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Attack on Bishops Threatens Chiapas Peace Process

by LADB Staff

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The peace process in Chiapas, which has remained stalled for more than a year, received another setback when attackers fired on a motorcade led by two Roman Catholic bishops, Samuel Ruiz and Raul Vera, both from San Cristobal de las Casas. The attackers did not harm Ruiz and Vera, but they did injure three Chol Indians accompanying the bishops during a procession near the community of Guadalupe Jolonopa. No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, but a spokesperson for the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas said members of a paramilitary group known as Desarrollo, Paz y Justicia were suspected of firing the shots.

Attack blamed on paramilitary group with ties to PRI

According to the diocesan spokesperson, the organization appears to have strong ties to members of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in Chiapas. Gonzalo Ituarte, a spokesperson for the church-sponsored mediating group Comision Nacional de Intermediacion (CONAI), said the attackers were clearly attempting to send a message. "This was not just an assassination attempt but also an attack on the Chiapas peace process," said Ituarte.

The peace process has been at a standstill for more than a year because of the federal government's refusal to recognize some of the agreements reached by its own mediators with leaders of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in February 1996. In those accords, the government agreed to recognize new rights for indigenous communities in Mexico (see SourceMex, 02/21/96). However, the administration's failure to translate those agreements into constitutional changes angered the EZLN, which withdrew from negotiations later in the year (see SourceMex, 12/11/96).

In addition to seeking official recognition for indigenous rights, the EZLN has asked President Ernesto Zedillo's administration to bring paramilitary groups under control. The EZLN contends that the government has not only failed to control the paramilitary organizations but has tacitly supported such groups. "The government of Ernesto Zedillo is continuing its war against Zapatista supporters," the EZLN said in a communique sent to several newspapers. While the Mexican army has maintained a strong presence in Chiapas since the EZLN uprising in January 1994, most of the direct violence against Zapatista supporters has been carried out by paramilitary groups. Those groups have been accused of destroying homes, defacing churches, looting stores, and assaulting EZLN sympathizers.

According to human rights organizations, more than 100 people have died in battles between paramilitary organizations and EZLN supporters over a three-year period. "It's not completely clear whom they represent, but most everyone suspects they are backed by powerful interests, probably landowners, businesspeople, and some politicians," said anthropologist Andres Aubry, who has been closely monitoring the situation in Chiapas. "The government's attitude has been to ignore the situation."

Congress concerned about increasing tensions in Chiapas

Some federal legislators have warned the Zedillo administration that a lack of action against those responsible for the attacks on Ruiz and Vera could worsen tensions in Chiapas. "The administration's policy has been to ignore the urgent need for a dignified peace in Chiapas," said Deputy Rosalbina Garavito of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). "This policy has served to legitimize illegal groups such as Paz y Justicia." The Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB) which oversees the government's mediating efforts in Chiapas condemned the attack against Bishops Ruiz and Vera and pledged its support for a full investigation of the incident, both at the state and federal levels. "We have orders from the governor to investigate this matter in an exhaustive manner," said state attorney general Marco Antonio Bersares.

Some members of Zedillo's PRI have also urged the administration to push more vigorously to resume negotiations. "It is not in our best interests to continue at an impasse with the EZLN," said PRI Sen. Esteban Moctezuma, who once served as Interior Secretary. Some members of the special congressional Chiapas peace commission (Comision Nacional de Concordia y Pacificacion, COCOPA) expressed concern that the attacks would hinder any new peace efforts in the region. COCOPA recently won approval to continue its mediating role in the region (see SourceMex, 10/08/97). "This attack does not contribute to our effort to seek peace, understanding, and dialogue," said COCOPA member and PAN Deputy German Martinez Cazerres. (Sources: Associated Press, Houston Chronicle, 11/05/97; Dallas Morning News, 11/06/97; La Jornada, 11/05-07/97, 11/10/97; El Universal, 11/06/97, 11/10/97; Excelsior, 11/06/97, 11/07/97, 11/10/97)

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