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## **Mexican President Zedillo Chooses War In Chiapas; Role Of U.S. Questioned**

*by Guest*

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By John Ross

[The author is a freelance journalist who has written on Mexican political and economic affairs for many years. He recently published "Rebellion From The Roots," a detailed account of the uprising of the Zapatista National Liberation Army in Chiapas. The following piece was written a few days before President Ernesto Zedillo's Feb. 14 announcement that the army would temporarily halt offensive military operations in Chiapas.]

In early February, in a violent about-face, President Ernesto Zedillo broke off a long-promised dialogue with the largely indigenous Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), pouring several thousand Mexican Army troops and federal police into the Zapatistas' Lacandon jungle base area just north of the Chiapas-Guatemalan border. Zedillo managed to sidestep an all-out declaration of war by couching the invasion in judicial clothing, ordering the arrest of the EZLN leadership as criminal conspirators. Zedillo also "unmasked" Zapatista spokesperson "Subcomandante Marcos" as a maverick philosopher and university professor, in a flawed effort to separate the mestizo "Marcos" from indigenous rebels and erase the charismatic EZLN spokesman's mounting mystique. But the public relations putsch is not just directed at dampening the Zapatistas' allure.

The military-police assault on the EZLN leadership appears to be an elaborately orchestrated ploy to restore the image of presidential authority, considerably weakened by the collapse of the Mexican peso and massive capital flight, a crisis that was initiated by currency devaluation just three weeks after Zedillo took office Dec. 1, 1994. The president at first sought to pin the blame for the economic tailspin on Zapatista troop movements, but the dimensions of the crisis soon escalated towards insolvency and Zedillo was forced to abandon the Zapatista gambit. The issuance of the arrest warrants and the advance of the armed forces into Zapatista territory came just hours after the Mexican government had drawn on the first US\$7 billion installment on the US-engineered US\$50 billion package designed to "rescue" this nation's battered economy.

Speaking in Queretero on Feb. 5 on the 78th anniversary of the crafting of the Mexican constitution, Zedillo directed his words to "those who guard contacts" with the rebels, counseling them to urge the Zapatistas to quickly resume negotiations with his government. The president's message was interpreted as an ultimatum by many delegates to the third National Democratic Convention, a Zapatista-inspired congress, meeting just across town in the same city. Zedillo's Interior Secretary Esteban Moctezuma met with EZLN leaders in their jungle camp on Jan. 15 in what had been billed as a move to jump-start new talks. Zedillo's promise of a fresh dialogue now appears to have been a cover-up to buy time to ready his armed forces for the invasion of the Zapatista zone. A Feb. 2 letter from Marcos to Moctezuma accuses the Zedillo government of seeking to trick the EZLN into a state of military "unpreparedness." Indeed, Zedillo is now charging the Zapatistas with similar bad faith.

The arrest of two dozen alleged rebels in Veracruz, Mexico state and Mexico City on Feb. 8 and Feb. 9 and the supposed discovery of small arsenals in what Mexican Attorney General Antonio Lozano labeled EZLN "safe houses," was cited by Zedillo in a nationally-televised address as proof that the Zapatistas were preparing for battle while discussing dialogue with his government. The president then authorized the arrest of rebel leaders and ordered the military advance "to prevent further violence."

By issuing the arrest warrants, Zedillo has transformed "a struggle for land and justice" into "one of common delinquency," said agrarian historian Carlos Montemayor in the daily newspaper *La Jornada*. In a similar use of judicial power, backed by military might, former president Carlos Salinas also initiated his mandate by capturing an oil union labor boss Joaquin Hernandez Galicia, known as "La Quina" (see *Chronicle of Latin American Affairs*, 02/28/89). Such "spectacular" actions are traditional for incoming Mexican presidents bent on publicly demonstrating their new authority. Hernandez Galicia's arrest commonly referred to as "El Quinazo" was instrumental in the consolidation of the Salinas regime, a highly-placed US official told *La Jornada* Washington correspondent David Brooks, suggesting that Zedillo was following the same script.

The offensive against the EZLN is popularly attributed in Mexico to US intervention. Many Mexicans believe that the US\$50 billion rescue of the floundering Mexican economy, engineered by the US President Bill Clinton's administration, incorporated political conditions that specified the crackdown on the rebels. A memorandum issued in mid-January by Riordan Reott, emerging markets advisor at US-based Chase Manhattan Bank, underscored that Ernesto Zedillo "must eliminate the Zapatistas to demonstrate that he has effective control" and advised aggressive action by the new Mexican government "to crush the insurgency" in order to foster investor confidence. A month earlier, on the eve of the Zapatistas' Dec. 19 takeover of portions of 38 Chiapas municipalities, analysts at Interacciones brokerage house urged that Zedillo display a strong hand in dealing with the insurrection. Interacciones is owned by the family of former Agriculture Secretary Carlos Hank, who is part of a faction of the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that has openly resisted any form of political reform.

On Feb. 11, the *New York Times* reported that US intelligence agencies were instrumental in identifying "Subcomandante Marcos." US embassy military attaches were photographed in the war zone during the first days of the military operation. Zedillo's issuance of arrest warrants for "Marcos" and other members of the Zapatista general command, has been accompanied by a police dragnet that was characterized by Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) leader Cuauhtemoc Cardenas as an unconstitutional "witch hunt" of social activists. Rumors of warrants being issued for the arrest of Cardenas himself, Chiapas "Governor-in-Rebellion" Amado Avendano, and San Cristobal de las Casas Bishop Samuel Ruiz and several of his priests, darken daily headlines. Among those already under arrest and charged with fomenting the Zapatista rebellion is Jorge Santiago, a close associate of Bishop Ruiz since 1974 and director of an indigenous anti-poverty agency in the San Cristobal de las Casas Diocese. Several conservative bishops have called for investigations by both civil authorities and the Vatican into Bishop Ruiz's role in the uprising.

In addition, the Attorney General's Office (PGR) released testimony taken from an alleged captured Zapatista commander that Bishop Ruiz had been forewarned of the impending rebellion

months before the Zapatistas' surprise Jan. 1, 1994 debut. Many of the 23 suspected guerrillas shown on television several days after being taken prisoner apparently displayed signs of torture. Additionally, judicial police raided Chiapas-based non-governmental human rights organizations in the wake of the military offensive in San Cristobal. One such group, CONPAZ, reported that its offices were ransacked by 30 agents on Feb. 10.

Despite Zedillo's suspension of guarantees in Chiapas and the cresting ambiance of a witch hunt throughout Mexico, Zedillo claims he has acted to preserve law and order under the Constitution, an argument severely critiqued by Cardenas at a Feb. 11 rally, attended by at least 100,000 citizens demanding an end to the hostilities in Chiapas. Accusing Zedillo of creating conditions for a coup d'etat ("golpe de estado"), the PRD's ex-presidential candidate and moral leader of the Mexican left called the military invasion of the Zapatista zone and the US\$50 billion bail-out deal with the White House tantamount to treason. During the massive rally, tens of thousands of Zapatista supporters responded to Zedillo's "unmasking" of the "Subcomandante" by repeatedly chanting "We Are All Marcos!"

Meanwhile, despite a total blackout on any news other than government press bulletins, refugees fleeing the conflict zone reported military confrontations between the Mexican armed forces and the EZLN. At least two Mexican military officials were killed in action during the first day of skirmishing between the two forces. Many communities sympathetic to the Zapatistas have abandoned their villages and fled into the surrounding mountains, along with EZLN fighters. The EZLN is known to have 2,500 fighters under arms and has been in training in the Lacandon terrain for a decade. "We are going to win," Subcomandante Marcos told La Jornada reporter Herman Bellinghausen in an interview on Feb. 9. Contrary to the assessments by Chase Manhattan's Riordan Reott, most financial experts consider that the military campaign in the Lacandon jungle will not prove beneficial either for the Zedillo administration or the Mexican economy. "The (offensive) provokes more questions than answers," said analyst Joyce Chang of New York-based Salomon Brothers. "Why has (Zedillo) taken such theatrical actions? It makes you think the government is trying to distract the Mexican people from their economic problems."

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