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## **Military Exerts Strong Influence on President Zedillo's Decisions on Chiapas**

*by Guest*

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President Ernesto Zedillo's government has taken gradual steps toward resuming negotiations in Chiapas, including an offer to accept all but four points of the disputed accord on Indian sovereignty negotiated with the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in February 1996 (see SourceMex, 02/21/96). As a gesture of goodwill, Zedillo has renewed a pledge to resolve the conflict without the use of force. But the president's best intentions could be tested by the army, which is quite capable of disrupting this very tentative drift toward peace.

As an example, the government's offer to accept most of the points in the 1996 accord took almost one week to reach the EZLN command because the military would not relax its patrols in the area around the jungle outpost of La Realidad and allow a courier to deliver the message. As of late February, the EZLN had yet to officially respond to the offer but has demanded that the army pull back from Zapatista communities before any new talks can be scheduled. Federal troops have been most active near Prado Pacayal, former headquarters of EZLN spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos, and La Realidad, public nerve center of Zapatista operations.

On Jan. 7, soldiers ransacked the Morelia ejido on the fourth anniversary of the date the army stormed the village and executed three local leaders. This incident is cited by human rights groups as evidence of military impunity. Army invades 55 communities after December massacre Since January, the army has moved 2,000 fresh troops to the highlands community of Chenalho, close to the site of the Dec. 22 massacre of 46 Tzotzil Indians. The army used the massacre as an excuse to invade 55 communities in the highlands. The occupation of these villages is an apparent violation of the March 1995 Law of Reconciliation, which gives the EZLN the right to bear arms in zones under its control (see SourceMex, 03/15/95).

Angry villagers in the highlands and the jungles have offered strong resistance to troop movements in their communities, but this has failed to deter Defense Secretary Gen. Enrique Cervantes. Speaking to reporters during a swing through the northern states with Zedillo, Cervantes insisted that a federal firearms law applies to all citizens "with no exceptions," including the EZLN. This has been interpreted as a clear signal that the military is prepared to forcibly disarm rebel fighters in Chiapas. To counter criticism, the army has launched a public-relations campaign in the area, using soldiers to perform "social labor," including cutting hair and fixing household appliances.

The Zedillo administration's failure to curb the military is part of an intricate historical "dance" between civilian governments and the military. An unwritten rule suggests the president's loyalty to the military is at least as crucial as the military's loyalty to the president. Since 1994, the dance floor has been Chiapas. On the heels of the Jan. 1, 1994, uprising, then president Carlos Salinas sent tens of thousands of troops into the state in response to the EZLN's "declaration of war" against the

federal government. That largely rhetorical declaration remains the legal justification for the army's occupation of this southern border state. But despite Salinas's initial impulse to unleash the troops, he ordered a cease-fire just as the army was poised to pounce on the Zapatistas as they fled into the jungle. The move further strained relations between the military elite and Salinas, who had ignored earlier intelligence reports warning of the EZLN's existence and the potential for unrest in Chiapas.

Salinas kept the reports secret to prevent any distractions during negotiations of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Military holds considerable influence on Zedillo Ernesto Zedillo, who came to power almost by accident, has been a more acquiescent commander in chief. Zedillo became the candidate for the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) after Luis Donaldo Colosio was assassinated in March 1994 (see SourceMex, 03/30/94). But Zedillo came to power with little support within the PRI, which forced him to cultivate military support. The president is said to have increased his reliance on the military after the devaluation of the peso triggered economic collapse only weeks after he took office, a crisis he sought to blame on the Zapatistas.

The influence of the military on the Zedillo presidency was particularly evident in February 1995, when 30,000 soldiers were deployed to Chiapas to quash a new EZLN conspiracy to "engage in new and greater violent" actions. The order included the arrest of EZLN leaders (see SourceMex, 02/15/95). The president later rescinded the order, which was based on flawed military intelligence, but chose to keep a strong military presence in Chiapas.

The president has ignored repeated demands from local leaders that the troops be removed. The strong military presence allowed the army to easily expand its hold on the territory following the Dec. 22 massacre in Acteal. Statistics compiled by nongovernmental organizations suggest that army troop strength has swelled to 36,000 inside the conflict zone. Almost one-third of the army encampments are located near Ocosingo, the birthplace of the Zapatista rebellion. The army has designated Ocosingo the country's 39th military zone. But the expansion of the military has only intensified the anger of residents in indigenous communities. "The soldiers bring alcohol and marijuana to our villages, they bring their prostitutes, they foul the water, and they harass the women," said Tzeltal Indian leader Maria Nunez.

The army has also inherited some roles previously assigned to the corrupt state police forces. In January, interim Gov. Roberto Albores ordered the brutal and corrupt state police apparatus dismantled after officers fired into a crowd of Tzeltal and Chol demonstrators in Ocosingo. The incident, which was filmed by a television network, set off national protests. Dismantling the state police left the military in charge of state security, a move defended by the government-affiliated Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH). "This is not a good time to ask for demilitarization in Chiapas," said CNDH director Mirielle Roccatti. "There is no police force in the state." But the increased military presence has led the Zapatista leadership to prepare for an attack. "This is all we can expect from the government," said Subcomandante Marcos in a written statement to the Mexican press.

Some nongovernmental organizations raised concerns that the Mexican military would time the attack to coincide with a US offensive against Iraq to minimize world attention on an attack on the Zapatistas. The motives for the military expansion in Chiapas are very clear. The principal objective is to wipe out the EZLN, which could be achieved in a matter of hours. But the military also appears to be using Chiapas to pressure the Zedillo administration for a greater voice in shaping national

policies, including the economy. Luis Hernandez Navarro, a former EZLN advisor, compared the relationship between Zedillo and the military to the Monopoly board game. "The military has built all its hotels on the strip called Chiapas, where it has placed 50,000 troops," said Hernandez Navarro. "If Zedillo wants to play, it will cost him a great deal."

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