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Government, Zapatistas Agree to Begin Formal Negotiations in Chiapas

by LADB Staff

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In early April, President Ernesto Zedillo's administration and representatives of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) reached an agreement to resume formal negotiations on April 20 in the town of San Andres Larrainzar, which is located a few miles north of San Cristobal de las Casas, in central Chiapas state. The agreement to hold the formal negotiations was reached after 12 hours of intense negotiations between representatives of the Interior Secretariat (Secretaria de Gobernacion, SG) and the EZLN. Because the negotiations were held in the village of San Miguel, about 20 miles southeast of Ocosingo, the agreement to hold formal talks is dubbed "The San Miguel Agreement."

The agreement to hold the formal negotiations was signed by SG representative Gustavo Iruegas and EZLN leader Comandante Tacho. The signing was witnessed by Bishop Samuel Ruiz of San Cristobal de las Casas, who has served in both official and unofficial mediating roles since the uprising first began on Jan. 1, 1994. Bishop Ruiz heads the civilian-led Comision Nacional de Intermediacion (Conai), which together with the recently formed Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion (Cocopa) have been engaged in efforts over the past several weeks to arrange formal negotiations between the government and the EZLN. Cocopa is composed principally of legislators from the four political parties represented in the Mexican legislature.

According to the text of the agreement presented by Bishop Ruiz to reporters on April 9, the government and the EZLN made a commitment to maintain "the continuity of dialogue and negotiation above any other consideration, event, incident or accident in order to guarantee the regular...uninterrupted development (of talks) until their positive conclusion." The document said the government and the EZLN will use the first round of talks to discuss options for "confidence-building" measures by both sides and further details of how the negotiations can proceed to achieve "a just, worthy, and lasting peace." Under the accord, the government also agreed to extend a suspension of the arrest warrants for Subcommander Marcos and other EZLN leaders, issued by Zedillo on Feb. 9 (see SourceMex, 02/15/95).

The suspension was due to expire on April 10. The move to extend the suspension of the arrest warrants was led by Sen. Felix Salgado Macedonio of the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD). Salgado had to overcome opposition by some members of the National Action Party (PAN) in the Chamber of Deputies, who did not want the suspension of the arrest warrant extended. According to political analysts, the decision to hold the negotiations in Chiapas state represented something of a victory for the Zedillo administration, which had totally rejected the EZLN's demand that the talks be held in one of three sites in Mexico City: the national cathedral, the office of the UN representative, or the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM). In making the request to hold the talks in Mexico City, the EZLN cited concerns about the large number of government

soldiers remaining in Chiapas. In fact, just days before the agreement, the EZLN had demanded that the government withdraw troops from areas taken over in February as a condition to hold the talks.

The Zedillo administration, meantime, rejected the proposal to hold the talks in Mexico City, citing security concerns. Indeed, according to some analysts, the talks would have probably attracted massive demonstrations, especially if held in the public places requested by the EZLN. The choice of San Andres Larrainzar appears to represent a partial concession to the EZLN, since the Zapatistas have enjoyed considerable support in that area. That location was not among the six sites originally proposed by the government: La Trinitaria, Independencia, Comitán, Palenque, Ocosingo, and Teopizca. Even though the negotiations are expected to be prolonged and difficult, political analysts suggest that Zedillo will probably take the opportunity to try to erase doubts about his political skills. Success in the negotiations could help Zedillo, whose popularity has plummeted because his economic austerity plan has created hardships for much of the Mexican population.

Zedillo is hoping that an agreement with the EZLN could greatly improve the political climate in Mexico, which could, in turn, facilitate talks with the PAN, the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), and the Labor Party (PT) on an agreement on political reforms. "Chiapas...is a test of Zedillo's leadership, his ability to bring together different political forces to get a solution on an important political issue," said analyst Damian Fraser of the Mexico City office of Baring Research.

The decision to hold the talks, however, has not eliminated the threat that the Zedillo administration may take further military actions in Chiapas in the future. "We don't want to continue in an uncertain stage in which we don't have war but we also don't have peace," said a senior government official in an interview with Reuter. That official, who asked to remain anonymous, stressed that a military option represented a measure of last resort and that the Zedillo administration much preferred a peaceful solution to the conflict. (Sources: Inter Press Service, 03/30/95; Deutsche Press Agentur, 04/04/95; United Press International, 04/07/95; Notimex, 04/10/95; Reuter, 04/02/95, 04/08/95, 04/09/95, 04/11/95; Associated Press, 04/11/95)

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