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Congress Resurrects Chiapas Peace Commission

by LADB Staff

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In late September, the Chamber of Deputies and Senate announced their decision to continue the special legislative peace commission for Chiapas (Comision Nacional de Concordia y Pacificacion, COCOPA). Members of all five parties from both houses will be represented in COCOPA, which will continue efforts to broker a peace agreement between the federal government and the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN). COCOPA will be chaired by Deputy Hector Sanchez Lopez, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). According to PRD Sen. Pablo Gomez Alvarez, the mission of the new COCOPA will change very little from that of the previous commission. "We seek a commission that is plural and equitable in all of its tasks," said Sen. Gomez. "Our most urgent task is to override the executive branch's vetoes of projects coming from COCOPA.

The conflict with the EZLN is rooted in the lack of recognition of the rights of indigenous communities." Committee chair stresses need for reconciliation COCOPA chair Sanchez Lopez stressed the need to preserve the spirit of the accords from the perspective of the Zapatistas. He said the accords should include the preservation of indigenous culture, rights for Indian communities, potable water, electricity, roads, health care, education, and opportunity. However, Sanchez Lopez also stressed the need for COCOPA to be a bridge between the government's interpretation of the accords and the interpretation given by the rebels. The conflict over interpretation of the accords was played out in late September, when the EZLN announced the creation of the autonomous Che Guevara municipality in the Lacandon Jungle in southern Chiapas.

EZLN spokespersons said the municipality would form part of the future Tzotz-choj Autonomous Zone, named after a former Mayan ruler. However, the creation of the new municipality drew immediate criticism from the government. Pedro Joaquin Coldwell, the government's chief Chiapas peace negotiator, called on the EZLN to refrain from actions that would derail peace efforts in Chiapas. "The decision to incorporate new municipalities will only contribute to ill feelings and discord in the region," Coldwell told reporters.

At the same time, Coldwell said the administration would like to respect the agreements contained in the 1996 San Andres accords reached between the EZLN and the government. "The federal government is willing to recognize the right of indigenous communities to self-determination and autonomy," said Coldwell. "But these agreements must first be translated to a legal text."

President Zedillo renews commitment to peace

In an attempt to show his administration's commitment to peace in Chiapas, President Zedillo took the unprecedented step of traveling to the region in early October. During the trip, Zedillo met with local officials and indigenous leaders, and he announced a major initiative to provide 309 million pesos (US\$39.8 million) in local, state, and federal funds for public-works projects. The projects include the installation of running water, highways, rural roads, basic medical service, and school

breakfasts. "Peace requires that we push programs such as these, programs that benefit and work toward social harmony and accord," Zedillo said. Zedillo also pleaded for resolution of the conflict between the rebels and the government. "I come here with strong conviction and with absolute honesty to ask all the actors in the peace process to take a definitive step toward peace in Chiapas," said Zedillo, whose trip to San Cristobal was the first by a Mexican president to this city in 19 years.

Leaders of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the PRD praised Zedillo's call to resume dialogue in Chiapas, but also urged the president to take concrete steps toward achieving that goal. "The president's commitment to seek peace in the region is a good start," said PRD secretary general Jesus Ortega. "I hope that this truly becomes the definite step to reach an end to the conflict." Sen. Pablo Salazar, a member of Zedillo's Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), took a more cautious view of the president's statements. "It is not enough for the parties involved in the conflict to declare their will to resume the dialogue," said Salazar, who is also a member of COCOPA.

Salazar said the solution does not come merely by returning to the negotiating table, but by finding ways to restore confidence to the process. "The government should be responsible for this step," he said. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Oct. 8, reported at 7.75 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: Associated Press, 09/28/97; The News, 09/30/97; Novedades, 10/02/97; La Jornada, 09/26/97, 10/03/97; El Universal, 10/02/97, 10/03/97; Excelsior, 09/26/97, 10/02/97, 10/03/97)

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