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## Latest Talks in Chiapas Fail to Yield Much Progress

*by LADB Staff*

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In late April, representatives of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) and the government concluded their latest round of negotiations in San Andres Larrainzar, Chiapas state, without reporting significant progress on key issues. Following the talks, the two sides accused each other of "obstructing" the negotiations. The government representatives, led by chief Chiapas negotiator Antonio Bernal, directed the bulk of their criticism against the group of advisers who is working with the EZLN on formulating a rebel position.

According to the government, the advisers are pushing the EZLN to adopt "unrealistic" positions on issues, especially the demand for comprehensive government reform. According to government negotiators, the EZLN decision to pursue national political reforms has had grave consequences. The Zapatistas, for example, are allegedly "ignoring their responsibility to discuss relevant regional issues that had been identified in the first round of negotiations." As a result, the peace process is tediously slow.

For their part, spokespersons for the EZLN and the group of advisers accused the government of proposing only small concessions instead of addressing fundamental issues in Mexico, such as a far-reaching reform of the country's political and electoral system. "The government has failed to show the will to resolve the conflict and has instead attempted to create an even narrower path to peace," the EZLN said. The EZLN argues that a push for democracy in Mexico and the need to draw up a new Magna Carta "constitute the nucleus and the heart" of rebel differences with the government. "Our country needs a transition that will lead to an end to the state-party system," the EZLN said, in reference to the long years of control the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has held over the Mexican political system.

In a statement to reporters, Antonio Garcia de Leon, a chief EZLN adviser, said the negotiations represent an appropriate forum to begin discussions about democracy in Mexico. Garcia emphasized, however, that the EZLN is only seeking to promote discussion of democracy in the country, since real reform must come from "the direct initiative of the Mexican people." The EZLN also alleges that the government has ignored its proposal to create a special commission to monitor and verify accords reached in negotiations. At the start of the talks, members of the seven special task forces that were created to address specific negotiating issues said the two sides have made considerable progress in four areas.

However, broad disagreements remain in the other three, especially the one that covers "democratic policies and public institutions." That task force is reviewing proposals for political reforms in Mexico. The statements following the latest round of negotiations sharply contrasted with the positive mood during the first round of talks in February. In those discussions, the two sides had reached preliminary agreements regarding rights of indigenous communities throughout Mexico. The agreements covered such areas as "multicultural" education, legal representation, and local

electoral matters (see SourceMex, 02/21/96). According to the daily newspaper Excelsior, President Ernesto Zedillo's administration and the Chiapas state congress are engaged in consultations to develop a framework for legislation to implement the accords reached in February.

Despite the lack of progress in the latest round of talks, the two sides agreed to meet again in early June. The encounter will follow a special "Democracy and Justice Forum," which will be held in Chiapas May 28-June 3. According to the EZLN, the results of the forum will be presented to the government in the next round of negotiations, scheduled to begin June 5. "It is clear that the solution to the conflict in Chiapas will not just depend on the government and the EZLN, but on the organized mobilization of the Mexican people," the EZLN said.

In a public address in April at John Hopkins University in the US, government negotiator Antonio Bernal said that the Zedillo administration and the EZLN are both wedded to the negotiations since the political costs for abandoning the bargaining table would be too high for either side. Bernal acknowledged that major obstacles lay ahead, but he said that "reasonable optimism" exists on both sides that the peace process will eventually culminate in a final accord to end the war in Chiapas.

Meantime, the special legislative commission on Chiapas (Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion, COCOPA) has proposed a deadline of early 1997 for the EZLN and the Zedillo administration to reach a peace agreement. The commission is composed of members of all parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. COCOPA's chief spokesperson, Deputy Cesar Chavez, said the deadline is based on statements from EZLN leader Subcommander Marcos that an agreement can be signed by early next year if the government assumes a "responsible" stance in the negotiations. COCOPA presented its deadline proposal to both sides before the April negotiations began. Chavez also said COCOPA had reminded Interior Secretary Emilio Chuayffet Chemor that the Zedillo administration is obligated to seriously consider any proposals presented by the EZLN regarding political and government reform. (Sources: Notimex, 04/11/96; Agence France-Presse, 04/23-25/96; Excelsior, 04/23/96, 04/25/96; La Jornada, Reforma, 04/25/96)

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