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Guest Author

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Zapatistas Observe Third Anniversary of Uprising; Peace Prospects Poor in 1997

by Guest

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By John Ross

[The author is a free-lance journalist who has written on Mexican political and economic affairs for many years.]

Despite military alerts, bloody conflicts in northern Chiapas, and a government that is reluctant to accommodate its demands, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional, EZLN) has some reasons to celebrate in the months of November and December. In November, the EZLN observed its 13th anniversary, even though the first 10 years were spent as a clandestine organization. On Dec. 31, the EZLN will mark the third year of its very public rebellion that created a new consciousness in Mexico about the plight of the poor indigenous communities throughout the country. The rebellion, which erupted fully on Jan. 1, 1994, resulted in a 12-day shooting war and 35 months of high tension give-and-take with the Mexican government.

Three years after the legendary uprising, however, the conventional wisdom conveyed by the media to the world outside Chiapas is that the EZLN star's is no longer rising. A principal reason for the decline in media attention to the EZLN is that the prolonged and frustrating "peace talks" with the Mexican government have been officially suspended. On the military front, the EZLN is surrounded by 40,000 federal government troops, and the Zapatistas now play only a backup role to the better-armed and much more aggressive fighters of the Popular Revolutionary Army (Ejercito Popular Revolucionario, EPR).

Additionally, other issues have started to dominate the headlines: the ongoing economic crisis, a dangerously wounded Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and wholesale urban crime and violence. Still, for the EZLN, the past year was filled with the sort of drama generally found in the movies. Not coincidentally, several films on the Zapatistas are already being screened and others are in the planning stage. For the EZLN, 1996 began in conflict. In January, Mexican army tanks invaded a highland site at Ovantic where Tzotzil supporters of the EZLN had built a cultural center. After angry villagers stoned the tanks, hurried negotiations between the legislative commission that oversees government-EZLN talks (COCOPA) and Interior Secretary Emilio Chuayffet defused a potentially explosive situation.

The COCOPA intervention allowed the Zapatistas to proceed with their planned anniversary celebration. For the first time since the rebellion exploded, EZLN fighters did not carry weapons during the celebration. The EZLN's Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, which had been issued New Year's Eve, set the tone for the Zapatista year. In the document, the Zapatista leadership called for the formation of a political front, the Zapatista National Liberation Front (FZLN), which would ease the rebels' transformation from an armed group to a political participant in the civil

society. A second broad front called the National Liberation Movement (FAC-MLN) was also proposed by EZLN leader Subcomandante Marcos. Both fronts are now in the process of formation, but with significant distinctions between them. The FZLN appears to be a civilian extension of the Zapatista army, while the FAC-MLN is oriented more toward the EZLN's competitors in the guerrilla game, the EPR.

For the EZLN, 1996 was also a year of outreach to other indigenous communities throughout Mexico. A national forum in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas state, in early January, attended by many Indian activists, helped the Zapatistas formulate proposals that included autonomy and self-government for indigenous communities, which later became the crux of negotiations with the government delegation. The network of Indian activists that grew from the forum would later hold a milestone Mexico City congress to reaffirm their demands. In mid-February, a surprise agreement on indigenous rights and culture was signed behind closed doors by Zapatista commanders and representatives of President Ernesto Zedillo. This was the only document ever to be signed between the rebels and the government, although none of the document's four parts have ever been officially published.

Zedillo's failure to speedily translate the agreement into constitutional changes defining autonomy and the special position of Indians in a multiracial Mexican society has angered the EZLN, which broke off official negotiations with the government in September. In response, Zedillo has promised that legislation will be introduced in the coming congressional session. However, the weakness of this proposed legislation has been the source of much irritation for the EZLN in recent weeks. Because of this disagreement, 1996 will end in much the same way as it began, with COCOPA representatives shuttling relentlessly between Mexico City and San Cristobal, trying to resolve this latest crisis. Meanwhile, although Subcommander Marcos has spent a significant amount of time negotiating in San Cristobal de las Casas, the EZLN communities have remained encircled by tens of thousands of government soldiers.

Nonetheless, perhaps the greatest military threat to the Zapatistas comes from the EPR. On Aug. 28, the EPR previously confined to the state of Guerrero barricaded roads leading into the Lacandon conflict zone, an action that seemed to startle the EZLN. The proximity of armed EPR fighters is worrisome to the EZLN command, which must maintain discipline among its own troops, most of whom are young men and women who have been restrained from combat for many months.

Reports of fighting between EZLN factions have circulated for months in the Lacandon canyons where the EZLN still wields considerable authority. One faction reportedly favors continued negotiations, while another group is more inclined to confront the government. Although at first reluctant to comment on the EPR's debut on Mexico's political stage, Subcommander Marcos later admitted knowing of the EPR's existence for at least three years. He nevertheless sought to distance the EZLN from the EPR, emphasizing that the Zapatistas had requested no help from the EPR. Significantly, the EZLN's first concrete response to the EPR's more militant stance was to break off the stalemated talks with Zedillo's team.

Although Marcos has vehemently rejected Zedillo's efforts to cast the Zapatistas as "good" guerrillas and the EPR as the "bad" guerrillas, the government has clearly assumed a more benevolent posture

toward the EZLN, in the hope that talks will soon be resumed. Peace negotiations are one of the few examples of solutions to social problems that Zedillo can use to reassure potential foreign investors of Mexico's new stability. Although it rejects the comparison, the EZLN benefits by the good guerrilla-bad guerrilla equation. For example, the government continues to hold as many as 185 militants accused of EPR ties in jails around the nation, while at the same time releasing prominent individuals with EZLN ties, such as Javier Elorriaga. There is little question that the EZLN and the EPR entertain contrasting visions of the new Mexican revolution. The Zapatistas once described as "armed reformists" by political analyst Jorge Casteneda have accused the EPR of wanting to take state power for themselves.

In contrast, EZLN statements insist that the Zapatistas only want to be part of a movement for democratic change for all Mexicans. Perhaps the most dramatic example of the differences between the two rebel groups came in October. While the EPR continued to stage hit-and-run attacks on military and police installations, the Zapatistas defied the government by sending their first-ever delegation to Mexico City to attend a national indigenous conference. And rather than dispatching a band of armed warriors, the EZLN delegation was led by Comandante Ramona, a Tzotzil woman who speaks very little Spanish. In addition to consolidating an organizational base among the nation's indigenous and mestizo peoples, the EZLN reached out to the world in 1996, orchestrating a series of international conferences "in defense of humanity and in opposition to neoliberalism."

During the year, the EZLN also attracted such luminaries as Hollywood film mogul Oliver Stone, actor Edward James Olmos, noted French intellectual Regis Debray, and former French first lady Danielle Mitterand to their jungle base. The presence of these prominent individuals coupled with massive media attention in the jungle outpost of La Realidad kept the military at bay and allowed local farmers to plant their corn for the first time in two years. The prospects for peace in Chiapas in the coming year are complicated by ongoing hostilities in northern areas of the state. These conflicts often involve fights that pit members of the center-left Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) and other EZLN supporters against members of the PRI, who are backed up by paramilitary groups. Hundreds of farmers have been killed, evicted from their land, or jailed in repeated clashes in municipalities like Tila and Sabanilla, near the Tabasco state border.

While Marcos has suggested that a resumption of talks with the government could well result in a signed peace agreement in 1997, such prophecy seems overly optimistic. If recent history is repeated, negotiations with the government will meet with obstacles at every turn. The official talks only reached agreement on one of the six issues to be negotiated indigenous rights and culture. Two very controversial topics democracy and justice, and agrarian reform are among the issues that still must be resolved. The Zedillo administration, which badly needs an accord to impress foreign investors and lure the EPR into similar negotiations, is expected to make a strong effort toward securing peace. However, several players including the Mexican military, Chiapas ranchers, dissatisfied PRI members, and the EPR could sabotage such efforts.

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