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Interior Secretary Appoints New Chiapas Peace Negotiator

by LADB Staff

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In mid-January, Interior Secretary Francisco Labastida announced changes at the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SG), including the designation of Emilio Rabasa Gamboa as a special peace negotiator for Chiapas. The new negotiator is one of 22 persons appointed by Labastida to key posts at the SG. Other major appointments include Jorge Alcocer as deputy secretary for political development, Roberto Zavala as deputy secretary for public security, and Emilio Gamboa Patron as deputy secretary for social communication.

According to political columnist Sergio Sarmiento, the appointments of Alcocer and Zavala are particularly significant. Alcocer, a former member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), will oversee the SG's initiatives on constitutional and state reform, including a review on the government's policy regarding indigenous rights. Among other things, Zavala will be in charge of federal oversight of local and state police forces, particularly given the recent excesses by state police in Chiapas.

The most controversial appointment, however, was the designation of former communications and transportation secretary Emilio Gamboa Patron to head social communications. Gamboa Patron is closely linked with the hard-line policies of former presidents Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Miguel de la Madrid.

Rabasa Gamboa, who replaces Pedro Joaquin Coldwell as Chiapas peace negotiator, is the fifth government representative to hold the post since the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) uprising in January 1994. But unlike his predecessors, Rabasa is a native of Chiapas and has not held elected office. He has a background in constitutional and international law and has served on the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH). "The designation of Rabasa would normally be a strong cause for optimism, based on his personal qualifications and not on the policies he must carry out," said prominent columnist Miguel Angel Grandos Chapa.

There was no immediate reaction from the EZLN to Gamboa's appointment. However, in an earlier communique, EZLN spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos made it clear that any significant movement toward peace will have to come from the grassroots population. "The government will not provide us with peace and justice," said Marcos. "These will come from civil society, from its initiatives and its mobilizations."

Protestors question government role in recent killings

The overhaul of the SG and Gamboa's appointment were announced only hours before the second major incident of violence in Chiapas since late December. In the latest incident, state police officers fired shots into a crowd of demonstrators in the town of Ocosingo, killing one adult and injuring two children. The demonstrators were protesting the massacre of 45 Tzotzil Indians by paramilitary groups sympathetic to the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). The massacre,

which occurred on Dec. 22, has brought massive protests throughout Mexico, including a huge rally in Mexico City on Jan. 12.

According to the protestors, the attack on the Tzotzil Indians was part of a campaign by members of the PRI, including President Ernesto Zedillo's administration, to undermine support for the EZLN. The demonstrators also blame Zedillo for lacking the will to negotiate a just peace with the EZLN, particularly after the executive backed down from an agreement between the legislative commission handling negotiations and the EZLN. The agreement would have guaranteed self-determination rights for indigenous communities (see SourceMex, 12/11/96). The two recent attacks in Chiapas reflect growing hostility between supporters of the EZLN and paramilitary groups linked to the PRI.

Last November, paramilitary groups attacked a convoy led by bishops Samuel Ruiz and Raul Vera of San Cristobal de las Casas. Ruiz and Vera escaped unharmed, but three lay people were injured (see SourceMex, 11/12/97). December massacre forces governor's resignation The December massacre forced interior secretary Emilio Chuayffet and governor Julio Cesar Ruiz Ferro to resign from their posts. In a 220-page report, the CNDH accused Ruiz Ferro's administration of failing to take action despite advance knowledge of the attack.

But the decision to replace Ruiz Ferro with federal deputy Roberto Albores Guillen also drew strong criticism from opposition parties. At a session of the Chamber of Deputies, Alfonso Ramirez Cuellar of the PRD questioned the choice of Albores Guillen, who is a PRI hard-liner and member of one of the powerful landholding families in Chiapas. "Chiapas will remain under complete control of PRI," said Ramirez. "Agrarian, judicial and political reform will be impossible. Opposition parties offered less resistance to Labastida's appointment to replace Chuayffet earlier this month (see SourceMex, 01/07/98).

Labastida has shown much more flexibility than his predecessor, but some intermediaries such as the church-led Comision Nacional de Intermediacion (CONAI) are concerned about the interior secretary's insistence that the federal army will not withdraw from Chiapas. In the Chamber of Deputies, the commission to uphold the Constitution (Comision de Regimen Interno y Concertacion Politica) has summoned Labastida to appear before the panel to discuss administration policies regarding Chiapas.

"Since no solution to the problems in Chiapas have been found, it seems irrelevant to talk about constitutional reform," said committee chairman Carlos Medina Placencia, a member of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). (Sources: El Nacional, 01/07/97; Reuter, 01/08/97; Proceso, 01/11/97; Associated Press, 01/12/97; Washington Post, 01/13/97; El Economista, 01/07/97, 01/08/97, 01/09/97, 01/13/97; The Dallas Morning News, 01/13/97; New York Times, 01/08/97, 01/13/97, 01/14/98; Excelsior, 01/07/97, 01/09/97, 01/12-14/97; The News, La Jornada, El Universal, Novedades, 01/07-09/97, 01/12-14/97; Diario de Yucatan, 01/08/97, 01/14/97)

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