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Mexican Legislators Approve New Law Seeking Peace with Zapatistas

by LADB Staff

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During the first week of March, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate easily approved legislation to facilitate peace negotiations with the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas. The legislation which suspends the arrest order against EZLN leaders issued in mid-February and provides for the creation of a demilitarized zone for negotiations received broad support in both legislative bodies. In the Senate, the bill was approved by a vote of 115-0, with two members of the opposition Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) abstaining. In the Chamber of Deputies, the measure also passed easily on a vote of 424-7.

The two PRD senators who abstained and the seven PRD deputies who voted against the measure expressed concern that the legislation did not contain language requiring the Mexican army to withdraw from positions they seized from the EZLN during an army offensive in mid-February, which accompanied the order to arrest EZLN leaders (see SourceMex, 02/15/95). On the other hand, the bill received key support from PRD Senators Irma Serrano of Chiapas and Heberto Castillo of Veracruz. In fact, Castillo lobbied heavily for passage of the bill after leading an effort to amend the legislation to address concerns raised by the EZLN and their supporters. The EZLN had rejected President Zedillo's original proposal, as a "step backwards." However, as of March 14, the EZLN had not issued a statement regarding the final proposal, which contained the modifications drafted by Senator Castillo.

One of the key modifications in the bill was a change in the language of the text, which in effect recognized the EZLN as "legitimate force of change" in Chiapas. The original version offered by Zedillo merely referred to the rebels as "dissenters" and mentioned the EZLN's chosen name only twice throughout the text. Castillo was also instrumental in including language that explicitly suspended arrest warrants for Subcommander Marcos and other EZLN leaders. On the other hand, the final version of the bill also contains a clause designed to appease hard-liners. This clause allows the government "to carry out its responsibility to guarantee security and justice" in Chiapas. The EZLN did not offer an immediate reaction to the bill. However, Senator Castillo expressed optimism that the legislation created a true opportunity for the peace process to advance. "We are not as far from peace as we were previously," he said.

For its part, on March 14 the Zedillo administration in an effort to show a commitment to the peace process announced the removal of army roadblocks and the withdrawal of troops from villages that had been taken during the army movements in Chiapas during February. In an announcement in Mexico City on March 14, Interior Secretary (Secretaria de Gobernacion) spokesman Alfonso Durazo said troops in the area will conduct patrols "only with the intent of protecting military contingents" and to supply and relieve troops by ground and air. Durazo also announced the creation of a special mediation team comprised of state and federal legislators from several political parties to hold talks with the EZLN.

The special commission, which was due to convene in Chiapas on March 15, will take over the role of the civilian-based Comision Nacional de Intermediacion (Conai). Conai had been formed by Roman Catholic Bishop Samuel Ruiz of San Cristobal de las Casas. However, it was not certain how the new mediation commission would be accepted by the EZLN. Until now, Conai was the only mediation body recognized by the Zapatistas. On the other hand, in a recent letter, the EZLN said the Zapatistas "exhort those responsible to continue seeking mechanisms to renew the dialogue." (Sources: Notimex, 03/06/95, 03/08/95, 03/09/95; El Universal, 03/09/95; Reuter, 03/06/95, 03/09/95, 03/12/95; Spanish news service EFE, 03/09/95, 03/12/95; Agence France-Presse, 03/12/95; El Financiero International, 03/13/95; Associated Press, 03/06/95, 03/15/95)

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