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Legislative Commission to Expand Role in Chiapas Peace Negotiations

by LADB Staff

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The special legislative commission on Chiapas (Comision Nacional de Concordia y Pacificacion, COCOPA) has been asked to take a more assertive role in negotiating a peaceful solution to growing conflicts in Chiapas. The role of COCOPA has become more important because of the dissolution of the church-based mediation organization (Comite Nacional de Intermediacion, CONAI) following the resignation of its founder and director, Roman Catholic Bishop Samuel Ruiz, in early June.

At a June 7 mass, Bishop Ruiz said CONAI could no longer function because the government had "abandoned the path of dialogue" and was promoting a "constant and growing aggression" against him and his diocese. COCOPA will expand role after demise of CONAI. Rather than function without Ruiz's leadership, the nine other CONAI members announced the dissolution of the organization. They said the continuing military buildup in Chiapas, the dismantling of pro-Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) autonomous communities, and a government campaign to discredit CONAI led to the decision to disband the organization. "We cannot continue to function when the government insists on destroying the conditions necessary for peace and dialogue," said the CONAI members.

At the same time, CONAI urged the EZLN to seek a political solution to the structural injustices in Chiapas, in the face of "government provocations." Bishop Ruiz formed CONAI in October 1994, almost one year after the uprising of the EZLN. COCOPA's existence was also questioned in 1997, when some members of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) proposed disbanding the commission because of its "ineffectiveness" in bringing peace to Chiapas. After much debate, the Chamber of Deputies and Senate agreed to resurrect COCOPA (see SourceMex, 10/08/97).

The dissolution of CONAI and growing tensions between the armed forces and PRI supporters on one side and sympathizers of the EZLN on the other have made it more urgent that COCOPA step up its mediation efforts. Armed forces continue to dismantle autonomous communities. In several instances since the beginning of this year, federal soldiers and members of the Chiapas state police have moved into autonomous communities created by EZLN sympathizers.

As of mid-April, EZLN supporters had declared 38 municipalities as autonomous communities in defiance of state and federal authorities. In the most recent case, in early June, a gun battle between government security forces and EZLN sympathizers resulted in at least eight deaths. The incident was considered the worst armed conflict in Chiapas since January 1994. The conflict arose when government forces, which included 500 federal soldiers and several state security forces, entered the community of El Bosque to dismantle the autonomous township of San Juan de la Libertad, established by EZLN sympathizers. Most of the dead were EZLN sympathizers.

In a recent case in May, which attracted international publicity, several hundred Italian observers defied a government blockade to visit the autonomous community Ricardo Flores Magnon in the township of Taniperlas. The Italian observers were immediately deported, creating controversy just when the European Parliament was voting on whether to ratify the terms of negotiation for a free-trade agreement between Mexico and the European Union (see SourceMex, 05/13/98 and 05/20/98).

As a result of events in El Bosque, the government-affiliated Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) has launched an investigation of charges that the EZLN sympathizers did not die in battle but were executed by the armed forces. The investigation is being conducted at the request of the Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolome de las Casas, based in the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas.

Other independent human rights organizations have also questioned the government's account that blamed the battle on a rebel ambush. "Officially it's being called an ambush, but we see it as an attempt to restart hostilities," said Julian Cruzalta, a spokesperson for the Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Francisco Vittoria. In response to the charges, the government's chief Chiapas peace negotiator, Emilio Rabasa Gamboa, said the army participated in the raid on El Bosque at the request of the state police. "This does not mean an end to the cease-fire with the EZLN," Rabasa said in a press statement.

The EZLN, meanwhile, has remained silent in the midst of the recent violent confrontations between its supporters and the armed forces. EZLN leaders have rejected all government overtures to hold further peace negotiations. Instead, the EZLN has accused President Ernesto Zedillo's administration of failing to implement the San Andres accords reached in January 1996, which guaranteed the rights of indigenous communities (see SourceMex, 12/11/97 and 02/21/96).

Citing the "grave deterioration" in Chiapas, COCOPA members requested an urgent meeting with Rabasa and Interior Secretary Francisco Labastida to discuss a strategy to bring peace to the embattled state. Sen. Carlos Payan Volver of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), who led the COCOPA delegation, said legislators and the administration agreed to continue efforts to resume a dialogue with the EZLN. COCOPA extracted a promise from Rabasa that the army would stop dismantling the autonomous communities. COCOPA seeks to open dialogue with EZLN. As part of the commission's new role to seek peace in Chiapas, COCOPA members traveled to the community of La Realidad, located close to EZLN headquarters. They gave a letter to the leader of a local collective farm to present to EZLN leaders. The letter urged the EZLN to resume a peace dialogue with COCOPA. "We come not as representatives of the state or governments, but on our own accord," said COCOPA leader Deputy German Martinez Caceres of the PAN. "We hope to arrange a meeting as soon as possible between COCOPA and the EZLN."

The collective-farm leader who received the COCOPA letter, known only as Miguel, said he could not promise that the document would be delivered. "We have no contact with the EZLN leadership," said Miguel. "We will give it to them if they come down from the mountain." In a press conference following the visit to La Realidad, Martinez reiterated COCOPA's determination to initiate contact with the EZLN. "We are prepared to take whatever steps are necessary to promote dialogue instead of violence as a solution to the problems in Chiapas," said Martinez. Another

COCOPA member, PRD Sen. Payan, used the press conference to criticize the policies of the Zedillo administration and Chiapas Gov. Roberto Albores Guillen regarding the autonomous communities. "The participation of the federal army has deepened the tension in the region," said Payan. "In my view, this is a very unfortunate development."

The COCOPA visit to Chiapas came only days after 161 PRD federal and local legislators met in Tlaxcala state to forge a declaration pledging to withdraw from political-reform talks with the Zedillo administration unless the government stops violent acts against communities and organizations working for peace in Chiapas. (Sources: Notimex, 06/08/98; Los Angeles Times, 06/09/98, 06/11/98; The Washington Post, 06/12/98; CNN, 06/11/98, 06/13/98; The Dallas Morning News, 06/09/98, 06/14/98; Spanish news service EFE, 06/08/98, 06/09/98, 06/15/98; The News, 06/08/98, 06/11/98, 06/12/98, 06/16/98; Associated Press, 06/08/98, 06/11/98, 06/13/98, 06/16/98; Novedades, 06/08/98, 06/09/98, 06/11/98, 06/12/98, 06/16/98, 06/17/98; El Universal, La Jornada, Excelsior, 06/08/98, 06/09/98, 06/11/98, 06/12/98, 06/15-17/98; Reuters, 06/08/98, 06/11/98, 06/17/98; The New York Times, 06/09/98, 06/17/98; El Economista, 06/11/98, 06/12/98, 06/15-17/98)

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