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## Zapatista Leaders Willing to Resume Contact with Legislative Commission

by LADB Staff

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After a prolonged silence, the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) announced its willingness to resume negotiations with the Chiapas legislature's peace commission (Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion, COCOPA). In a communique addressed to COCOPA in late October, EZLN leader Subcomandante Marcos offered to "reconstruct a bridge" with the legislative commission to jump-start the peace process. Marcos said the Zapatistas were willing to begin discussions "under the same terms" that were on the table when dialogue was suspended. The EZLN and COCOPA last met face to face in January 1997.

Members of the multiparty commission attempted to initiate dialogue with the EZLN in June of this year, following the dissolution of the church-based Comite Nacional de Intermediacion (CONAI). However, COCOPA was unable to make contact with the EZLN at that time (see SourceMex, 06/17/98). COCOPA members were initially encouraged by the EZLN's move to restart the peace negotiations.

At a special meeting following the release of the EZLN communique, COCOPA members drafted a resolution urging the Zapatista leadership to set a date and location for a meeting as soon as possible. "We cannot continue to delay the peace process indefinitely," said Deputy Felipe de Jesus Vicencio Alvarez, who holds COCOPA's rotating chair. EZLN declines to meet with Zedillo administration. In the recent communique, Marcos said the offer for dialogue was directed only to COCOPA and not to the executive branch, which has failed to move away from its "warlike" attitude. "Maybe the mistake was to assume COCOPA could be a bridge to the government, and that, with the help of that bridge, we could reach peace," said the EZLN statement.

But Vicencio Alvarez of the center-right opposition Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) said COCOPA continues to view its role as a facilitator rather than a mediator. "The government has shown some willingness to eventually resume mediation," said Vicencio. "But for this to happen, a meeting between the EZLN and COCOPA is necessary." Alvarez and other COCOPA members said any peace negotiations with the EZLN must be facilitated by a special peace mediator. The government and the EZLN must determine whether this mediator is Mexican or a foreigner, said Alvarez.

Several human rights organizations in Mexico have called for Mary Robinson, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, to play a significant role in selecting a mediator for eventual peace talks in Chiapas. COCOPA was instrumental in drafting agreements negotiated by then Chiapas chief negotiator Manuel Camacho Solis and EZLN leaders in February 1996. These agreements developed guidelines on the rights of indigenous communities (see SourceMex, 02/21/96).

But President Ernesto Zedillo's administration backed off from the agreements later that year, arguing that they violated the Mexican Constitution and threatened to tear the country apart. The

administration's position caused the talks to collapse. While contact between the EZLN and the government has remained minimal since late 1996, conflicts have escalated in Chiapas between supporters of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and Zapatista sympathizers. Tensions exploded in December 1997 after paramilitary groups sympathetic to the PRI massacred 45 Tzotzil Indians in the Chiapas village of Acteal (see SourceMex, 01/07/98).

The conflicts between PRI and EZLN supporters are exacerbated by the presence of thousands of soldiers in Chiapas. The federal army has assisted state law enforcement officials in retaking some villages in Chiapas that EZLN supporters had declared autonomous communities (see SourceMex, 05/13/98).

### *EZLN calls for national consultation in November*

In addition to the message to COCOPA, the EZLN directed a statement to nongovernmental organizations and civil society at large calling for a national consultation on the original peace agreement drafted under Camacho and COCOPA. The EZLN called for the consultation to be held in San Cristobal de las Casas on Nov. 20-22. "If the federal government does not want peace, we would like to think others in Mexican society want peace," said the EZLN statement. "We would like to extend our hand to them." The Zedillo administration responded in a positive manner to the EZLN's proposal to renew dialogue with COCOPA.

But the government's Chiapas peace negotiator, Emilio Rabasa Gamboa, urged the EZLN to "convert its pronouncements" into decisions and proposals that will provide a solution to the conflict. "The government will provide all the necessary tools for the EZLN and COCOPA to come together," said Rabasa. At the same time, Rabasa also denied the EZLN's assertions that the Zedillo administration was seeking only a military solution to the conflict in Chiapas. "President Zedillo has repeatedly mentioned his determination to use dialogue and negotiation to reach a definite solution to the conflict," he said.

### *US Congress introduces nonbinding resolution on Chiapas*

The EZLN communiqués were issued less than a week after the US House of Representatives and Senate introduced a joint nonbinding resolution urging US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to push for a quick and peaceful solution to the conflict in Chiapas. Among other things, the resolution urges Albright to ensure that Mexico use US military assistance for its intended purpose of combatting drug trafficking and not for violating human rights in Chiapas.

The resolution also calls on Mexico to respect the rights of US citizens and other foreigners who monitor human rights in Mexico. Rabasa and other administration officials criticized the US Congress for interfering in Mexico's internal affairs. "In no way" will Mexico be influenced by foreign attempts to resolve the Chiapas conflict, said Rabasa.

The US congressional resolution coincided with a similar recommendation presented by an organization of Latin American and Caribbean political parties (Conferencia Permanente de Partidos Políticos de América Latina y el Caribe, Copppal). The recommendation urged Mexico to take "any necessary steps to reduce tensions in Chiapas and foster the resumption of peace negotiations.

But Coppal stopped short of proposing the withdrawal of the military from Chiapas, since the president of the organization is PRI leader Mariano Palacios Alcocer. (Sources: Reuters, 10/18/98, 10/19/98; Associated Press, El Universal, 10/19/98; The News, 10/13/98, 10/15/98, 10/20/98; Novedades, 10/19/98, 10/20/98; The Dallas Morning News, 10/20/98; Spanish news service EFE, 10/12/98, 10/18/98, 10/19/98, 10/21/98; La Jornada, 10/08/98, 10/12/98, 10/18-20/98, 10/23/98, 10/27/98; Excelsior, 10/14/98, 10/19/98, 10/20/98, 10/27/98; El Economista, 10/19/98, 10/20/98, 10/21/98, 10/27/98)

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