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Analysis: Disarming The Zapatistas, A Done Deal?

by Guest

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By John Ross

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After two years of open rebellion and a decade of patient preparation, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) has been virtually disarmed by a combination of Mexican government and military ploys, the EZLN's own military weaknesses, and the Zapatistas' heartfelt desires for a just peace. The EZLN commemorated the second anniversary of its now legendary Jan. 1, 1994, uprising by building a huge "cultural complex" on a muddy, windswept mountainside in the highlands above San Cristobal de las Casas, the colonial city they seized on a frigid New Year's eve two years ago, in an act of armed political theater that rocked Mexico and the world. The "cultural complex," largely mounted by Tzotzil Indian women in the hamlet of Ovantic, was one of four such areas built in rebel regions to mark the New Year's anniversary. It is named for a similar Zapatista "autonomous space" destroyed by the Mexican military in February 1995.

The EZLN's indefatigable spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos, characterized the new centers as "ships of democracy about to set sail." But the launch of these areas did not please the Mexican military, which suspected that the new structures might become staging areas for bellicose activities. For example, in Ovantic, patrols on "ready alert" roared up and down the broken road bordering the construction sight. Tanks pointed their cannons at the angry villagers and, at one tense stand-off Dec. 27, soldiers knelt to fire upon the Tzotzil supporters of the Zapatistas. The EZLN itself declared the peace process in jeopardy. In a non-stop effort to head off new bloodshed, members of the church-sponsored Comision Nacional de Intermediacion (CONAI), sponsored by the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas, and the legislative-sponsored Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion (COCOPA), went into emergency session with Interior Secretary Emilio Chuayffet. Finally, as New Year's eve approached, the military stood down. "The atmosphere in the negotiation sessions was scary," said Juan Banuelos, a CONAI member and a prominent Chiapas poet.

"The Army was really prepared to invade and destroy the structures. Who knows what would have happened then?" In return for the army pullback, the EZLN agreed not to display arms during the commemorations. In 1995, the Zapatistas welcomed 1995 with an ear-splitting fusillade during a first anniversary celebration at the site of the original uprising. But 1995 was a difficult year for Zapatista military fortunes. An offensive by the army in February of 1995, ordered by President Ernesto Zedillo to capture EZLN leaders, forced the rebels out of their base areas into the deep jungle. Zapatista support communities were invaded and remain under daily surveillance by an estimated 36,000 to 40,000 Mexican troops and the EZLN has held a weak hand in the prolonged peace talks at San Andres Sakam'chen de los Pobres, near Ovantic. On the Zapatistas' second anniversary, only the defiant Subcomandante Marcos dared to appear armed and then only on video tape. On a video screen set up in the middle of a Zapatista jungle community with the tantalizing name of

La Realidad, Marcos pronounced the fourth "Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle" in which the rebel leadership called for the formation of a national political front that would unite progressive opposition forces throughout Mexico.

The formation of the Frente Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (FZLN) complies with the results of the August 1995 national "consultation," in which 1.3 million Mexicans cast ballots that favored the transformation of the EZLN into a "political force." The fourth declaration signals that, although the EZLN itself would not lay down its arms, the FZLN would be strictly political. In his televised address, Marcos put his trademark iconoclastic touch upon the new organization: the FZLN would not run candidates for public office nor would it become a political party. "We are fighting for democracy, not power," Marcos told a thousand TV watchers gathered in the jungle on New Year's eve. The fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle was read simultaneously at all four cultural complexes created especially for the occasion. Rather than function as a partisan political organization, the proposed FZLN would operate like a network of non-governmental organizations, each focusing on local social problems without asking for government help.

The organizational base for the new Front will be the nation's 56 distinct Indian peoples, said Marcos. The creation of the FZLN and the implication that the EZLN is transforming itself into a political organization- -delighted the Zedillo administration and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which has controlled the federal government for the past 67 years. Both Zedillo and Interior Secretary Chuayffet hailed the new formation, as did the left-center opposition Democratic Revolution Party, although with considerably less enthusiasm. This is because the creation of the FZLN could draw rank-and-file members of the PRD away from that party. Only the fast-rising center-right National Action Party (PAN) condemned the creation of the FZLN, calling the front "politically irrelevant." Others suggested that the PRD and the PRI reactions were less than sincere. "The truth is that neither the PRI nor the PRD likes the idea of a Front," said Javier Eloriaga, a prisoner for the past 11 months in Chiapas's maximum security lock-up, Cerro Hueco. "The PAN's reaction is the only honest one."

Eloriaga is one of 18 accused Zapatistas arrested in the wake of last February's military offensive who remain in jail. The FZLN is the Zapatistas's third effort to enlist civil society in a mass resistance movement. The National Democratic Convention was split by left factions soon after its creation ahead of presidential elections in August 1994. Similarly, the National Liberation Movement was stillborn after its creation in February 1995. On the other hand, the announcement of the Zapatistas' new front was well received in financial circles. On the first trading day after Marcos's televised jungle address, the jittery Mexican stock exchange (BMV) soared by an astounding 5.43%. The EZLN's best weapon has been its ability to inflict the shakes on the BMV, causing nervous movements in the exchange's main index (Indice de Precios y Cotizaciones, IPC) whenever the rebels initiate action. In December 1995, when the Zapatistas symbolically seized 38 Chiapas municipalities, President Zedillo utilized the pretext of military destabilization to devalue the peso, a decision that has led to the deepest Mexican recession in 64 years.

The EZLN's uncanny knack for knocking out Mexican markets stands in stark contrast to its relatively weak military strength. Equipped with few automatic weapons and no supply lines, the use of weapons by the Zapatistas has always been more theatrical than operative. In its Jan. 1, 1994,

uprising, the EZLN fought the Mexican military to a draw during a short, surprise siege of the army base at Rancho Nuevo but took heavy losses in the battle of Ocosingo. In February 1995, 13 months later, the rebels were unwilling to respond to the Mexican Army's advance, even when their knowledge of the terrain presumably gave them an advantage in a hit-and-run guerrilla war. In seeking an alliance with civil society, the EZLN has subordinated its military option to the search for peace. Not unexpectedly, the Zapatistas' diminishment as an armed force has been matched by the swelling importance of the Mexican military, which has concentrated a fourth of its fighting force in Chiapas.

The military's influence in national politics has grown proportionally since the February invasion and occupation of the rebel's Lacandon stronghold. President Zedillo now does not make even economic decisions without consulting with the generals. For example, a meeting with military leaders on Nov. 2 to seek approval of a new labor-business-government pact, stimulated rumors of a military coup the following day. These rumors sent the market reeling once again. Who is actually running the country is a question that EZLN negotiators often ask. At a Jan. 9 press conference in San Cristobal de las Casas, Marcos ventured that the White House was really running Mexico and still wanted a military solution in Chiapas. The disarming of the EZLN of anything more than their moral authority was made graphically explicit on Jan. 7 when, before dozens of photographers in La Realidad, Marcos stripped off his bandoleers and handed his pistol to his adjutant, Major Moises.

Boarding a Red Cross ambulance, Marcos headed for San Cristobal de las Casas, his first appearance in this mountain capital in 22 months. The first two times Subcomandante Marcos came to San Cristobal, he was carrying a weapon. The Zapatista leader traveled to San Cristobal de las Casas to participate in a historic indigenous congress, sponsored by the COCOPA as part of the national debate on the reform of the Mexican state. The invitation to the Zapatistas to participate in the debate is tacit acknowledgment by the government of the rebels' national political stature.

The Law of Reconciliation, under which the COCOPA operates, has, as its end, the disarming of the Zapatistas and their integration into the national political spectrum. At the congress, an unprecedented assembly of 38 out of the nation's 56 Indian peoples, Marcos spoke of the six rainbows through which he had passed on the route up from the jungle, and called the event a "seventh rainbow" and "a bridge to build a new world." Meanwhile, even as Marcos envisioned peace rainbows in San Cristobal de las Casas, Mexican army troops took up new positions in neighboring Oaxaca state, occupying towns in the Tuxtepec region in search of Zapatista-like guerrillas. In recent weeks, the military has been on the move throughout Oaxaca and Guerrero. According to leaked military intelligence reports, seven separate armed groups operate in Guerrero, but none of these groups has yet publicly declared its existence.

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