

Government, Zapatistas Begin Peace Negotiations

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Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1994-02-23

On Feb. 21 seven weeks after the uprising of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional, EZLN) began in Chiapas EZLN representatives and the government's Peace Commissioner Manuel Camacho Solis started negotiations aimed at resolving the conflict. The talks are being held at the Roman Catholic cathedral in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas. The official mediator for the negotiations is Roman Catholic Bishop Samuel Ruiz, who played an instrumental role in bringing the two sides together.

In interviews with reporters on Feb. 21, Camacho would not specify the agenda items that will be discussed as part of the talks. However, he did clarify that any accords reached during the negotiations would have to deal exclusively with the situation in Chiapas, although he conceded that additional "discussions" could cover some broader issues.

Zapatistas demand broad land reform, Salinas resignation

For its part, the EZLN has called for sweeping economic and political reforms at the national level, thus foreshadowing a difficult battle at the bargaining table, as the rebels attempt to broaden the dialogue agenda and the government attempts to limit its scope. Indeed, the EZLN appears committed to pushing for radical reforms at all levels. In statements issued during the days leading up to the negotiations, for example, the EZLN called for sweeping land reform throughout Mexico, plus the resignation of President Salinas, to be replaced by a transition government which would rule until after the Aug. 21 general elections.

The EZLN also has a long list of demands for local transformations, including political autonomy for Indians in Chiapas. In an interview with the New York Times published on the eve of the opening round of negotiations EZLN leader Sub-commander Marcos reiterated the importance of confronting issues beyond the borders of Chiapas: "We don't fool ourselves. Either the democratic process is national or there is not a democratic process...We cannot believe that there can be a democratization of the state of Chiapas or the municipalities where the EZLN is located but not the rest of the country." Marcos also hinted that some of the issues which gave rise to the conflict, and the manner in which it is potentially resolved, have implications beyond Mexico: "What is at stake in Chiapas is no longer just Chiapas or even Mexico, but perhaps even the free trade agreement [NAFTA] or the whole neo-liberal project in Latin America."

Different timetables

Differences between the Salinas administration and the EZLN regarding the inclusion of national reforms on the negotiations agenda is one of several factors which are expected to result in a lengthy, drawn out process. While the government would like to conclude an accord in the shortest amount of time possible, the rebels say they are in no hurry and would prefer to strive for a solid agreement no matter how long it takes. Some political analysts have warned that the peace process in Chiapas may not be fully resolved before the Aug. 21 elections, a prospect the government will

seek to avoid at all costs. In any case, as of Feb. 22, the two sides had still not agreed on an official timetable for the talks. Despite the wide difference in positions, both the EZLN and Camacho were encouraged by the fact that the talks had at least begun. "We saw that it was a good moment, perhaps, to speak with the words of our heart rather than the fire from our guns," said Marcos shortly after the negotiations got underway.

For his part, Camacho appealed to the region's power brokers including local political leaders and cattle ranchers to be open to change. In fact, to date, conservative ranchers in Chiapas have proven to be extremely resistant to even discussing significant transformations. Indeed, since the Mexican army announced its cease fire a couple of weeks after the uprising began, many ranchers and local political bosses have taken matters into their own hands.

On Feb. 5, reporters from La Jornada and Reforma newspapers, and from Proceso magazine, were attacked in San Cristobal de las Casas by four youths who said their fathers were prominent local ranchers. The assailants demanded that the newspapers "tell the truth" about area ranchers. Two of the reporters were slightly injured in the attack. In a separate incident on Feb. 11, several ranchers and local residents, led by a mayor affiliated with the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), staged a demonstration against the nuns who operate a hospital in Altamirano, Chiapas. According to four Italian legislators, who visited Chiapas and witnessed the action, the demonstrators carried placards calling the nuns "assassins" and "witches" for having provided medical assistance to wounded EZLN combatants. The demonstrators demanded that the nuns leave the area.

Meanwhile, even as the EZLN and government representatives were beginning the peace talks, ripple effects from the rebellion continued to multiply throughout Mexico. Dozens of peasant groups emboldened by the Zapatista revolt have held protests and seized farms and town halls in Chiapas and other impoverished states, accusing the government of corruption and failing to fulfill promises of land reform.

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