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Government Changes Strategy in Chiapas Conflict

by Carlos Navarro

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With the rebel uprising in the southern state of Chiapas now in its third week, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's administration has adopted a major change in its strategy for dealing with the conflict. The Salinas administration's initial response to the rebellion which began on Jan. 1 when guerrillas from the Zapatista National Liberation Army (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional, EZLN) occupied four towns in Chiapas was to launch a massive counterinsurgency offensive by government security forces ([SourceMex, Jan. 12, 1994](#)) An estimated 15,000 army troops, backed by helicopter gunships and artillery, succeeded in flushing the rebels out of most of the territories they had occupied. But as government forces gained the upper hand on the battlefield, it became clear to the Salinas administration that political repercussions from the uprising were rapidly multiplying.

Within the space of a few days, the government has done an about face, first toning down its harsh anti-rebel rhetoric, then appointing a high level peace envoy to seek a negotiated solution to the conflict, and finally declaring a unilateral cease-fire and an amnesty for all combatants.

Zapatistas accept cease-fire

The government's change in tactics is apparently bearing fruit. On Jan. 17, after a prolonged silence, the EZLN apparently accepted terms for a cease-fire and amnesty offered by the Salinas administration, and tentatively agreed to enter into negotiations with the government. Salinas's Peace Commissioner, Manuel Camacho Solis, told reporters in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, that the Zapatistas had accepted the offer in a message signed by "Commander Marcos," the EZLN's leading spokesperson.

In announcing the cease-fire and recognition of the EZLN as a legitimate political and military force, the government complied with two key conditions demanded by the rebels as preconditions for entering into negotiations with the government. Such official recognition of the EZLN as a "belligerent force" would grant the Zapatistas some protection under the Geneva Conventions on War. Still, more rebel demands must be met before the EZLN will agree to actually sit down at the bargaining table. Those demands include a withdrawal of all army troops to their barracks, and an end to air bombings.

Moreover, even though Camacho publicly said the government would recognize the EZLN as a legitimate representative group, the issue still remains murky. According to the New York Times, the EZLN says it is not yet completely satisfied that the government has formally recognized the insurgency as a belligerent force. In fact, the government's overtures to the rebels may in essence be aimed at undermining the EZLN as the legitimate representative of Indian communities in Chiapas and elsewhere.

According to the Times, for example, the Salinas administration has moved quickly to establish contacts with legal Indian and peasant groups in Chiapas. A three-member special commission

appointed by Salinas on Jan. 8 traveled around Chiapas for the past week, interviewing local groups and taking note of their demands for economic assistance and changes in government policies.

"What I am trying to do is to convince the government to take the necessary steps to create a context for peace and to immediately start reforms in the state of Chiapas that respond to the needs for justice, social development, the rule of law, and democracy," said Camacho on Jan. 18. "The key is to respond to social needs and to not mix a general political discussion with the pressure of a localized armed rebellion."

Army assists with humanitarian efforts

For its part, the army has begun to carry out civic action operations in the conflict zones. A spokesperson for the National Defense Secretariat (Secretaria de la Defensa Nacional, SEDENA) said military personnel in Chiapas are now assisting with "humanitarian efforts," such as distribution of medicine, drinking water, and other basic goods in the towns of Altamirano, Ocosingo, Las Margaritas and Oxchuc. Human rights situation deteriorates Meanwhile, several human rights organizations, including the government's National Commission on Human Rights (Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos, CNDH), have issued preliminary reports or launched investigations into charges that the army engaged in massive human rights violations in Chiapas after the fighting began on Jan. 1.

Former US attorney general Ramsey Clark traveled to Chiapas in early January to assess the situation. On Jan. 7, Clark told reporters he found evidence of a higher number of deaths from the fighting between rebels and the army than reported by the government. As of Jan. 17, the official death toll reported by the government was 107 casualties. Some sources put the actual death toll at three to four times that number.

On Jan. 8, Canadian investigators told reporters in Mexico City that the army had subjected Indians to summary executions, disappearances, and other human rights abuses during the conflict. The Canadian team also charged that troops were restricting the movements of villagers in what amounted to a state of siege in some parts of Chiapas. Juan Mendez, director of Human Rights Watch-Americas, said his group was also investigating cases of alleged torture by the army. He said evidence gathered to date suggests that the army tortured suspected rebels, summarily executed guerrillas, and indiscriminately fired at civilians. There have been other complaints as well of mistreatment of prisoners, and abuses committed by both sides.

CNDH president Jorge Madrazo Cuellar promised that the Commission will investigate all legitimate complaints about human rights violations, including reports of mass graves and disappearances. In fact, on Jan. 16 the CNDH reported the discovery of a clandestine grave near Ocosingo site of one of the fiercest battles between government forces and the rebels- -but said none of the eleven bodies buried there showed signs of torture. Meantime, the CNDH has asked the EZLN to immediately release several hostages held since the fighting began, including former Chiapas governor Gen. Absalon Castellanos Dominguez, whom they have threatened to execute. "Hostage-taking constitutes one of the most clear and emphatic violations of international humanitarian conventions," the CNDH said in a statement.

According to a report by Reuters news agency, the EZLN has called on President Bill Clinton to ensure that the US refrains from directly assisting in the Mexican government's efforts to put down the rebellion in Chiapas. "Troops, planes, helicopters, radar, communications equipment and weapons are used not to fight drug traffickers...but to repress the just struggle of the Mexican people and the indigenous population in Chiapas," said a copy of a Jan. 17 letter signed by the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee, which heads the rebel EZLN.

Reuters reported that the government did in fact divert helicopters, including some provided by the US, from their routine duties of intercepting drug-traffickers to support its campaign against rebels in Chiapas. "The helicopters which the United States has provided to Mexico are restricted to counternarcotics activities, but they can be used for non-narcotics purposes under certain conditions," one US official said. "The embassy has been assured by senior Mexican government officials that the helicopters were used in a logistical, non-combat support role, were not involved in offensive counterinsurgency actions, and, as of Jan. 13, have all been returned to their counternarcotics functions."

Speculation continues over political fallout

While debate over rights violations continues, speculation abounds regarding the impact of the Chiapas uprising on the Aug. 21 presidential elections. Most political analysts agree that two politicians stand to benefit the most from recent developments: Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the opposition Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) and Peace Commissioner Camacho. Camacho recently lost out in his bid to secure the presidential nomination of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), as President Salinas instead chose Social Development Secretary Luis Donaldo Colosio. Camacho was reportedly bitter at having been passed over, and even entertained the possibility of quitting the PRI in order to participate in the elections with another party.

Analysts now say the events in Chiapas could be devastating to Colosio's candidacy for two reasons. On the one hand, to the extent that the uprising is perceived as resulting from the PRI's failure to improve social conditions in Mexico, Colosio may be forced to assume part of the responsibility given his former position as head of the Social Development Secretariat (Secretaria de Desarrollo Social, SEDESOL). On the other hand, if Camacho succeeds in his role as chief government negotiator, he could emerge as a strong political figure, having led the effort to solve the conflict and restore stability to Mexico. In fact, given the extent to which Camacho's new high-profile role has already forced Colosio's incipient presidential campaign into the shadows, some have raised the possibility that the PRI may still decide to change candidates, or that Camacho could pursue his presidential ambitions as an independent or with another party.

Colosio's opponents, especially the PRD's Cardenas, have made it clear that they intend to characterize the events in Chiapas as a warning regarding the consequences of the huge gulf between rich and poor in Mexico. In fact, the PRD candidate was among the first politicians to call for a unilateral cease-fire by the army and for amnesty for the EZLN rebels. In a Jan. 13 interview with the Toronto Globe & Mail, Colosio conceded that, "the roots of the conflict in Chiapas are definitely in the inequalities and the social injustice that prevail in some parts of the country." But when asked directly if the system of unequal distribution of land in Chiapas must be changed in order to reduce inequality, Colosio was non-committal. "There are some areas of Chiapas that need

to be attended to in terms of land tenure. But I don't see that as the only solution. We also have to find alternatives in employment, such as in fishing and tourism."

At the same time, Colosio may also face an invigorated challenge from National Action Party (PAN) candidate Diego Fernandez de Cevallos, who stands to gain some of the vote from the business sector if the PRI is perceived as moving too far away from the economic reforms instituted by President Salinas.

Fallout Widens

Finally, the uprising in Chiapas is causing a ripple effect, directly influencing important state affairs. One example is the postponement of a signing ceremony for a new trade agreement between Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela, known as the Group of Three (G-3) countries. The signing ceremony with Presidents Cesar Gaviria of Colombia, Venezuela's interim president Ramon Velasquez, and Rafael Caldera, president-elect in Venezuela who will take office in February was originally scheduled for Jan. 20 in Cartagena, Colombia.

However, the ceremony was delayed until sometime during the week of Jan. 24-28 to allow President Salinas to dedicate full attention to the situation in Chiapas. Notwithstanding the Chiapas uprising and its consequences, the Salinas administration continues to staunchly defend the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was one of the EZLN's justifications for launching its offensive. Following a NAFTA ministerial-level review meeting with US Trade Representative Mickey Kantor and Canadian Trade Minister Roy MacLaren on Jan. 14 in Mexico City, Trade Secretary Jaime Serra Puche told reporters that the administration continues to look to NAFTA for future economic development.

"Particularly in Mexico, NAFTA will permit a more balanced regional development because it will permit free access, after a period of transition, to the Canadian and US markets, for products from every part of the country," Serra Puche said.

Still, despite the government's efforts to push forward with business as usual, many influential private sector leaders remain concerned about the repercussions of the Chiapas uprising. Antonio Sanchez Diaz de Rivera, president of the Mexican Confederation of Employers (Confederacion Patronal de la Republica Mexicana, COPARMEX), told La Jornada newspaper he fears a prolonged conflict could cause many foreign investors to leave Mexico. Still, Ricardo Dajer Nahum, president of the Confederation of National Chambers of Commerce (Confederacion de Camaras Nacionales de Comercio, CONCANACO), said there are as yet no immediate signs that foreign companies are packing their bags.

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