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## **Analysis: Peace Talks In Chiapas, a Breakthrough or Dead End for EZLN**

*by Guest*

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By John Ross

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When representatives of the Mexican government and the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) met for the third time in a month on May 12-15 to attempt to create conditions that could end the 15-month-old conflict in Chiapas, the prognosis for success was guarded. This "pre-dialogue" phase of promised negotiations was initiated in the Lacandon village of San Miguel on April 9, the gateway to the zone held by the Zapatistas until the military took control in February. The next two sessions have been held in the highland municipality of San Andres Larrainzar. All three sessions were marked by testy interchanges between rebel representatives and government negotiators. The two sides cannot even agree on the name of the town in which they are holding the talks the Zapatistas have renamed San Andres "Sakan ch'en de los Pobres," or "The White Caves of the Poor" in the Tzotzil language.

Because of the disagreements, the May 15 announcement of a tentative agreement between the Zapatistas and the government which stipulates a military pullback from the contested zone came as a shock to reporters who only hours before had been pounding out stories about how the talks were doomed. The "minimum agreement" was reached after four days of intense and sometimes rancorous discussion inside a stifling wooden house hastily thrown up on the San Andres-Sakan ch'en basketball court to accommodate the participants. The pact apparently commits the military to regroup outside of the contested zone. Although eight routes will be open to army patrols, the EZLN will be responsible for security within the disputed area. Under the agreement, a "pilot" corridor has been established to assess the arrangement's workability the agreement signed by the government and the EZLN to install this "pilot" corridor was the first ever signed by the two protagonists.

If the "pilot" corridor proves viable, the plan will be extended to 11 villages around which the EZLN civilian base has been concentrated. Nevertheless, EZLN communal assemblies must still ratify this "minimum agreement," and talks have been recessed until June 9 to allow for consultations in the Lacandon jungle. Negotiators overcome tense pre-dialogue phase The contentious atmosphere in San Andres-Sakan ch'en was encapsulated by events surrounding a negotiating session on April 20. On the eve of the talks, 3,000 to 5,000 Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, and Chol supporters of the EZLN marched into the town square and declared they had come to assure the safety of EZLN commanders.

"They wished to be part of the process after all, their future was being decided here," explained Father Pablo Romo, director of the human rights center at the San Cristobal de las Casas diocese. Romo is also a member of the non-governmental intermediary body Comision Nacional de Intermediacion (CONAI), established by Bishop Samuel Ruiz. For two days, government negotiators refused to attend the talks in San Andres-Sakan ch'en, perceiving a threat to their personal security, explained the chief of the delegation, Marco Antonio Bernal. Bernal had labeled the Indians concentrated in San Andres-Sakan ch'en as "acarreados" or "trucked-in ones" and charged they had been mobilized by Ruiz's CONAI.

Ironically, the "acarreo" is a traditional electoral technique of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) to pack political rallies for most of its 66-year tenure in office. Bernal himself is said to have organized mammoth "acarreos" during the 1994 successful presidential campaign of Ernesto Zedillo, in which he served as sub-director. The talks in San Andres-Sakan ch'en finally got underway after the EZLN leadership asked thousands of their supporters to withdraw. The much-photographed Indian exodus in a driving rainstorm struck a national chord of sympathy, handing the EZLN yet another propaganda victory.

The pre-dialogue phase has been designed to produce a climate conducive to negotiations on substantive issues. Since the initial talks in San Miguel, the EZLN has proposed that "distencion" (literally "dis-tension") can best be achieved by the military's return to positions held before the army advance into the rebels' Lacandon jungle stronghold ordered by Zedillo on Feb 10. The government countered with a proposal that the EZLN regroup in three enclaves, where they would be fed and protected until a timetable is established for the disarming of rebel troops and their reintegration into civil life.

One of the government's two top negotiators, Gustavo Ireguas, helped broker talks between the governments of El Salvador and Nicaragua and respective rebel forces in those two countries. Ireguas is said to have been particularly active at Sapoa (Nicaragua) talks when the "Contras" reluctantly agreed to regroup in "bolsas" (pockets), in preparation to turning in their guns. In a recent interview with the weekly news magazine Proceso, Ireguas argued that talks with the EZLN were being conducted under the congressionally-ratified Law of Concordance and Pacification (Cocopa), which contemplates the eventual disarming of the Zapatistas and the rebels' reconstitution as a political movement. In accordance with this logic, Ireguas argued that regrouping the EZLN in "bolsas" was an initial step towards reintegration in the political process, the stated goal of Cocopa.

But the EZLN leadership rejected the government's "bolsa" plan as tantamount to surrender. Moreover, Comandante Tacho, the Tojolabal leader who has served as EZLN co-spokesperson at the three negotiating sessions, has categorically rejected the government's offer to reconstitute the EZLN as a political organization. Nonetheless, the Zapatistas do contemplate an eventual return to civil life, and charismatic "Subcomandante Marcos" has made dramatic statements to this effect. "We became soldiers so that no one else would ever have to become a soldier again," he explained in the Cathedral of San Cristobal de las Casas during the 1994 peace talks. "We picked up the guns so that one day they will no longer be needed." Disarming the Zapatistas, however, will be a highly problematic process. It is more likely that the rebels would be amenable to following the example of

their namesake, Emiliano Zapata, who periodically buried his army's arsenal whenever he struck a truce with the several Mexican governments against which he campaigned. Constant consultations with the Zapatista bases are certain to complicate future talks and try the government's already limited patience. The PRI-run government is used to negotiating with leaders who are not obligated to consult with those they purport to represent.

The Zapatista delegation announced the expected rejection of the Ireguas plan at San Andres-Sakan ch'en on May 12, countering with a proposal that the military itself withdraw into the much-discussed "bolsas." EZLN threat to abandon talks forces government compromise After three days of angry accusations and recriminations, the government modified its position and agreed to pull its garrisons out of former EZLN strongholds while retaining the prerogative to patrol the roads. Such an arrangement will take weeks to verify. Press reports suggest that the surprise agreement was forged after the Zapatista delegation threatened to abandon the peace table.

For its part, the Zedillo administration has characterized the talks as evidence that political stability is returning to Mexico. The message directed at international investors is that Zedillo is committed to negotiating with the rebels rather than crushing them militarily. The EZLN delegation at the peace table has been comprised of eight members of the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee-General Command (CCRI-CG). Subcomandante Marcos has been absent from the three delegations that have met with government representatives since April 9, although the prominent EZLN leader did meet in the Lacandon Jungle on Jan. 15 with Interior (Gobernacion) Secretary Esteban Moctezuma.

The Zapatista negotiators are all indigenous Mayans, a selection thought to be influenced by government accusations that the Indians are being manipulated by white radicals, namely Marcos (whom the government claims is former university professor Rafael Sebastian Guillen Vicente). Surprisingly, Zapatista delegations to the first two rounds of talks did not include any women, even though women account for one-third of the EZLN fighting force and at least half its civilian base of support. Women, principally Comandante Ramona, played a visible role in the Zapatista delegation to the 1994 talks. But once again seizing the propaganda initiative, the EZLN delegation to the May 12 session in San Andres-Sakan ch'en included a ninth member, Comandanta Trinidad, a white-haired Tojolabal grandmother who became the star of the media circus that accompanied the talks.

On the other side of the table, Marco Antonio Bernal, a one-time political radical-turned-PRI functionary, has been designated as chief government negotiator, supplanting the diplomat Ireguas who officiated at San Miguel. Born in Tamaulipas state, Bernal was affiliated with the Sep. 23 Communist League while a student in Monterrey. In 1974, Bernal was arrested and brutally tortured by the much-feared Federal Security Direction (DFS). The young revolutionary emerged from prison to become a rising star in the PRI. Once associated with former Mexico City mayor and Chiapas peace negotiator Manuel Camacho Solis, Bernal became a PRI representative to the Federal Electoral Commission during the fraud-marred 1988 presidential election, and wrote numerous articles defending the disputed victory of Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Bernal later joined the public works Solidarity Program (Pronasol), where he became part of the braintrust of then-Social Development Secretary and later presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio.

Among the principal advisors to the government delegation is Gen. Tomas Angeles, personal secretary to Defense Minister Gen. Enrique Cervantes. Angeles's appearances at the talks underscores the military's justifiable concern about the outcome of negotiations. With one-third of its 170,000-strong armed forces deployed in and around the Chiapas conflict zone, what happens in San Andres-Sakan ch'en could deeply affect military budgets and the generals' political clout for years to come. According to a study by historian Antonio Garcia de Leon, published in the daily *La Jornada*, the Mexican government is spending US\$200 million a year to maintain the military in Chiapas. "We must beware of those who still seek a military solution to this conflict," Bishop Ruiz cautioned on the eve of the third round of talks in May. Ruiz is represented at the bargaining table by the CONAI, a body whose role has been a source of much contention since its creation last fall.

The legislative commission charged with initiating and overseeing the negotiations as mandated by the Law of Concordance and Pacification (Cocopa) occupies the fourth side of the peace table. The 24-member commission (five are seated at any one session) is dominated by the PRI, and EZLN supporters grouped together under the rubric of the National Democratic Convention (CND) have demanded that Cocopa be removed from the talks because PRI control overloads the government side of the table. Prestigious members of the opposition on the commission include Sen. Heberto Castillo of the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), Sen. Luis H. Alvarez of the National Action Party (PAN), and Deputy Jose Narro of the Labor Party (PT).

The PRD has repeatedly hinted it will leave the commission if the body continues to parrot the government's negotiating position. How will the two sides benefit from dialogue? How long the protagonists will be agreeable to negotiate inside a stifling double-walled (to prevent eavesdropping) structure as the rainy season washes over the Chiapas highlands, is a pointed question. Another pertinent query is: Who wins and who loses by continuing to sit down at the table? Historically, indigenous rebels in Chiapas have sought to negotiate with authorities four times since 1712. In that year, the predominantly Tzeltal Army of the Virgin of Rosario was advancing on San Cristobal de las Casas when its leaders were summoned to Oxchuc to present their demands where they were captured by the troops of the Crown and summarily hanged. In 1868, the Chamulas, driven by land hunger and religious prophecy, sought to take San Cristobal de las Casas, but its leaders first attended a hastily-arranged negotiating session at an estate just outside of the city and were ambushed by government troops. Similarly, in 1911, landowners sought to quell agrarian revolt by agreeing to negotiate with Jacinto Perez Chixtot at Tuxtla when Chixtot and his comandantes came up to the state capital, they were arrested and their ears lopped off.

In February 1994, the EZLN delegation was able to escape San Cristobal de las Casas negotiations unscathed, albeit with a government proposal that the rebel bases ultimately rejected. Although arrest warrants for the Zapatista leadership now suspended were signed by Zedillo in February, EZLN delegates in San Andres-Sakan ch'en have not been harassed. The failure of the government to include Zapatista national demands led to the rejection of the 1994 package, but some of these items have been achieved via other routes. For example, the EZLN demanded the resignation of Carlos Salinas and the former president is now relegated to US exile, reviled throughout Mexico as being responsible for the current economic crisis.

The Zapatistas also demanded the installation of a "government of transition," an end that the widespread discontent and mobilization afoot in the land could eventually bring to fruition. For

example, the enormous outpouring of forces opposed to the Zedillo government on International Workers Day, May 1, is a sign that support for democratic change in Mexico continues to grow. Zapatista banners and ski-masked participants were prominent at the unprecedented May 1 march, the largest expression yet of the cross-class "coyuntura" (literally "coming together") that is closing around a weakened presidency and a wounded state party. But such popular support is one of the few forceful cards the Zapatistas hold as they sit down to substantive talks. Zapatistas have lost military advantage. Militarily, the EZLN's most damaging weapon had been surprise. However, the Zapatistas' failure to take the initiative in the wake of the Feb. 10 military takeover of the zone they had controlled for more than a year is a glaring signal of their vulnerability. Badly outgunned from the inception of the revolt, with ever-diminishing ammunition, the EZLN appears to have little military capability left.

Nevertheless, Marcos continues to boast of his army's capacity. In a recent communique, the Zapatista military chief insisted that his troops offered no resistance to the federal military in February in order to avert massacre of the civilian population of the conflict zone. But the bottom line is that the Zapatistas no longer control any territory in Mexico. Even if the Mexican military agrees to remove its outposts, army presence on the roads in and out of the Lacandon Jungle will nullify Zapatista dominion over the zone. Moreover, the Mexican army has moved up to 10,000 displaced PRI supporters, who fled the war zone in January 1994, back into the Lacandon as a wedge against future Zapatista territorial claims. Agreeing to negotiate with a weak hand is not propitious to the realization of the EZLN's substantive demands. Although these demands have not yet been delineated, the Zapatistas have said they will not submit a package as they did in San Cristobal de las Casas last year. One theme will be discussed at a time and consultations with the base held to determine rejection or acceptance. The EZLN appears to favor regional talks in Chiapas and then moving onto negotiations on national issues dealing with justice and democracy in Mexico City. Such negotiations would involve a broad spectrum of social and political organizations.

The Zedillo administration, much as the Salinas government, seeks to limit talks to a solution of regional problems, refusing to recognize the EZLN as a national force, and rejecting Marcos's call for Mexico City sessions mainly because the EZLN has demonstrable support in the capital. The rebels have little leverage to set so ambitious an agenda. Some observers, commenting on the Zapatistas' debilitated military capacities, suggest that what is really being negotiated at San Andres-Sakan ch'en are the terms of the EZLN's surrender. Yet, at crucial instances in the 15-month conflict, the EZLN has proven resourceful enough to seize the initiative from the government.

Recapturing public imagination will probably not take place at the negotiating table. Indeed, the Zedillo government stands to gain multiple benefits by engaging in drawn-out negotiations, a process that neutralizes EZLN energies and buttresses the president's assertions that stability is returning to Mexico. Indeed, it is precisely this false sense of stability that both the Salinas and the Zedillo governments have sought to sell to the international investment community and which the Zapatistas have been so successful in unmasking. The eruption of another armed conflict elsewhere in Mexico could dramatically alter the current equation of government advantage and Zapatista defiance. For months, rumors have circulated that new guerrilla formations are preparing to launch offensives against the government. Yet no uprising has occurred and no sighting of new guerrilleros has been confirmed. Whether or not such armed groups exist is now increasingly vital to the EZLN's future successes.

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