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# Government's Refusal To Enact Agreements On Indigenous Rights Dooms Talks With Zapatista National Liberation Army

by Carlos Navarro

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[The author is a free-lance journalist who has written on Mexican political and economic affairs for many years.] A little more than a year ago, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) and the Mexican government signed a historic agreement, recasting Mexico as a multiethnic nation. The 40 pages of agreements reached in San Andres Larrainzar on Feb. 16, 1996, defined protection of Indian culture and civil rights and awarded Mexico's 56 distinct indigenous nations a degree of administrative autonomy from federal and state regulations. The text of the agreement, actually four separate agreements, has never been published. But any benefits of EZLN-government talks have now been essentially annulled by President Ernesto Zedillo's refusal to honor the agreements, which were never enacted into law. Earlier this year, the administration rejected a proposal from COCOPA, the legislative commission originally assigned to develop legislation to enact the agreements. COCOPA had envisioned changes that included amendments to at least five chapters of the Mexican Constitution. The trickiest amendment would have involved the Zapatista notion of autonomy, to which Zedillo's representatives had unexpectedly affixed their signatures. Some observers suggest the Zedillo administration's rejection of any legislation related to the agreement is based on concern about how autonomy would affect native land ownership. In the agreement, government and EZLN negotiators had established the right of indigenous communities to continue to work the land in a collective manner, under the "ejido" and "comunidad" systems. Both of these rights have been seriously compromised by revisions to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, which governs agrarian reform and was the bedrock of Mexico's social revolution in 1910-1917. The EZLN autonomy proposal was gathered and synthesized during a series of consultations with representatives from most of Mexico's indigenous peoples (now organized as the National Indigenous Congress) in late 1995-96. The Zapatista position keyed on control of administrative, political, and judicial spheres of daily life, through the mechanism of municipal government, in the more than 700 majority-indigenous municipalities that dot the Mexican countryside. Disagreement regarding land rights remains key issue Both the Zedillo administration and the government of former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari have adamantly refused to yield to rebel demands to restore the original language of Article 27 of the Constitution. The article had been revised to promote the sale or "association" of ejido and communal land to transnational agribusiness, concomitant with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Indeed, Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos has frequently pointed out that the revision of Article 27 was the "detonating blow" that produced the EZLN's declaration of war against the federal government. One official who was instrumental in crafting the 1991 revision of Mexico's agrarian policies is Zedillo's chief of staff Luis Tellez. EZLN advisor Luis Hernandez Navarro holds Tellez responsible for the Zedillo administration's decision to reject the COCOPA legislation. Tellez who served as deputy agriculture secretary for forestry resources in the Salinas administration collaborated with such industry giants as International Paper, Simpson-Mexico, and Louisiana Pacific to open up more than a million acres of campesino and indigenous agricultural lands over

a four-state area in Mexico's southeast, for quick-return commercial tree farming. Tellez is also the protege of Salinas's finance secretary, Pedro Aspe, who is now director of the Vector brokerage house. One of Vector's most important clients is Monterrey-based Pulsar International, which is International Paper's principal partner in the southeastern forestry-farming venture. Proponents of the project, including World Bank president James Wohlfenson, suggest the plan will provide employment for residents of hundreds of ejidos and native communities in the southeast and help Mexico become self-sufficient in paper production. Under the terms of the agreement struck between the government and Pulsar-International Paper, and governed by Tellez's revisions of Article 27, local farmers are issued "T" shares (for "tierra" or land) in exchange for associating with the pulp giants. Even though such shares are worthless to individual farmers, Pulsar can reacquire them and trade them as a bloc on the Mexican stock exchange (BMV), thus converting Indian farmlands into a saleable commodity. But critics of the Tellez tree-planting venture, such as columnist Jaime Aviles of *La Jornada*, question the project not only on constitutional grounds and because of damage to native communities, but also because of environmental concerns. Aviles points out that one of the trees being planted on a large commercial scale in the southeast is eucalyptus, which is notorious for its heavy use of soil nutrients and ground water. "This is the perfect neoliberal tree," said Aviles, referring to the economic philosophies of the Zedillo and Salinas administrations. "The eucalyptus is fast-growing, it kills everything near it, and it makes a lot of money for a few people." Pulsar's chief agronomist, Jesus Rivas, counters that the huge plantations are environmentally sound, since they will not affect the region's biodiversity. In fact, Rivas suggests that the project will reduce the cut in native forests. In fact, the autonomy principle signed by the EZLN, while respecting the territorial integrity of indigenous regions, was also nonexclusive and did not challenge the federal government's right to exploit strategic resources in areas projected to be under indigenous administrative control. Surprisingly, the EZLN's response to Zedillo's rejection of the agreement has been relatively subdued. "Here we await you," said Subcomandante Marcos in a written statement on the first anniversary of the unfulfilled accords. "As always, we are ready for war or for peace..." Indigenous groups pledge to continue drive for autonomy. But if the Zapatistas have not been very vocal, other advocates of indigenous autonomy have shown no reluctance to reclaim their independence. "It doesn't matter if Zedillo accepts or doesn't accept the constitutional reforms, we are going to keep consolidating our autonomous regions," said Margarito Ruiz, who sits on the general counsel of Chiapas's self-proclaimed eight multiethnic autonomous regions. The Zedillo administration appears to have placed a higher priority on debating political reforms, which are more critical to its interests ahead of the elections for the Chamber of Deputies in July 1997. This renewed focus on political reform has practically suspended any action on an agreement with the EZLN, despite earlier pledges by the administration to carry the autonomy initiative to Congress. In fact, an improving general economy seems to have provided Zedillo with more political breathing room, allowing the president to go on the offensive against the agreement. During visits to a cross section of indigenous communities across the nation, Zedillo has described the Zapatista leaders as "false saviors" and has charged that the EZLN's autonomy proposals could create "a Bosnia" in Mexico's southeast. Zedillo's vilification campaign against the EZLN has found some support from prominent journalists. In one particularly exaggerated statement, columnist Sergio Sarmiento of the daily newspaper *Reforma* accused the Zapatistas of "Stalinism" because they advocated the "collectivization" of the land, a process that, he claimed, had cost 30 million lives in the former Soviet Union during the 1930s. Sowing such fears appears crucial to the PRI's electoral ambitions in 1997. In part, Zedillo won the presidency in 1994 by promoting widespread fears about the Chiapas rebellion.

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