

June 3, 2003

Dear Friends,

I'm writing to inform you of a crisis in our Columban parish here and to ask for prayers and any advice or information you might have to help us resolve same peacefully.

In the westernmost part of the parish of Corpus Cristi de Anapra, in an area called Lomas de Poleo, people began settling on the upper part of the colonia, the mesa, as long as thirty-some years ago. I celebrated a "Quincenera" for Gabi, Carmen's daughter, who was born up there three years after her family arrived eighteen years ago. Jose Luis and Sylvia arrived twelve years ago and with the help of Builders Without Borders and other volunteers, have built a beautiful straw bale house. Joaquin and Juana retired and moved up on to the mesa some seven years ago. I could name many others who have been there for many years.

The crux of the problem is this: according to the Mexican Constitution, anyone who peacefully occupies a piece of land for five years, without using violence and without ever receiving a personal visit from the owner or his agent showing legal title to the land, becomes him/herself the legal owner. In other words, people can come into possession of land simply by "squatting" five years or more with no intervention from the legal owners, if there are any.

Pedro Zaragoza Vizcarra, Juarez industrialist whose family and family-owned business, Grupo Zaragoza, control all the natural gas of Mexico and Guatemala, Lucerna milk and Corona beer, has been trying to dislodge these people from their homes for at least two years. He has offered money, other plots of land, and most recently resorted to intimidation and abuse. He influenced a judge to order the electric company to remove all the electric poles and transformers leaving the residents without electricity which they had legally contracted and paid for. That is, no light, no refrigeration, no fans, in the hot desert area. Now he has planted a group of paid men, some would say hooligans, recruited from other poor parts of town and paid 300 pesos a day, to intimidate and harass the people. These men appeared in pick-up trucks Tuesday morning, brandishing bats, stones, and pipes. The newspaper photographer zoomed in and recorded some with firearms in their belts.

Because all the street lights have been removed, groups of vandals can roam easily about Lomas at night, stealing and creating fear in the minds of the people, and intimidating the young women. You must also realize the extremely high number of young women from this area who have been raped and murdered in the last ten years. A situation the local government and law enforcement have failed miserably to address. All day the paid "grupo de choque" as the men are called, along with the private security guards of the Grupo Zaragoza, sit ensconced on the mesa, right next to the only road that leads into the colonia. They have dug about a six inch deep hole in the sand road which creates a kind of speed bump forcing cars to come to almost a complete stop with the private security agents dressed in black occupying both sides of the road.

Zaragoza has almost limitless resources and has set up huge circus tents, electric generators, refrigerators, water, food service and portable toilets. We have also witnessed firsthand some of the younger men sniffing glue under the protection of the leaders of the "grupo de choque". The

police are visible and claim they are neutral, just separating the two groups. But the week before, over seventy police vehicles accompanied the electric company as it dismantled the very poles it had placed there only last year and for which the residents were paying. (The cost to get the electric was US 320 dollars, for which most people were still making payments.) We have spoken directly with the police "commandante" who reassured us there would be no violence and no eviction. The judges have imposed an "amparo", a kind of injunction prohibiting eviction until the case is settled in court. Pedro Zaragoza Fuentes, is claiming ownership of the land but this was already denied by a judge in 1992.

Because of the tense situation and the fear of a sudden attack on their homes, many people are forced to remain on the mesa, unable to work and therefore lacking in food and other necessities. The situation has turned into a siege with all the advantages, except justice, on the Zaragoza side.

Each illegal or threatening action has been reported to the civil authorities and the local "Asociacion Civil" or non-profit community organization has been documenting as best it can with video cameras and regular cameras what is happening. A group of us who do not live up on the mesa but are supporting the people there drafted a letter to the mayor, Jesus Delgado, asking him to remove the "grupo de choque" immediately. We will go again in person tomorrow and stay in his office till he sees us. Petitions have been sent to the state governor, Patricio Martinez and the Mexican President, Vicente Fox. The above mentioned civic association has contracted several lawyers who are managing but you can imagine the expense for people who when they are able to work are making about 50 US dollars a week.

On the pastoral side, we had been concerned about the spiritual dimension of the struggle. Complicated by the fact that the catholics are a minority, there are lots of evangelicals and Jehovah's Witnesses as well, we wondered how to unify the people and express faith in God who will not abandon them. After speaking with the leaders, who spoke directly with the people, everyone was in agreement that we could pray, use scripture and song to fortify ourselves spiritually and offer a witness to the "grupo de choque" that we are God's children with dignity and the right to be here. (The local Sisters of Charity contingent found the spanish words and cassette tape of "We Shall Not be Moved" in spanish, a lively and appropriate mantra for the group's struggle). We have consistently emphasized the value of peaceful resistance and non-violence under whatever provocation, citing examples of Ghandi, Martin Luther King, and Jesus himself.

We are considering some sort of boycott of Zaragoza's products sold in the US to pressure them to remove the threatening group from the mesa. If something were in place it could be bargaining chip, possibly, to persuade Zaragoza's family/business that their activities to illegally obtain this land would not be worth it. We're researching the holdings, interests, etc. that they have in the US. There are also stories of FBI charges against the group for drug-trafficking. Negative publicity about the Zaragozas could be used as part of the boycott against Corona beer for example. We're also going to send out the address/fax/email for the mayor, governor and president and ask people to communicate their concern for the residents and ask for the immediate removal of the "grupo de choque".

That is what is happening up to now. I ask your prayers and support for all the neighbors up in Las Lomas. If you have suggestions, ideas, similar experiences, etc. please feel free to let me know. For more information you can get on <http://www.eldiariodigital.com.mx> the local newspaper's website. I am sending separately a brief piece and the only coverage yet from the El Paso paper.

Seeking the peace and justice of God's reign,

Bill Morton, ssc

<http://www.borderlandnews.com/stories/borderland/20030602-120491.shtml>