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Zapatistas, Legislative Commission Resume Contacts

by LADB Staff

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The Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) and the congressional peace commission on Chiapas (Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion, COCOPA) reopened lines of communication following difficult meetings in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas state, Nov. 20-22. The Zapatistas were transported to the meeting in San Cristobal with the assistance of the International Red Cross.

COCOPA members said the meetings did not yield any significant breakthroughs but broke down barriers present when the two sides first met on Nov. 20. The talks began in an atmosphere of distrust, with the EZLN delegation refusing to shake the outstretched hands of COCOPA members. The EZLN then accused COCOPA members of racism for failing to provide adequate lodging arrangements for the 29 members of the Zapatista delegation. The EZLN members said they were housed in facilities with rusty cots, nonusable toilets, and no fax line.

Frustrated with the EZLN's refusal to address "substantive" issues, COCOPA members threatened to end the talks on the second day and escort the Zapatistas back to their headquarters in the Lacandon Jungle. But some members of nongovernmental organizations said the EZLN attitude was a symptom of deep Zapatista mistrust for COCOPA, which has failed to stand up to President Ernesto Zedillo's policies in Chiapas since talks between the government and the EZLN broke down in 1996. "This had nothing to do with toilets and beds," prominent human rights leader Mariclaire Acosta told the Washington Post. "There's a very legitimate anger on the part of the Zapatistas toward this commission."

Despite the conflicts during the first two days, EZLN and COCOPA members held a productive meeting the third day. "This was a positive and encouraging meeting because we were able to foster a climate of trust and respect, which will allow further meetings between the EZLN and COCOPA," said commission chair Deputy Javier Guerrero of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Another COCOPA member, Deputy Felipe Vicencio Alvarez of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), said the commission promised to strongly consider an EZLN request for legislators to assist in setting up a national consultation on a Zapatista indigenous-rights initiative (see SourceMex, 10/28/98).

"A political initiative such as a national consultation is welcomed because it provides an alternative to a violent resolution to the conflict in Chiapas," said Vicencio Alvarez. EZLN says government must recognize 1996 accords But the EZLN delegation led by Comandante David, Comandante Tacho, and Comandante Zebedeo left little opening for a resumption of direct negotiations with the Zedillo administration. The Zapatistas told COCOPA they would not return to the negotiating table unless the government met five demands, including implementation of the San Andres accords on indigenous rights, which were negotiated in 1996 under the direction of then Chiapas peace negotiator Manuel Camacho Solis. The accords were signed by Zedillo but never submitted to Congress (see SourceMex, 03/12/97).

"If the federal government does not want to meet its commitments, there is no sense in returning to the dialogue," Tacho told reporters. But the EZLN leader also reiterated the Zapatista's intention to resolve the conflict without violence. "We want a peaceful and political solution to the conflict," Tacho said. Prominent EZLN leader Subcomandante Marcos did not accompany the delegation for security reasons. However, Marcos issued a taped statement to a gathering of 3,000 representatives of nongovernmental organizations in San Cristobal de las Casas. "Our immediate direction is toward a fight against neoliberal economic policies," Marcos said. "This economic model is not only unjust, but its objective is to destroy Mexico as a sovereign and independent nation."

The nongovernmental groups agreed to support the Zapatista effort to launch a nationwide political mobilization in support of indigenous rights. Under the EZLN plan, 5,000 supporters would be dispersed nationwide to start the effort in the hope of affecting national elections in 2000. Meanwhile, the EZLN delegation rejected two proposals sent by the Zedillo administration through COCOPA. EZLN spokespersons said COCOPA was not the appropriate vehicle to present the proposals, since the legislative commission was acting only as mediator and not negotiator.

COCOPA took on a greater mediating role when the church-based mediation organization *Comite Nacional de Intermediacion (CONAI)* was dissolved in June of this year (see *SourceMex*, 06/17/98). Some COCOPA members expressed frustration with the administration and particularly at deputy Chiapas peace commissioner Alan Arias for publicizing the proposals before the meetings with the EZLN. "This announcement made by Arias before the meetings eliminated any positive reaction by the EZLN to the proposals," said *Vicencio Alvarez*. Another COCOPA member, Deputy *Gilberto Lopez y Rivas* of the PRD, said the commission could not refuse the administration's request to present the proposals to the EZLN because the government lacked other means to communicate the offers to the Zapatistas. "We were well aware of our role as mediators and not negotiators," said *Lopez y Rivas*, "but we were the only option, given the absence of a true negotiating team."

While Arias informed news media about the administration's proposals, his announcements did not give details about their content. A handful of reporters was allowed to view a copy of the proposals as long as they did not take notes. The weekly news magazine *Proceso* said the administration was in essence proposing a "reciprocal" withdrawal of military forces and the opening of a preliminary dialogue "without any conditions."

Earlier in November, Chiapas Gov. *Roberto Albores Guillen* proposed an initiative to disarm paramilitary groups in Chiapas. The presence of paramilitary groups, many of which support the PRI, has been a major stumbling block to restoring peace in Chiapas. Paramilitary groups are blamed for attacks on EZLN supporters in Chiapas, including the massacre in *Acteal* in December 1997 (see *SourceMex*, 01/07/98). [Sources: Spanish news service *EFE*, 11/10/98, 11/19/98; *El Universal*, 11/10/98, 11/23/98; *Novedades*, 11/23/98; *El Economista*, 11/19/98, 11/23/98, 11/24/98; *The Washington Post*, 11/24/98; *La Jornada*, 11/13/98, 11/23/98, 11/24/98, 11/25/98; *Excelsior*, 11/23/98, 11/24/98, 11/27/98; *Proceso*, 11/29/98; *The News*, 11/11/98, 11/19/98 11/30/98]

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