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Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional Observes 19th Anniversary of Uprising in Chiapas

By Carlos Navarro

Liberación Nacional (EZLN) marked the 19th anniversary of its uprising with a series of public events in the municipalities of Ocosingo, Palenque, Altamirano, San Cristóbal de las Casas, and Las Margaritas. These are the same communities where the Zapatistas first appeared on Jan. 1, 1994. The takeover of San Cristóbal de las Casas and other communities was intended to bring attention to the extreme poverty in Chiapas and elsewhere in Mexico and the ongoing violation of human and cultural rights for the country's indigenous communities. The uprising was planned to coincide with the start of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which the Zapatistas viewed as a symbol of the neoliberal policies that were behind the economic inequalities in Mexico.

The Zapatista rebellion promoted some changes in Mexico's policies, particularly those dealing with recognition of the rights of indigenous communities. But the laws approved in 2001 were weaker than promoters originally intended. Still, the EZLN's push for indigenous rights opened the door for other initiatives, including the right of citizens to challenge human rights violations.

Autonomous communities deemed a success

The EZLN communities, led by leader Subcomandante Marcos, used the 19th anniversary of the uprising to celebrate the changes that have occurred in Chiapas and other states during the past two decades, including the development of autonomous communities.

"As part of their celebrations, the indigenous communities organized sporting competitions and musical events until dusk," said the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio. "In the evening, several men and women with their faces covered, possibly Zapatista leaders, addressed the crowds with messages that included a call to resistance against the government of Enrique Peña Nieto and demands for the release of political prisoners."

The autonomous communities that the Zapatistas created are seen as extremely successful, said experts at a forum organized by the Universidad de la Tierra in Chiapas in January. In many cases, these communities, which are in remote areas of the Selva Lacandona, provide education, medical services, and a legal system to residents that the state and federal government are unable to offer.

The San Andres Accords, negotiated in 1996, legitimized the autonomous communities created by the Zapatistas, giving local indigenous peoples control over their own territory, their natural resources, administration of finances, and their justice and educational systems.

"They tell us that in their territory they have succeeded in ensuring that all children attend school, that hospitals and medicines are available to all the sick, and that everyone has access to food," sociologist Pablo González Casanova said at the forum.

González Casanova, who has conducted extensive studies on indigenous communities in the Americas, said the EZLN's model is evidence that it is not necessary that "all solutions be imposed from the top."

Views mixed on indigenous-rights law approved in 2001

Still, there is some debate on the reach of the indigenous-rights law approved by Congress in 2001 Mexican society as a whole. Many critics contend that the law was diluted to the point that the needs of indigenous communities outside Chiapas were not adequately addressed. One of the main changes inserted into the original bill was the stipulation that indigenous communities act in accordance with the Mexican Constitution and state laws.

But legislators from the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), whose parties were instrumental in approving the indigenous-rights law, said the measure fulfills many of the promises that the Mexican government made during negotiation of the San Andrés Accords.

"Most of the demands made through the San Andrés Accords have been met through constitutional reforms and others have come through decrees that recognize the rights of indigenous peoples," said Sen. Arturo Zamora, one of the PRI floor leaders in the upper house.

There are some areas where the rights and the quality of life can still be improved, but Zamora said changes could be implemented through, normal legislative channels. "I don't think it's necessary to make constitutional changes to address these matters," said the PRI senator. "Otherwise, everyone around the country with a request for some sort of change is going to ask us to approve a constitutional reform."

Similar comments came from PAN Sen. Hector Larios. "The Constitution was already reformed to include text regarding respect and protection of indigenous communities, and, in my opinion, the issue is already settled," said Larios.

The PAN senator said statements made by Marcos and other Zapatista leaders in December 2012 and January 2013 were simply intended to mark the anniversary of the uprising and do not reflect the current situation for indigenous communities in that state. "Anyone who had been in Chiapas in 1994 will notice deep changes when they visit that state now," said Larios.

The Zapatistas have criticized the neoliberal policies of all the governments that have been in power during the last two decades, but a good deal of their criticism has focused on the PRI.

Zapatistas criticize PRI, Peña Nieto

Several violent acts against indigenous peoples occurred under the watch of the PRI, especially during the administration of President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000). One of the most infamous cases involved the massacre at 45 Tzotzil Indians in the remote community of Acteal in 1997. Paramilitary groups aligned with the PRI carried out the killings. Many perpetrators were members of other indigenous communities in Chiapas, but the massacre was said to have occurred with the consent and knowledge of local PRI leaders. Relatives and survivors of the massacre allege that Zedillo conspired to cover up the murders.

Zedillo also earned the contempt of EZLN sympathizers and human rights advocates when he launched an all-out campaign against Zapatista leaders in 1995.

The EZLN also joined human rights advocates in condemning the killing of protestors in San Salvador Atenco in México state in 2006. The killings occurred when riot police from state and federal law-enforcement agencies fired indiscriminately at vendors who were protesting an eviction order from sidewalks outside a local market. Critics, including the EZLN, have accused Enrique Peña Nieto, then México state governor, of ordering the crackdown.

In a communiqué associated with the 19th anniversary of the EZLN uprising, Subcomandante Marcos made a direct reference to the Acteal and San Salvador de Atenco incidents. "Was it not [Peña Nieto] who promoted the police violence in San Salvador Atenco?" asked Marcos.

The EZLN leader also accused the president of cowardice when as a candidate he avoided a direct dialogue with student protestors from the #YoSoy132 movement at a debate at the Universidad Iberoamericana.

Marcos also held Peña Nieto responsible, along with the government of Mexico City, led by the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), for the violent crackdown on Young protestors on inauguration day.

The EZLN leader took the opportunity to criticize members of Peña Nieto's new Cabinet, including Education Secretary Emilio Chuayffet and Energy Secretary Pedro Joaquín Coldwell, who were high-level officials in the early years of the Zedillo government. Chuayffet served as interior secretary and Coldwell as the head of the government commission negotiating a peace agreement with the EZLN.

"Wasn't [Chuayffet] the one who in 1996 said that the government accepted the terms of an agreement negotiated by the Chiapas legislative commission [Comision Nacional de Concordia y

Pacificación, COCOPA] only to go back on his word?" asked Marcos. "And wasn't he one of the intellectual authors of the massacre in Acteal in 1997?"