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Zedillo Appoints Ex-Governor Coldwell to Head Chiapas Negotiations

by LADB Staff

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In late April, President Ernesto Zedillo appointed Pedro Joaquin Coldwell to assume the post of special peace negotiator for Chiapas. Coldwell is the fourth government representative to hold the post since the uprising by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in January 1994. Coldwell previously served as governor of Quintana Roo state, as director of the national tourism fund (Fondo Nacional de Promocion al Turismo, FONATUR), and as tourism secretary.

Coldwell replaces Marco Antonio Bernal, who resigned the post to run as a candidate for the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in the upcoming elections for the Chamber of Deputies. Former Mexico City mayor and foreign relations secretary Manuel Camacho Solis and current Attorney General Jorge Madrazo Cuellar have also headed negotiations in Chiapas with the EZLN. In a press conference announcing Coldwell's appointment, Interior Secretary Emilio Chuayffet reiterated President Ernesto Zedillo's intention to seek a "dignified and just peace" with the EZLN. "Coldwell has all the attributes to help bring this along," said Chuayffet.

Negotiations have been suspended since August of last year, when the EZLN withdrew from the talks after accusing the Zedillo administration of negotiating in bad faith. In particular, the EZLN accused the government of refusing to honor agreements reached in February 1996, which 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 (see SourceMex, 03/21/96 and 03/12/97). The suspension of the talks has increased tensions in Chiapas, with human rights groups and nongovernmental organizations warning of a possible attack by the army on the EZLN.

Seeking to defuse these concerns, Zedillo told reporters during a trip to the US that his government "rejects" a violent solution to the impasse in Chiapas. Zedillo, who was in Atlanta for a meeting of Latin American leaders, said his administration is "at all times" willing to listen to any EZLN proposals.

'A step in right direction'

There was no immediate reaction from the EZLN to Coldwell's appointment, but representatives of two organizations that have served in mediating roles in Chiapas described the nomination as a "step in the right direction." Gonzalo Ituarte, secretary of the Comision Nacional de Intermediacion (CONAI), said an important aspect of Coldwell's appointment is that he was given enough negotiating authority with the EZLN without having to verify every point with the Zedillo administration. "This independent decision-making authority is necessary to promote fundamental changes to push the peace process forward," said Ituarte. CONAI was formed by Samuel Ruiz, Roman Catholic bishop of the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas.

Similarly, representatives of the Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion (COCOPA) said they were pleased with Coldwell's appointment, since this could reactivate the stalled talks with the EZLN. COCOPA comprises federal legislators from the four major political parties in Mexico. "The task assumed by Coldwell is more complex than that of his predecessors," said the daily newspaper Excelsior. The newspaper said such factors as a permanent police and military presence in indigenous communities, the proliferation of paramilitary groups, the radicalization of social forces in the region, and the precarious conditions in the Lancandon Jungle and other areas of the state have dissipated hope that a peaceful solution will be reached in Chiapas. (Sources: Excelsior, 04/28/97, 04/29/97, 04/30/97; La Jornada, 04/28/97, 04/29/97, 05/02/97; Novedades, 04/28/97, 05/02/97; El Universal, 04/28/97, 04/29/97, 04/30/97, 05/02/97; The News, 04/29/97; Associated Press, 05/02/97)

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