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Negotiations Could Start Soon Between Government, Zapatistas in Chiapas Conflict

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More than three weeks after the uprising of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional, EZLN) began in the state of Chiapas signs have begun to emerge regarding possible negotiations between the rebels and President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's administration. Although government and EZLN representatives have not yet met face-to-face at the negotiating table, both sides appear to be keeping lines of communication open through communiques and conciliatory gestures.

On Jan. 20 and 21, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate approved legislation proposed by President Salinas offering broad amnesty to combatants from the EZLN and from the federal army for actions committed during the Chiapas uprising between Jan. 1 and Jan. 20. Sen. Victor Manuel Tinoco, a representative of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) from Michoacan state, said the amnesty legislation does not represent a "pardon" nor an "armistice," but rather an effort to meet the conditions presented by the EZLN in order to enter into dialogue with the government.

Zapatistas accept government's overtures

For its part, the EZLN accepted the government's overtures aimed at reaching a peaceful settlement, but at the same time took issue with the spirit of the legislation. In a communique published in several Mexican newspapers, EZLN spokesman Commander Marcos said: "For what are you going to pardon us? For not starving to death? For not being silent in our misery?"

However, in a subsequent communique, the EZLN promised not to disrupt the 1994 presidential elections, suggested topics for peace talks, and offered to release a captive former governor. "If we find a dignified peace, we will follow the path of dignified peace," wrote Commander Marcos. "We will not take the country hostage," he added. "We do not want nor are we able to impose our ideas on Mexican society by the force of our arms."

Another step taken by the Mexican government to ease tensions was to offer to begin moving its troops out of cities and towns in Chiapas, as demanded by the EZLN. According to the Associated Press, by Jan. 23, in most towns, soldiers had retreated to the outskirts. But army personnel still occupied Ocosingo and Altamirano, two of the towns taken by the EZLN on Jan. 1.

Meanwhile, on Jan. 20, President Salinas announced a series of tax breaks for residents and businesses in Chiapas, and on Jan. 25, Salinas personally visited the state capital of Tuxtla Gutierrez where he met with representatives from 280 Indian organizations. The Indians who met with Salinas say they have no affiliation with the rebels, but support the EZLN's call for far-reaching social reform in Chiapas.

Meantime, the Chiapas state legislature also took steps to ease tensions by accepting the resignation of interim governor Elmar Setzer Marseille, replacing him with former federal deputy Javier Lopez Moreno. Setzer was accused, along with his predecessors retired Gen. Absalon Castellanos and Patrocinio Gonzalez, of resisting all efforts to address issues of poverty and social inequality in Chiapas.

One of the first actions taken by new governor Lopez Moreno was to offer amnesty to the rebels for any violations they may have committed under state laws. This amnesty was designed to complement the federal government's amnesty proposal. In turn, on Jan. 22 the EZLN announced that kidnapped former Chiapas governor Castellanos may soon be released. Castellanos and two relatives were seized by a rebel squad from his ranch in Chiapas shortly after the insurrection began on Jan. 1. In a communique published in La Jornada and El Financiero, the rebels offered to trade Castellanos for EZLN fighters and civilians held by the army.

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