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Government, Zapatistas Agree in Principle on Most EZLN Demands

by Carlos Navarro

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On March 2, the government's Peace Commissioner Manuel Camacho Solis and representatives of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional, EZLN) announced an agreement in principle that meets 32 of the 34 demands presented by the EZLN during negotiations in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas.

The agreement, which followed 10 days of negotiations, must still be ratified by Mexican federal legislators and by indigenous community councils in Chiapas before taking effect. In a prepared statement read by Camacho's aide Roberto Saucedo, the government promised to provide more aid in the areas of housing, education, health, and employment in the rural communities of Chiapas.

The government also pledged to launch a large-scale program this year to build roads and health clinics, and to bring electricity to isolated indigenous communities. Other key concessions by the government include promises to help increase the representation of indigenous communities in the Chiapas and the federal legislatures, and to transfer land and water rights to indigenous communities.

Salinas government suprisingly flexible

According to political observers, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's administration showed surprising flexibility in the negotiations, even allowing members of the EZLN to keep their weapons until nationwide political reforms are implemented. Many political reforms have already been negotiated separately by political parties, but they must yet be passed into law by Congress.

In fact, EZLN leaders threatened to resume fighting if the presidential elections in August of 1994 are perceived as unfair or undemocratic. "I can't think of any other Latin American country in history that has accepted such an agreement," said political scientist Sergio Aguayo. "Look at El Salvador and Guatemala. The governments told the rebels to hand in their weapons and negotiate surrender. Here, there was no surrender. They negotiated democracy and let the rebels keep their weapons." In fact, on March 4, Camacho told reporters in Mexico City that President Salinas had instructed his cabinet to make every effort to comply in a timely manner with the agreements reached at the negotiating table in Chiapas.

Electoral reforms a possibility

Camacho also raised the possibility that Salinas would call a special session of Mexican legislators in March to write the legal statutes for proposed electoral reforms, which are aimed at guaranteeing a fair and impartial presidential election. These proposed reforms are the result of months of

negotiations among nine political parties, including the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

The new flexibility exhibited by the PRI was also reflected in statements by presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, who announced on March 6 that foreign observers will be allowed to monitor the upcoming Aug. 21 elections. "The election belongs to society, and cannot be a closed subject," Colosio told participants at the PRI's 65th anniversary celebration. "We have no reason to fear those who wish to know the nature of our democratic processes."

Camacho whose role as Peace Commissioner elevated his political stature has often been mentioned as an alternative presidential candidate to Colosio, possibly as an independent or representing a coalition of political parties. According to PRI insiders, Camacho was angered when he was passed over in favor of Colosio for the PRI nomination. In fact, shortly after Colosio's appointment as party candidate, rumors circulated that Camacho would defect to the opposition Democratic Revolution Party (PRD).

Now, given Camacho's success as a negotiator in the Chiapas crisis, rumors continue that he will replace Colosio as the PRI candidate. But in an interview with reporters on March 3 in Mexico City, Camacho sought to dispel those rumors, saying there was no "new circumstance" in his political future.

Meanwhile, according to the New York Times, the crisis in Chiapas has failed to create the expected groundswell of support for current PRD candidate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas. While the EZLN uprising has brought attention to the social issues pushed by the PRD in recent years, the party and Cardenas are perceived to have presented no viable alternative to President Salinas's economic policies. "He's really not doing that badly, and he can probably only grow," political scientist Federico Estevez told the New York Times. "The thing is, a lot of people thought he would really zoom because of this (the Chiapas crisis)."

In another Chiapas-related development, several thousand campesinos encouraged by the EZLN uprising on March 6 staged a march through the Chiapas cities of San Cristobal de las Casas, Tapachula, and Tuxtla Gutierrez, demanding land and the removal of several PRI mayors whom they described as "corrupt." The action was organized by the State Council of Indigenous and Campesino Organizations (Consejo Estatal de Organizaciones Indigenas y Campesinas, CEOIC). Interim Chiapas Governor Javier Lopez Moreno agreed to meet with a delegation of the demonstrators to discuss those demands.

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