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Zapatistas, Government Agree to New Negotiating Format

by LADB Staff

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In mid-July, representatives from the federal government and the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) announced an agreement to implement a new format in peace negotiations. The accord is expected to substantially push the peace process in Chiapas forward. According to Sen. Benigno Aladro, a spokesman for the legislative mediating commission (Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion, COCOPA), the two sides basically accepted a document that simplifies the dialogue, allowing both the EZLN and the government to present their positions in a more flexible manner. One key agreement is that any suspension of negotiations will have to be approved by both COCOPA and the church-sponsored mediating committee (Comite Nacional de Intermediacion, CONAI), which was created by Bishop Samuel Ruiz of the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas. This means that neither the EZLN nor the government can unilaterally suspend the dialogue.

COCOPA sources said another key concession is an agreement to allow EZLN and government representatives to take part in the verification commission (Comision de Seguimiento y Verificacion). The commission is charged with verifying that any agreements reached by the two sides on four broad areas are followed. These areas include cultural and indigenous rights, democracy and justice, health and development, and women's rights. The two sides have already reached agreements on indigenous rights, and they are scheduled to begin discussions on democracy and justice in the next round of negotiations sometime in July. According to political analysts, a recent EZLN commitment to seek change in Mexico primarily through the political process represents a key step in reaching a peace agreement in Chiapas. Earlier this year, the EZLN announced its intention to work through a recently formed political organization, the Zapatista National Liberation Front (Frente Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional, EZLN).

The EZLN's effort to distance itself from another uprising in Guerrero state in late June has also contributed to a more stable climate for negotiations. The Guerrero uprising is led by a group that calls itself the Popular Revolutionary Army (Ejercito Popular Revolucionario, ERP). The new group made its appearance on the first anniversary of a massacre of campesino activists in Aguas Blancas, Guerrero state. According to Sen. Heberto Castillo, a leading COCOPA organizer, the atmosphere for negotiations in Chiapas has now improved so much that a comprehensive peace agreement is possible by the end of 1996. That represents a sharp reversal from the situation prevalent in recent months.

Indeed, just days before the agreement on the dialogue format was announced, government representatives led by chief negotiator Antonio Bernal had declined to accept new terms for negotiation. The government refusal led EZLN leaders in early July to warn that the peace process was endangered. "The government's strategy is to extend indefinitely a solution of the conflict," said EZLN leader Commander Tacho. However, government negotiators later accepted the new terms. "The government is taking all the steps necessary to make sure that the dialogue produces positive results," said Bernal.

In fact, the last time representatives for the two sides had met for full negotiations was in late April. Representatives from both sides said those discussions failed to produce much progress, and accused each other of obstructionism (see SourceMex, 05/01/96). The negotiations were endangered further in early May, when the government arrested EZLN sympathizers Javier Elorriaga and Sebastian Entzin and accused them of "terrorism." At that time, EZLN spokesman Subcommander Marcos said the arrests reflected bad faith on the part of the Zedillo administration. He accused the government of using the talks in San Andres Larrainzar to buy time while determining the appropriate moment to "restart the war against the EZLN." Elorriaga and Entzin were later released from prison, which also contributed to the resumption of negotiations. (Sources: Agence France-Presse, 07/06/96, 07/08/96; Novedades, 07/10/96; El Financiero International, 07/08/96, 07/15/96; Excelsior, 07/09/96, 07/12/96, 07/16/96)

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