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European Parliament Raises Concern About Chiapas Situation

by LADB Staff

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The proposed free-trade agreement between Mexico and the European Union (EU) could be delayed because of recent violence in Chiapas. Late last year, EU and Mexican negotiators adopted three documents one on political cooperation, another on commercial relations, and a joint declaration setting the parameters for negotiations on a full accord in 1998. Those negotiations are scheduled to begin in the second semester (see SourceMex, 12/17/97).

The EU-Mexico framework agreement was announced only a few weeks before the massacre of 45 Tzotzil Indians near the village of Acteal in Chiapas. The attack was carried out by paramilitary groups claiming affiliation with the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Many domestic and international critics believe the attack was part of a campaign by PRI members, including President Ernesto Zedillo's administration, to undermine support in Chiapas for the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN). The Zedillo administration took some steps to address the situation, including the ouster of then interior secretary Emilio Chuayffet and Chiapas governor Julio Cesar Ruiz Ferro (see SourceMex, 01/07/98 and 01/14/98).

Negotiations on EU-Mexico accord could face delays

Notwithstanding these steps, Jose Ignacio Salafranca, director of the European Parliament's committee for Central America and Mexico, says negotiations on an EU-Mexico accord could be jeopardized unless the Zedillo administration shows a clear effort to resolve long-term problems in Chiapas. On Jan. 15, the European Parliament approved a strongly worded resolution urging the Zedillo administration to bring the "material and intellectual authors" of the incident to justice. The resolution reminded the Zedillo administration that the December agreement obliges Mexico to respect democratic principles and individual rights as outlined in the UN's Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

The clause allows for cancellation of trade agreements if such principles and rights are violated. "We hope these violent incidents are not repeated," said Salafranca. "They could present an obstacle for negotiations on a cooperation accord between the EU and Mexico." Salafranca supports a proposal by the nongovernment organization Human Rights Watch that the European Commission issue an annual report on human rights in Mexico. "This is a very good idea," Salafranca told the weekly news magazine Proceso. The European Parliament's action was followed a week later by a similar resolution in the Italian Parliament urging the Zedillo administration to resume negotiations with the EZLN or face Italy's possible rejection of an EU-Mexico accord.

PRI legislators objected to the resolutions. "We view these resolutions as interference in what we consider Mexico's internal affairs," said Deputy Alfredo Phillips Olmedo, the PRI's secretary for international matters. But Deputy Cuauhtemoc Sandoval, director of international relations for the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), said the EU can influence government

policies without violating sovereignty. Sandoval said the clauses in the framework agreement require the Mexican government to respect democratic principles and human rights. "It's not a matter of the EU becoming a tribunal," said Sandoval. "Rather, the EU will promote the advance of democracy in Mexico."

Government downplays European concerns

In contrast to PRI legislators, the Zedillo administration downplayed the European Parliament's action. "Our sense is that the European Parliament will approve the framework agreements," said deputy trade secretary Jaime Zabludovsky. "At that point, we can proceed with negotiations on a full accord. Foreign Relations Secretary Rosario Green Macias said the Zedillo administration will keep the EU fully informed of government efforts to resolve the conflict in Chiapas. Green said she is scheduled to meet with EU representatives in February to discuss the Chiapas situation.

The EU leadership could play a role in advancing negotiations on a full EU-Mexico agreement and in promoting human rights. Britain, one of the strongest supporters of the EU-Mexico accord, currently holds the presidency of the European bloc. Under the EU structure, the president has the prerogative to expedite discussion of certain agenda items, including the accord with Mexico. Adrian Beamish, Britain's ambassador to Mexico City, pledged that a British-led EU presidency will push respect for human rights in Mexico. "We have established a dialogue with Mexico on human rights," said Beamish. (Sources: El Universal, 01/08/98; The News, 01/09/98; Proceso, 01/18/98; El Financiero International, 01/19/98; Notimex, 01/21/98, 01/22/98; Spanish news service EFE, 01/21/98, 01/27/97; La Jornada, 01/28/97)

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