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Government, Zapatistas Report Minor Progress in Peace Talks

by Carlos Navarro

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On Feb. 27, after more than a week of dialogue, representatives of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) and the government's Peace Commissioner Manuel Camacho Solis reached agreements on a series of measures to improve conditions for indigenous communities in Chiapas. Nonetheless, while the two sides were successful in reaching agreement on some of the local social and economic issues, continued talks through March 1 failed to produce significant progress on rebel demands for far-reaching political reforms and other issues with repercussions at the national level.

Meanwhile, although the government continues to press for a rapid conclusion of the dialogue, it seems clear that complex and lengthy negotiations will be necessary to reach an accord acceptable to both sides. Speaking to reporters from international news organizations, the EZLN's chief spokesman, Subcommander Marcos, confirmed both sides had reached agreements on a series of issues related to the situation in the state of Chiapas.

The issues agreed to so far during the talks include a government commitment to provide more electrical, health, and education services to indigenous communities in Chiapas. The government has also agreed to compensate the relatives of victims killed during the uprising. Agreement was also reached regarding the formation of a special commission which would oversee compliance and implementation of an eventual peace accord.

Both Camacho and the EZLN agreed that the accords reached to date are still subject to ratification. In the case of the government, this means that Camacho must secure approval from President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, as well as from the Chamber of Deputies and Senate for some of the proposals. In the case of the rebels, the EZLN says it must secure approval for the proposed reforms from members of the remote Mayan Indian communities which back the EZLN. Marcos also told reporters that the government has been reluctant to discuss at least eight other EZLN demands regarding measures that have national repercussions.

"More changes are needed at the national level that will make it possible for the accords to be fulfilled," Marcos declared. Although he did not specify these demands, the list is thought to include issues such as far-reaching electoral reforms, repeal of constitutional amendments regarding land tenure, and changes to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Zapatistas remain cautious

In a March 1 press conference, Marcos was significantly more cautious in terms of the scope of accords reached to date. He warned that in order to assure even minimal implementation of the accords, the Salinas administration will have to confront economic and military power of the large

landowners and ranchers in Chiapas. He said the ranchers have formed their own paramilitary units and have threatened to launch attacks against the EZLN. Marcos also expressed concern over the government's refusal to recognize the EZLN as a "belligerent force," or to grant some type of legal status to the rebel organization, thus undermining the Zapatistas ability to seek adequate guarantees for implementation of the accords.

During earlier statements to the press, the EZLN had also demanded the resignation of President Salinas. However, Marcos subsequently said this demand might be dropped if the government were to take "dramatic" steps to overhaul the electoral process in order to assure truly clean elections. In fact, although nothing was agreed to at the bargaining table in Chiapas, the Salinas administration appeared to be making concessions in terms of national political reforms.

On March 1, the Federal Electoral Institute (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE) a semi autonomous body within the Interior (Gobernacion) Secretariat announced that all nine registered political parties in Mexico, including the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), had agreed to a new package of political reforms. The new modifications go far beyond a set of reforms announced by Salinas last year.

Key elements of the accord include:

—Appointment of a commission comprised of ten "respected citizens," with no political affiliation, to hire independent auditors who will verify the accuracy and integrity of voter registration lists. The commission is to issue a report on results of the audit by May 11.

—Establishment of an independent counsel within the attorney general's office (Procuraduria General de la Republica, PGR) to receive complaints and prosecute wrongdoing at election time. * On election day, all polling stations would be open to independent observers, including, for the first time ever in Mexico, foreign observers.'

—Changes in the format of voter identification cards. * Changes in campaign finance regulations.

—More severe penalties for individuals accused of vote fraud.

As of March 2, the EZLN had not issued any statement regarding the new package of political reforms. Interior Secretary Jorge Carpizo, who has jurisdiction over electoral matters, said the agreement was "extraordinarily important" because it is designed to achieve "what all Mexicans want: an objective, clean and transparent election process."

Given the reforms and other recent developments, political analysts suggest the conflict in Chiapas may finally force the PRI to conduct reasonably fair presidential elections this year. President Salinas's election in 1988 was tainted by widespread charges of fraud. In a recent column, political analyst Sergio Sarmiento said that if the presidential elections on Aug. 21 are not clean, "the party and the Mexican government will lose all legitimacy."

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