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## **Zedillo Government, Zapatista Supporters Clash Over Autonomous Municipalities**

*by LADB Staff*

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The Tzetzal community of Taniperlas in Chiapas state has become the focal point for the conflict between the government and supporters of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) regarding the creation of independent municipalities. As of mid-April, EZLN supporters had declared 38 municipalities in Chiapas autonomous communities, including Taniperlas, in defiance of federal and state authorities.

The declarations of autonomy, which include the creation of a parallel government, have been marked by violent clashes between supporters of the EZLN and residents loyal to the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). The PRI supporters have had the full backing of federal armed forces and state police, which have frequently moved into those communities "to restore order and uphold the Mexican Constitution."

EZLN supporters said the creation of alternative municipalities is justified because of the government's failure to implement the San Andres accords reached with the EZLN in January 1996, which guaranteed the rights of indigenous communities (see SourceMex, 02/21/96 and 12/11/97).

Many of these communities have incorporated since December 1994, the autonomous council of Chenalho said in a statement. "We want to tell President Ernesto Zedillo that we as Zapatista indigenous peoples are here to defend our right to govern our communities with democracy, liberty, and justice," the council statement said. Taniperlas autonomous community becomes center of dispute Taniperlas, located just northeast of Ocosingo, Chiapas, has attracted wide international attention because of recent deportations of foreign observers.

In mid-April, EZLN supporters announced the creation of the autonomous community Ricardo Flores Magon within the boundaries of Taniperlas. The action was quashed immediately by state police and federal troops, who moved in to dissolve the new town council. Immediately following the incident, the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB) ordered the expulsion of 12 foreigners for assisting the EZLN sympathizers to set up the autonomous community.

The foreigners—citizens of the US, Canada, Belgium, and Spain—were charged with violating terms of their tourist visas by participating in local political activities. But the foreigners said they were expelled because they were witnesses to acts of brutality by the military and police during the intervention in Taniperlas. "We could see how the police and the army entered the town and attacked the Indians," said Maria Pilar Lopez Castillo, a citizen of Spain. "

All foreigners were beaten and arrested to avoid our witnessing them burning the people's houses." Three weeks later, a delegation of Italian observers defied a government directive against traveling

en masse to Taniperlas. An original permit from SEGOB gave 10 members of the delegation permission to travel to the restricted community. In defiance of the directive, the 134-member delegation formed a convoy to travel to Taniperlas. Upon their arrival, the Italian visitors were attacked by hundreds of PRI supporters, who then clashed with EZLN sympathizers in Taniperlas. Most members of the Italian delegation were deported within days of the incident for violating Mexican immigration laws. "They are looking for pretexts to tell the world that Mexico is an intolerant, authoritarian country, that it is a violent country, and that it rejects the observation of human rights," said Fernando Solis Camara, SEGOB's top immigration official.

While most of the Italian delegation were students, the group also included a Roman Catholic priest and four members of the Italian Parliament. Sergio Trabattoni, an Italian legislator, said the group visited Taniperlas to personally verify whether Mexico was complying with a rights clause contained in an interim agreement to negotiate a Mexican- European Union (EU) accord. The two sides are hoping to begin full-scale negotiations by September 1998 (see SourceMex, 03/11/98).

### *Italian observers seek to tie issue to Mexico-EU accord*

Some Italians who were deported said they planned to meet with representatives of the European Parliament to lobby for rejection of a proposed EU-Mexico accord. The Italians are supported by the International Human Rights Federation, which has demanded that the European Parliament put more muscle in the democracy and human rights clause contained in EU agreements with other countries.

Meanwhile, the Italian government asked the Zedillo administration for a detailed report on the incident. Bruno Cabrias-Melchiori, Italy's ambassador to Mexico City, said his government does not want to endorse or condemn the expulsions, but rather to learn as much as possible about the incident. "The protection and monitoring of human rights in the world is one of the fundamental principles in the policies of Italy and of European countries," said Cabrias-Melchiori. In contrast to the treatment of the Italian visitors, the Mexican government allowed five members of the Canadian Parliament to move freely in several Chiapas communities.

The Canadian delegation, which also visited Chiapas in early May, interviewed supporters of both the PRI and the EZLN. One group of EZLN supporters asked the Canadians to intercede on behalf of hundreds of families who have been displaced from their communities by the 15,000 federal troops in Chiapas. The Canadians said they obtained a promise from Interior Secretary Francisco Labastida that the government would stop sending troops to dismantle newly incorporated autonomous municipalities.

Meanwhile, representatives of Mexico's legislative commission on Chiapas (Comision Nacional de Concordia y Pacificacion, COCOPA) began a series of meetings with Chiapas Gov. Roberto Albores Guillen and other officials to try to defuse the very tense situation in the state. COCOPA leader Carlos Payan Verver of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) said the federal government should shoulder much of the responsibility for the tension because of its policy of direct confrontation with EZLN guerrillas rather than dialogue. Chiapas chief peace negotiator Emilio Rabasa Gamboa in early May asked COCOPA to review a law governing negotiations in Chiapas.

Specifically, members of COCOPA were asked to review a section of the law that designates the church-based Comision Nacional de Intermediacion (CONAI) as mediator in the Chiapas conflict. Rabasa's directive did not ask directly that CONAI be eliminated from the peace process, but a change in the law would make this step possible. SEGOB is bound by law to respect CONAI as a fundamental player in the peace process.

In recent months, CONAI has faced constant criticism from the Zedillo administration for adopting positions "too partial" to the EZLN. The group's position was further undermined when CONAI's founder, Samuel Ruiz, bishop of the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas, acknowledged that "impartiality was impossible" because of the government's failure to comply with terms of the San Andres accord. Even some members of the PRD, which has generally supported CONAI, expressed concern about Ruiz's statement. "If it is now felt that these statements are an obstacle to peace, then another form of mediation should be put into place," said PRD Sen. Ernesto Navarro Gonzalez.

Just a few days before Bishop Ruiz's statement, both the PRD and the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) warned the Zedillo administration against taking any steps to remove CONAI permanently from the peace process. Indigenous-rights legislation delayed in Congress Legislation governing indigenous rights has become bogged down in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. Both bodies completed their regular sessions in early May without considering any bills on the matter.

The Zedillo administration has drafted a proposal that would guarantee the rights of all indigenous communities in Mexico. But EZLN spokespersons have criticized the proposal as inadequate because it falls short of the promises made by the government in the San Andres accords. The PAN delegation in the Senate has drafted a proposal that coincides with the Zedillo plan in most points. PRI and PAN legislators had attempted to reconcile the two proposals, but were unable to resolve differences regarding the PAN's plan to grant indigenous communities limited powers to create autonomous councils.

The PRD has declined to offer its own proposal, seeking instead to form a broad consensus from all sectors, including the EZLN, the PRI, and the PAN. In the end, the PRD convinced the PAN and the PRI to postpone debate on indigenous-rights legislation until a broader plan could be drafted.

Meanwhile, the PRD and the PAN have reached some agreement on a Chiapas plan but disagree on a timetable to develop the plan. The PAN would like to set a deadline for an agreement, while the PRD wants a more flexible timetable. The indigenous-rights issue is scheduled to be discussed in a special legislative session proposed for May 26 to June 2. However, other pressing matters such as financial reform and changes to the electoral code will be competing for time during the two-week session. Once the session is completed, legislators will not reconvene until September. (Sources: The Miami Herald, 04/16/98; The Washington Post, 04/19/98; El Economista, 04/15/98, 04/24/98; El Nacional, 04/17/98, 04/27/98; Proceso, 04/26/98, 05/03/98; Notimex, 04/23/98, 05/06/98; Agence France-Presse, 05/08/98; Spanish news service EFE, 04/23/98, 05/10/98; Reuter, 05/06/98, 05/09/98, 05/11/98; Associated Press, 04/13/98, 04/30/98, 05/06/98, 05/11/98; The New York Times, 05/08/98, 05/12/98; Excelsior, 05/07/98, 05/08/98, 05/11/98, 05/12/98; Novedades, 04/14/98, 04/15/98, 04/22/98, 04/23/98, 05/12/98; The News, 04/02/98, 04/15/98, 04/16/98, 04/23/98, 04/28/98, 05/05/98, 05/07/98,

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