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## **Government, Zapatistas Reach Landmark Agreement on Indigenous Rights**

*by LADB Staff*

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In mid-February, representatives of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) and the federal government signed a landmark agreement recognizing new rights for indigenous communities in Mexico. The agreement which was signed in private in San Andres Larrainzar, Chiapas completed 10 months of difficult negotiations. In principle, the agreement lays the foundation for a new relationship between the government and indigenous communities throughout Mexico.

For example, the accord recognizes the rights of these communities to "multicultural" education, including school instruction in their own language. Another key concession by the government removes a requirement that Indians in Chiapas belong to a political party to participate as candidates in elections. For years, the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) used this rule in Chiapas and elsewhere to stifle opposition from potential Indian candidates with no formal party affiliation.

The agreement also reorganizes local courts and district attorney's offices to offer Indians greater representation. Additionally, the Zedillo administration agreed to create two special offices, one to protect Indians' human rights and the other to resolve land disputes between Indians and non-Indians. EZLN spokesperson Commander Tacho told reporters the agreement had already received the strong endorsement of indigenous communities throughout the state during a vote in mid-January, when 96% of participants voted to accept the government's proposals.

Despite the government's concessions to the Zapatistas, the agreement deals with Indian sovereignty only in vague terms. For example, the accord does not create autonomous Indian-ruled territories, nor does it grant to indigenous communities revenue from exploitation of natural resources such as crude oil.

Additionally, the agreement requires that representatives of the Interior Secretariat (SG) and the EZLN negotiate five other agreements over the next several months, dealing with such controversial matters as land distribution. "Let us not fool ourselves. This is not the full peace agreement," said EZLN leader Subcommander David, who said the recent agreement will remain "only a piece of paper" until the government fulfills all its promises. "We want peace, but a new peace with justice and dignity, not the peace of the graveyard," David said at the press conference in San Andres Larrainzar.

However, EZLN leaders acknowledged that the Zedillo administration's willingness to consider issues at a national level was a breakthrough. "These accords could benefit indigenous communities throughout our country," David said. Political observers suggested that one concrete EZLN victory from the recent round of talks was the government's admission that racism has existed for

centuries in Chiapas. They said this could eventually force the government to deal with the issue of inequitable land distribution in Chiapas, where a few individuals own huge tracts of land, while many indigenous campesinos own next to nothing. However, observers also pointed out that the EZLN's weak military position in comparison with the federal army prompted the Zapatistas to take a more flexible stance in negotiations with the government.

"The Zapatistas have recognized with some realism that they don't have much chance of improving their bargaining position any further," said Federico Esteves, a political science professor at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM) in Mexico City. The Mexican army has retained a strong presence in Chiapas since the EZLN uprising in January 1994. However, no shots have been fired since February 1995, when President Zedillo ordered the arrest of five EZLN leaders, including the group's prominent spokesperson Subcommander Marcos. Although Zedillo later rescinded the arrest orders, the action broke a cease-fire that had been in effect for more than a year (see SourceMex, 02/15/95).

According to Esteves, Zedillo's decision to order the arrest of the EZLN leaders marked a turning point in the Chiapas conflict. "Ever since the change in the strategy of military deployment in February, the importance of the Zapatistas has been notably reduced," Esteves told Reuter. Indeed, Sergio Sarmiento, a prominent political commentator in the daily newspaper Reforma, noted the recent agreement accepted by the EZLN was almost identical to one the Zapatistas rejected in June 1994, when they were much stronger. According to Sarmiento, the Zapatista leaders had good reason at that time to think that the constitutional order in Mexico might break down. "Today that possibility seems remote, if not impossible," Sarmiento said. Still, some observers said the Zapatista movement would not exist today if there had not been an armed uprising.

Columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa noted that the EZLN scored a notable victory by forcing Indian issues onto the national political agenda and it may still have a bright future as an independent political force. "The armed revolt allowed the Zapatistas to become a political force," said Granados Chapa in an interview with Reuter. Meantime, members of the two mediation groups church-sponsored Comisión Nacional de Intermediación (CONAI) and legislature-sponsored Comisión de Concordia y Pacificación (COCOPA) hailed the accord as a positive sign for the country's indigenous peoples. "Some EZLN proposals were not included in the accord, and these have not been abandoned," said CONAI spokesman Miguel Alvarez. "But what has been achieved is good news for Mexico's indigenous peoples." This sentiment was echoed by a COCOPA member, Deputy Juan Guerra Ochoa, who described the agreement as a "historic" step in the negotiation process.

For his part, Catholic Bishop Samuel Ruiz of San Cristobal de las Casas, who was instrumental in the formation of CONAI, described the advances reached in negotiations as "irreversible." Additionally, Ruiz said the accord "turned a page" in history because the needs of indigenous people will no longer be ignored by the government. However, Ruiz expressed strong concern about the continued presence of the Mexican army in Chiapas. Ruiz said there is no evidence that the Zedillo administration has opted for a political rather than a military solution, given the strong military presence in the state. Meanwhile, President Zedillo promised that his administration would continue efforts to reach a final peace agreement with the EZLN.

"The signing in Chiapas of the first accords is a firm step toward a definitive peace with dignity and justice in that state," Zedillo said during a ceremony commemorating the 83rd anniversary of the army on Feb. 20. While hailing the accords, the president praised the army for its role in containing the EZLN uprising. "In these times of intense economic, political, and social changes, the Mexican army has maintained itself as a solid pillar of legality," he said. (Sources: Reuter, 02/14/96, 02/15/96; New York Times, Reforma, 02/15/96; La Jornada, 02/15-17/96; Agence France-Presse, 02/15/96, 02/16/96, 02/18/96; Excelsior, 02/15/96, 02/19/96, 02/20/96)

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