the freshly painted school just across the road. She and her brothers have never set foot inside.

The children's parents do not allow them to attend classes at the school, the girl's uncle says. That's because the adults support the Zapatista rebels, and the schoolhouse was built by the government for backers of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, which this month lost its seven-decade hold on both Mexico's presidency and Chiapas' governorship.

The girl's family and other sympathizers of the Zapatistas, who launched a bloody rebellion in the southernmost state of Chiapas in 1994, live in shacks on the side of the highway opposite the school. Supporters of the PRI, who oppose the rebels, live on the other side of the strip of blacktop that runs through Nueva Provedencia, a village of fewer than 200 people.

"They are like the enemy," says the girl's uncle, a Zapatista supporter who gives his name only as Jorge. "I don't think things will get better until they leave."

Across the road, Baltizar Lopez fumes with equal rage and says his Zapatista neighbors are little more than military-style thugs. He points to marks on his wrists and says rebels kidnapped him in August and held him for 12 days in an effort to scare him into leaving the village.

"They live by force," Lopez says. "We can't trust them."

Such anger and distrust will no doubt complicate the efforts of Mexico's new president, Vicente Fox, to bring peace to Chiapas after seven years of smoldering conflict, observers say.

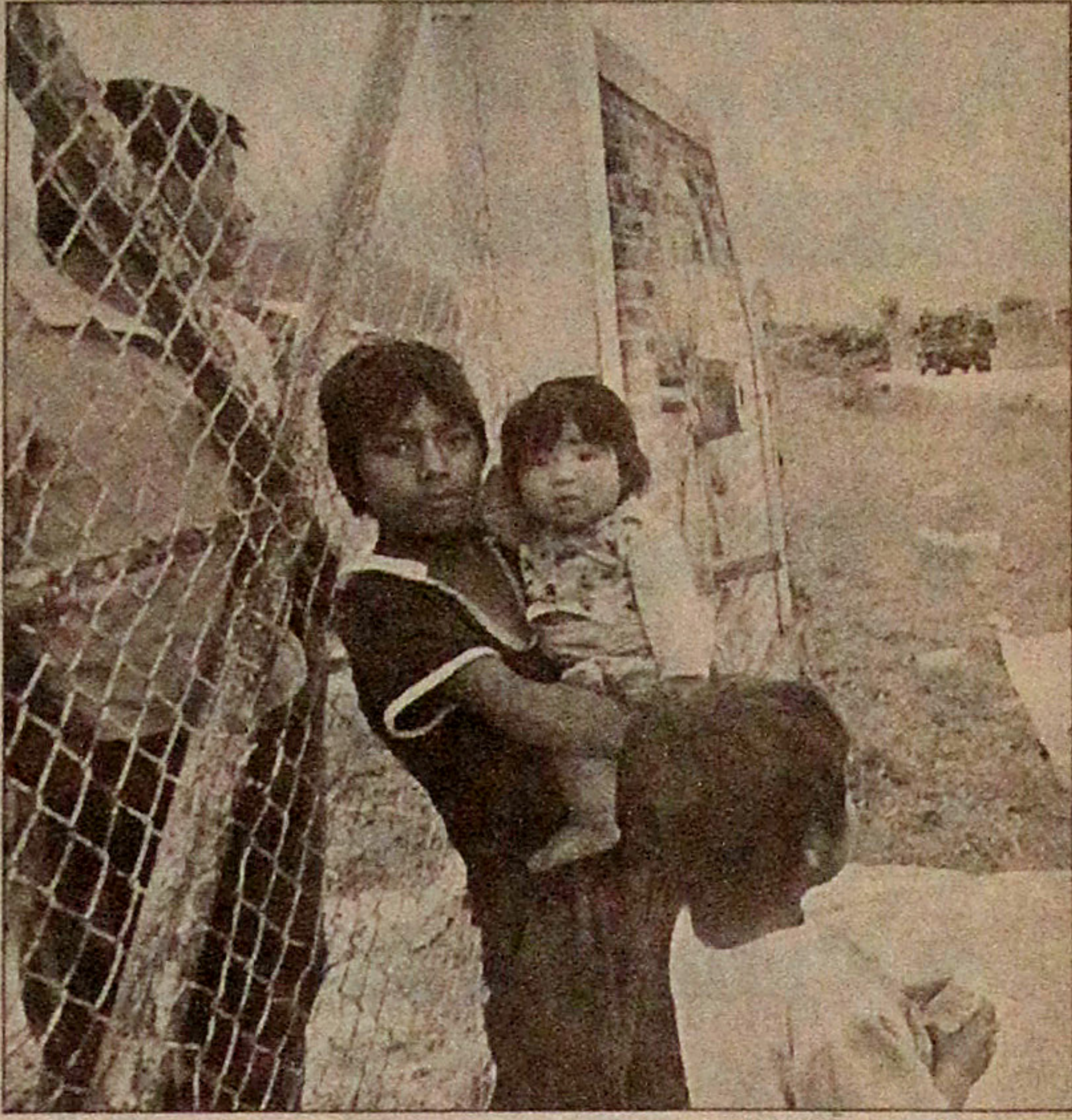
Fox, of the National Action Party, or PAN, announced within hours of his inauguration Dec. 1 the withdrawal of army troops from dozens of military checkpoints in the conflict zone in an effort to jumpstart peace negotiations.

The Zapatista leader known as Subcomandante Marcos indicated that the mostly Maya rebels would agree to resume peace talks, which collapsed in 1996, as long as the government withdraws some troops and complies with other demands.

Supporters of Fox believe that the battered state is finally on the road to peace.

But observers in the region say the conflict has divided families and communities and devastated the economy. A negotiated peace settlement, they say, will not in itself heal the wounds or reconcile a feuding people.

"The negotiations may take a year," says Noe Pineda, an analyst for the Fray Bartolome Hu-

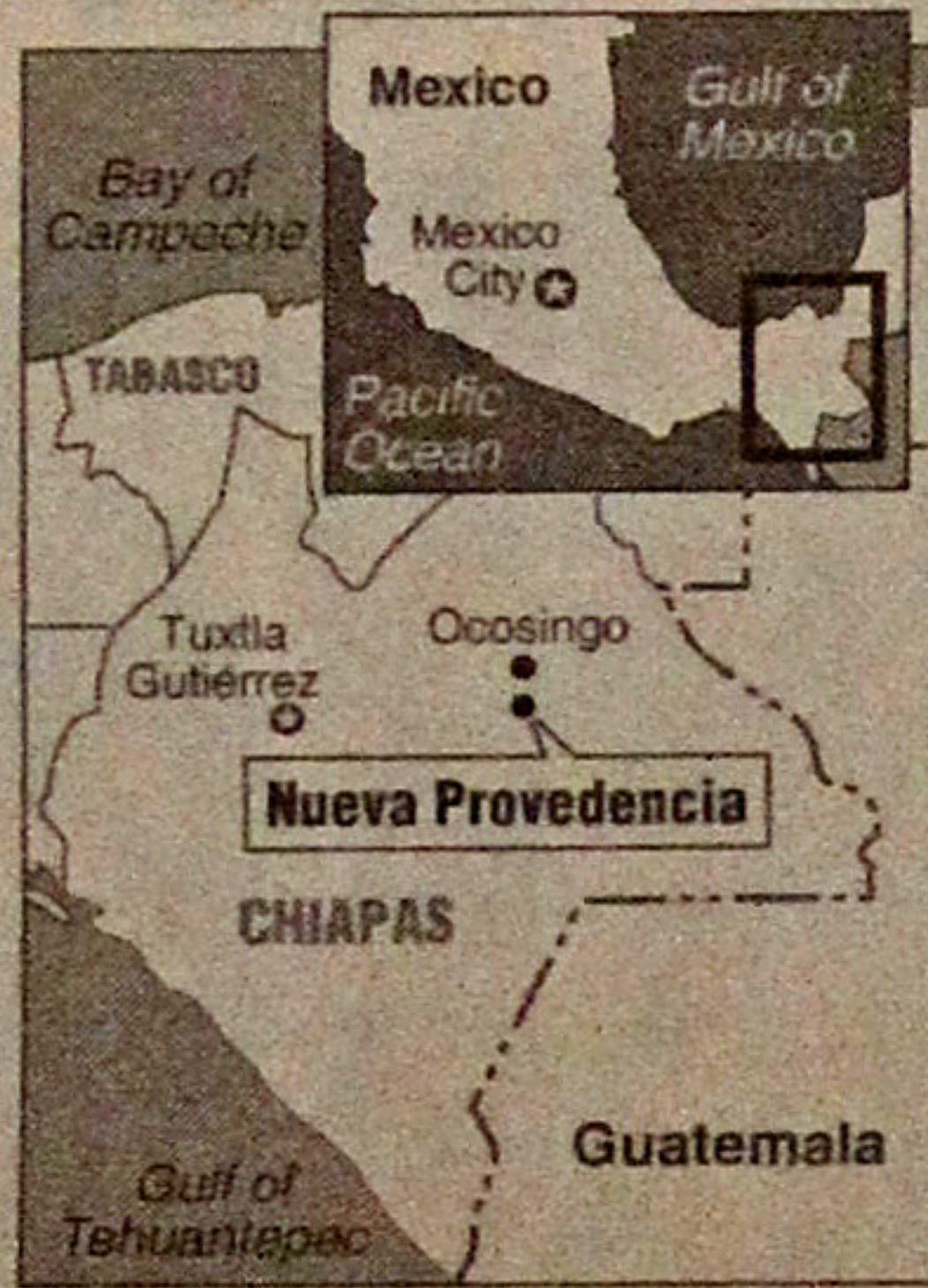


Photos by Janet Schwartz / Special to the Chronicle

Supporters of Zapatista rebels stand near the road that separates them from rebel opponents in the village of Nueva Provedencia.

man Rights Center in San Cristobal de las Casas. But reconciliation, bringing people together so that they can live in peace, "will take years and years."

Demanding indigenous rights and an end to free-market economic policies, the Zapatistas seized a handful of towns in Chiapas during the early days of their rebellion, which began Jan. 1, 1994.



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Soon, however, the Mexican army drove the rebels back into their jungle stronghold. Army garrisons sprang up near many Zapatista communities, and troops manned checkpoints set up along the state's major roads. Clashes between villagers who support and oppose the rebels led to many deaths.

In many ways, the conflict has transformed the Maya highlands, which account for about a third of the state.

The population of Ocosingo, which sits just outside the rebels' jungle stronghold, for instance, tripled in size to nearly 60,000 people after refugees poured out of the nearby mountains in search of safety and work.

The wide valleys and mountain slopes near Ocosingo once produced beef for the rest of Mexico. But ranchers say the rebels took over much of their land, nearly 75,000 acres. The Zapatistas turned ranch houses into multi-family housing units and plowed under pasture land to plant corn.

Exports of Chiapas beef have fallen from 25,000 head of cattle a month to fewer than 1,000, says Porfirio Martinez, a rancher and

former Ocosingo mayor.

For peace to take hold in Chiapas, Martinez says, the state's economy will have to be rebuilt. Fox will have to find a way to return the ranchers' land to them.

And paramilitary groups tolerated by the past PRI government as a counterweight to the rebels will have to be disarmed.

"The conflict has been a huge setback," Martinez says. "Even if there is a (peace) agreement, I don't think things will ever be the same."

Perhaps not surprisingly, people here disagree about whether the Mexican army should remain in Chiapas.

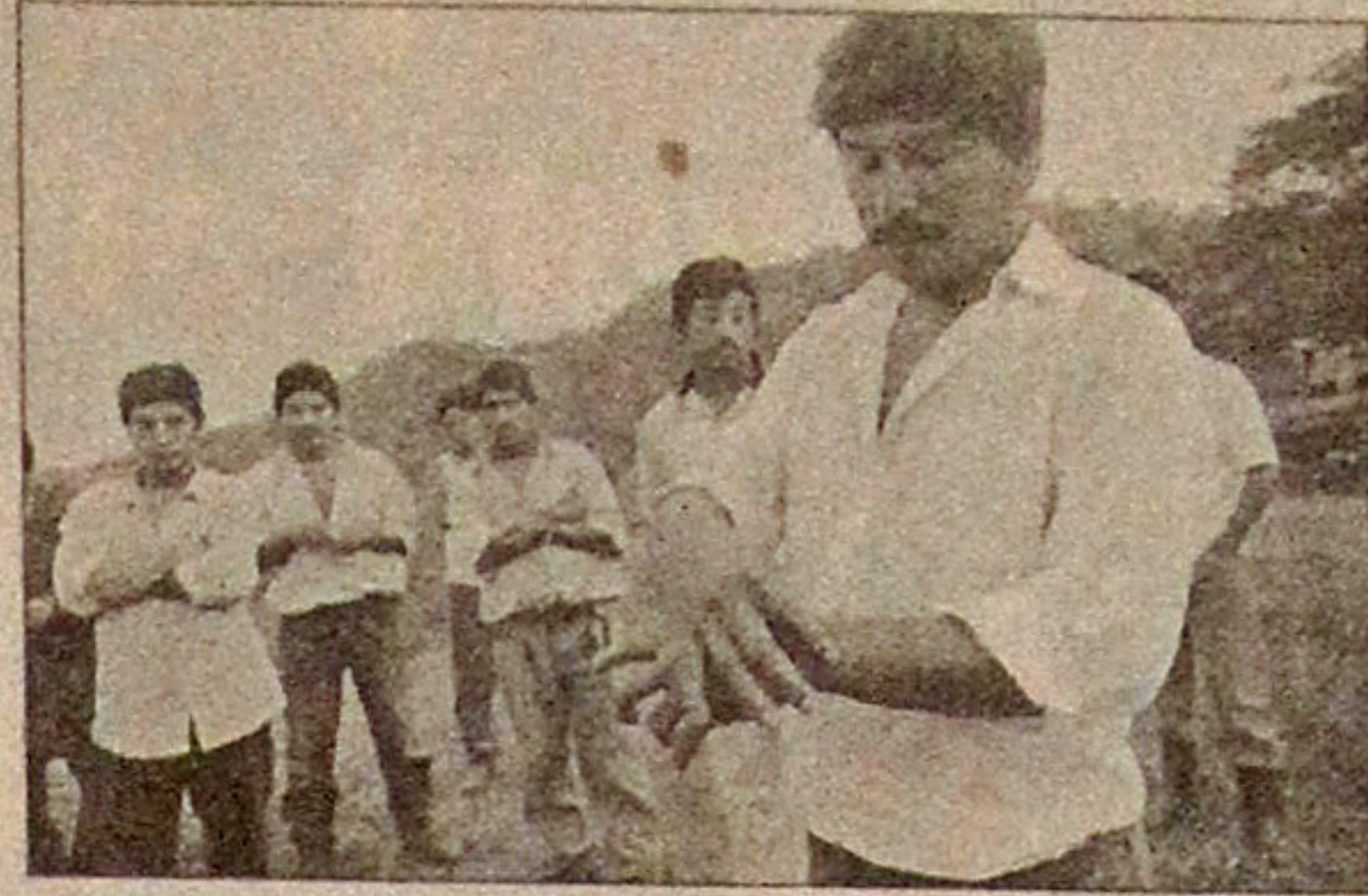
Early this month, Fox ordered the removal of army checkpoints in the conflict zone, but tens of thousands of soldiers remain in the region. In his first public appearance in months, rebel leader Marcos demanded that seven of the army camps be permanently dismantled before the Zapatistas would sit down at the negotiating table. Eventually, he said, most of the soldiers must leave.

But many merchants see the soldiers as a boon to business. Some ranchers and villagers view the troops as protection.

Late last month, opponents of the rebels protested in Ocosingo, demanding that Fox keep the soldiers in the state. They said they fear Zapatista retribution if the troops leave.

Other people in Chiapas accuse the soldiers of spreading prostitution and drug use into once-insulated villages.

Surrounded by razor wire and guarded by men with machine guns, one of the army camps sits



Baltizar Lopez, an opponent of the Zapatistas, points to marks on his wrists and says rebels held him for 12 days in August.

in a corn field above the village of Jolnacho, where 500 Tzotzil Maya Indians live in mud-walled houses heated by wood fires.

The river that runs from the camp through Jolnacho used to be crystal clear, said Jesus Diaz, a resident of the village. A stench now rises from the stream, and beer cans and plastic bottles litter its banks.

Villagers, many of whom make a living selling corn or homemade fireworks, say prostitution now flourishes in the area. Young women, many of them from Central America, show up at the army camp's gates two or three times a week.

Lopez, the PRI supporter in Nueva Provedencia, believes that an army withdrawal would only allow the anger that has simmered in Chiapas for years to flare, perhaps bringing more violence.

After the school for PRI sup-

porters was built two years ago, he says, the Zapatistas came in the night and painted rebel slogans on the building.

Lopez and others say the rebels burned the houses of those who back the PRI in an effort to force them to leave the village.

Zapatista supporters, who have no school of their own in Nueva Provedencia, say that when they try to talk to their PRI neighbors, bullets chase them away.

"They can't stand the sight of us," says Jorge, the Zapatista sympathizer, as he cautiously eyes his neighbors from across the road.

If the army leaves, Lopez says, neither Fox nor Marcos will be able to control what happens next.

"We have peaceful intentions," Lopez says. "But even the burro can only take so much whipping before it fights back."

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