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Strong Contrasts Between Zapatistas, New Guerrilla Movement in Guerrero

by Guest

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Editor's Note: In a series of communiqués published on Sept. 3, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) announced a unilateral suspension of peace talks with the Mexican government. Among the alleged impediments to negotiations, the EZLN listed increased army militarization of Zapatista zones, the recent sentencing of alleged EZLN prisoners, the failure of the government to implement a previous agreement on indigenous rights and culture, and the refusal of government negotiators to consider fundamental reform of the Mexican political system.

In response, President Ernesto Zedillo's administration is making new overtures to lure the EZLN back to the bargaining table. Among other things, the government is considering replacing its chief negotiator, Marco Antonio Bernal, with another individual capable of regaining the EZLN's confidence in talks. In contrast, the administration has taken a hard line with the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR), the guerrilla group that launched a series of attacks in southern Mexico during the past several weeks. "The government will use the armed forces to defend the people from all violence imposed by fringe groups," Agriculture Secretary Francisco Labastida Ochoa said at an address to commemorate Mexico's Independence Day on Sept. 16. The following article draws contrasts between the EPR and the EZLN.

Mexico City, Aug. 30. Once described as a "grotesque pantomime" by Mexican government officials and opposition politicians, the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR) has established its existence with a bang, carrying out murderous hit-and-run attacks against regular army troops throughout the poor and often-violent state of Guerrero. * On July 19, an EPR detachment ambushed a Mexican army convoy in Guerrero's Montana region. A subsequent rebel communique claimed that five soldiers had been killed and four wounded in the action. The Defense Secretariat (SEDENA) claimed there had been no military casualties, but both sides conceded one civilian was killed in the fighting.

*On Aug. 1, EPR sharpshooters opened fire on a Mexican navy patrol in the Tecpan region of the Costa Grande. No casualties were reported by either side. The US-based Boise Cascade Corp. has extensive investments in the Tecpan area.

*On Aug. 7, the guerrillas blasted away at a lonely army encampment in Encinos, near Tepetitla in the sierra of Coyuca. The location is near the burial sites of many of the farmers massacred in

the infamous Aguas Blancas incident in June 1995. The EPR utilized the first anniversary of the massacre to display a public (if hooded) face. Following the Aug. 7 attack, the military for the first time conceded casualties: the death of a sergeant-cook and the wounding of two soldiers.

*On Aug. 9, the EPR again opened up on a military convoy, this time near the state capital of Chilpancingo. The military reported two soldiers wounded, but national television spoke of an unofficial casualty toll of eight soldiers killed.

*In late August, two months after their June 28 appearance, the EPR launched a string of ambushes against military installations in Guerrero, Oaxaca, Puebla, Mexico, and Chiapas states, leaving at least 17 dead.

The EPR's hit-and-run strategy appears designed to lure the military into mountain regions of Guerrero where the knowledge of the terrain gives the guerrillas the upper hand. At least 8,000 troops now patrol the state and full-scale counterinsurgency efforts appear to be underway. According to information provided by SEDENA sources to the daily newspaper La Jornada, the Mexican army is utilizing census rolls to conduct village searches for possible EPR members. Meanwhile, civil authorities, who continue to label the rebels as "criminals" and "drug traffickers," have gone after groups sympathetic to the EPR.

In early August, the government arrested militants Omar Garabay, founder of the Mexican Marxist-Leninist Communist Party in Chilpancingo, and campesino leader Porforio Del Angel of the Emiliano Zapata Democratic Front of Eastern Mexico (FEDOMEZ), a long-persecuted indigenous farmers' group in the Huasteca mountains of Hidalgo state. In contrast to this agitated agenda, Mexico's other guerrilla army, the now well-established Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), which rose in armed rebellion in January 1994, utilized the first days of August to stage an international "Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism" in its Lacandon-jungle base area, an entirely peaceful affair reminiscent of the US Woodstock festival of the 1960s.

On Aug. 6, the EZLN, which has repeatedly announced its transformation into a political front, resumed peace negotiations with the Mexican government. The talks, which have been held at irregular intervals for the past 15 months at San Andres Larrainzar in the highland mountains of Chiapas, have produced few gains for the EZLN and its civilian base. In marked difference from the "hot war" with the EPR and its sympathizers in Guerrero, two high-profile Zapatista prisoners have been released by the Mexican government in recent months, although 16 other persons alleged to have EZLN ties remain in jail.

And, despite the continuing military standoff in the jungle, no shots have been fired in this frozen conflict since January 1994. Indeed, the fighting in Guerrero seems to have converted the Zapatistas into "good guerrillas," in the government's eyes. Despite frequent suspensions in talks between the EZLN and the government, President Ernesto Zedillo has made a special effort to compliment the Zapatistas for seeking a negotiated settlement of their grievances. Unidentified officials at the Interior Secretariat (Secretaria de Gobernacion) have communicated a desire to similarly "dialogue" with the EPR. This offer to dialogue carries the condition that the guerrillas lay down their arms- -an unlikely scenario.

At an Aug. 6 press conference in the forests of the Huasteca mountains, the EPR delineated its differences with the EZLN. "For us, this is a government of killers," said Comandante Jose Arturo in an interview with the weekly news magazine *Proceso*. "We cannot sit down and dialogue with this government." Unlike the Zapatistas, the EPR is "seeking to take state power," while the EZLN has emphasized its role of contributing to the construction of a more democratic Mexico. "We have important differences," said Jose Arturo. "We do not think that poetry can be substituted for other matters," he said in reference to the literary bent of the EZLN's charismatic Subcomandante Marcos.

In reference to Marcos's trademark, Jose Arturo also emphasized he does not smoke a pipe because "fumes can be detected 200 meters away." Nonetheless, despite their differences, he said the EPR will not create obstacles to ongoing peace talks between the Zapatistas and the government. In fact, Jose Arturo stressed that the EPR and the EZLN share certain common visions, such as the struggle against neoliberalism. This sentiment has been shared by EZLN leaders. "We have known about the guerrillas in Guerrero since 1994," Marcos acknowledged in a recent interview. "The existence of the EPR obeys the logic of Guerrero and other states where armed groups operate: the repression and the lack of a political opening have moved them to go on the offensive." These remarks represented the first time the subcomandante has publicly acknowledged the legitimacy of the EPR as a guerrilla organization.

At his Aug. 6 press conference, Jose Arturo explained that the EPR was formed from 14 different factions, the most prominent of which appears to be the Clandestine Revolutionary Party of Workers-Popular Union (PROCUP), primarily an urban guerrilla group that has taken credit for a handful of Mexico City bombings during the past decade. "Some of our fighters have been preparing for 30 years," Jose Arturo said, a clear indication that followers of Lucio Cabanas's Party of the Poor which held off the Mexican military from 1967 through 1974 in the Guerrero mountains are involved in the creation of the EPR. Another faction that appears to have joined the EPR forces takes the name of Genaro Vazquez, Lucio Cabanas's contemporary in the Guerrero mountains. Jose Arturo said the rebel military command was first formulated in May 1994, five months after the Zapatista uprising.

Militarily, the EPR is organized through a compact four-person command and the structure includes platoons, brigades, and "special detachments." Still, despite a bristling rebel military presence, the Aug. 6 press conference appears to have been convened to announce the formation of an EPR "political" front, the "Party of the Popular Revolutionary Army," whose program includes the establishment of a "provisional government" and a new constitution, the construction of a "popular democratic republic," and a more just economic order. Although the diction of the EPR's "manifestos" is often Marxist, Jose Arturo studiously avoided the word "socialism" during the interview. Indeed, the EPR's creation of a political party parallels the Zapatistas' formation of the FZLN, an unarmed "political" front. The EPR leader said the rebels' inventory of high-powered weaponry, which appears to far outstrip the EZLN's wildest dreams, was acquired through "bank expropriations and kidnappings of members of the financial oligarchy."

Although both the EPR and the EZLN identify neoliberalism as "public enemy number one," the EPR kidnappings may have struck a more damaging blow against that economic model than did the

EZLN's recent international encounter in the jungle. Indeed, the PROCUP has long been suspected as the perpetrator of the 1994 kidnapping of Banamex President Alfredo Harp Helu, one of Mexico's richest and most influential bankers. Harp Helu's relatives paid a record-breaking ransom of US \$25 million to rescue the banker. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the EPR's clandestine Aug. 6 press conference was that it did not take place in the EPR's headquarters in Guerrero, but in Hidalgo's Huasteca mountains.

On the other hand, the Mexican government has identified this region as a base for guerrilla movements. In fact, on July 5 of this year, the Mexican military discovered a significant arms cache in the Huasteca and thousands of troops have been combing the region ever since, setting up roadblocks and conducting house-to-house searches in seven largely Nahuatl Indian municipalities, extending to the Veracruz state line. The EPR later acknowledged ownership of this cache. The Huasteca mountains run north to south through eastern Mexico, touching five states, ranging from Tamaulipas to Puebla, and the EPR's appearance in the zone underscores the rebels' potential for opening up several simultaneous fronts.

The EZLN, on the other hand, is backed up against the Guatemalan border in the southeastern corner of Chiapas and has been unable to break out of its base area because of army encirclement. When the Zapatistas seized seven municipalities and attacked a local military base in Chiapas in January 1994, the uprising had an immediate and devastating impact on the Mexican Stock Exchange (BMV), and the market has often reacted negatively whenever the EZLN threatens an offensive.

On the other hand, the rising tide of rebel violence in Guerrero has hardly caused the BMV to shudder. An investment analyst for a foreign bank in Mexico City explained the EZLN uprising came as a major surprise to the market. "In 1994, the international investment community believed in Salinas and thought that, with NAFTA, Mexico would soon enter the first world," said the banker. "But now, the economy and the market are so depressed that the EPR is looked upon as just one more local trouble spot that can easily be isolated from the national economy." As evidence of this theory, the main index of the BMV climbed steadily during the first week of August, when the EPR ambushed the Mexican military on three separate occasions and substantiated its existence at a dramatic press conference.

The stock market, however, may not be the present focus of the EPR's hit-and-run campaign. After all, the group's debut on June 28 at Aguas Blancas came on a Friday afternoon after the BMV had closed for the week. By stepping up their offensive in more strategic sections of the country, the rebels could put a damper on Zedillo's optimistic forecast of economic recovery. If the EPR's agenda is to attack more strategic economic targets, the guerrillas will not have to look very far. The group already operates in a zone enclosing two of Mexico's prime tourist resorts: Ixtapa and Acapulco. Indeed, the PROCUP took credit for the bombing of an Acapulco military bank in the wake of the Zapatista uprising in January 1994. The PROCUP is also suspected of various bombings at Mexico City targets over the course of the past ten years. A renewed terror campaign in the capital could graphically demonstrate to foreign investors just how unstable Mexico has become and inflict deep damage upon an economy that is just beginning to bounce back from the worst recession here in 64 years.

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