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## **Government's Road Construction Program Raises Tensions in Chiapas**

*by Guest*

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In his Sept. 1 State of the Union address, President Ernesto Zedillo recited a litany of accomplishments, including the construction of thousands of kilometers of rural roads, which will bring social progress to remote communities in Mexico. Zedillo's address failed to mention Chiapas state in any form, much less the long-simmering conflict between his government and the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN).

But Chiapas remains high on the list of beneficiaries of the government's program to expand rural highways, particularly the southeastern jungles where the EZLN has been trapped for the past five years. This campaign to build rural roads literally paved the way for the military offensive that drove the EZLN leadership deep into the internationally protected Montes Azules biosphere in February 1995 (see SourceMex, 1995-02-15).

In the wake of the offensive, the government escorted 17,000 refugees sympathetic to the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) back into the jungle. This policy inflamed enmities between supporters of the EZLN and PRI sympathizers, particularly in the eight canyons that feed into the heart of the Lacandon Jungle. Under the pretext of peacekeeping, the government then established military garrisons on the edges of dozens of Tzeltal and Tojolabal villages throughout the region.

Road construction was expedited in the following months to accommodate convoys of US-built armored vehicles and light tanks that patrol the canyons and to connect up newly established jungle camps for resupply. The road from the one-time EZLN command post of Guadalupe Tepeyac, now a nerve center for military operations in the canyons, to bases at the Euseba River and San Quintin was completed in 1995 soon after the February incursion. The road intersects with the EZLN's most public civil enclave, La Realidad, in the mountains southeast of the area where Subcomandante Marcos and other EZLN leaders are encamped.

Mexican army convoys and Zapatista supporters invited to encounters with the rebels in their Aguascalientes cultural center have been the road's main users. EZLN supporters clash with army & PRI sympathizers. The road construction has been a constant source of tension between the government and EZLN supporters. However, conflicts have escalated significantly in recent weeks. In late July, masked rebels torched construction equipment clearing a 19-km track from San Quintin through the Amador Valley on the outskirts of the Montes Azules sanctuary.

The new road was built to connect the region with the busy thoroughfares leading to the cities of Las Margaritas and Ocosingo and with the 1000-km stretch of paved highway paralleling the Guatemalan border. But it is no coincidence that this configuration encircles the EZLN command camps and the civil communities that sustain them. On Aug. 15, pro-Zapatista Tzeltal villagers from Amador Hernandez sought to stop the road from penetrating their community, but troops subdued protesters with plastic truncheons and tear gas. The news of the confrontations brought an observer delegation, including actress Ofelia Medina and striking students from the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), to Amador Hernandez.

The arrival of the observer group led Chiapas Gov. Roberto Albores Guillen to issue an order to arrest the "outside agitators" if they did not immediately leave the state. Albores' statements were used as a rallying cry by villagers sympathetic to the PRI, who severely beat three human rights observers, including a Mexican doctor. On Aug. 25, tensions were raised further after an army patrol arbitrarily detained three Indian farmers returning from their fields near San Jose de la Esperanza, between La Realidad and Amador Hernandez.

Enraged villagers who sought to rescue the men were repelled by army gunfire, resulting in the most serious confrontation between the army and EZLN supporters in more than a year. In May 1998, 10 villagers were killed during an army takeover of the rebel autonomous municipality of San Juan de La Libertad (El Bosque) in the highlands (see SourceMex, 1998-05-13).

The alarming escalation in the Lacandon Jungle brought a response from EZLN supporters all over the country. US and European networks were activated, and, for the first time since the 1997 massacre of 46 Zapatista supporters at Acteal, demonstrators appeared outside Mexican embassies and consulates. Legislative commission seeks to ease tensions The possibility of war also stirred concerns among members of the congressional Chiapas peace commission (Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion, COCOPA).

After visiting the region in the wake of recent violence, COCOPA leaders Carlos Payan and Gilberto Lopez y Rivas denounced the military assault on San Jose de la Esperanza as a possible violation of the still-standing dialogue law that has protected the Zapatistas from army attack since 1995.

In a high profile meeting with Interior Secretary Diodoro Carrasco and Chiapas coordinator Emilio Rabasa, COCOPA members exacted a pledge from the Zedillo administration that the road to Amador Hernandez would be rerouted. But in a follow-up visit to Amador Hernandez on Aug. 27, COCOPA members found no evidence that road construction had been halted. In fact, villagers continue to face off daily with a military detachment that has dug in for the duration.

Despite COCOPA efforts to ease tensions in the area, war fever is very evident in the canyons of southeastern Chiapas. Dozens of military, state police, and immigration check points have been established on the roads that converge in San Quintin from Las Margaritas and Ocosingo. Vehicles are vigorously searched at 10-km intervals, and many Mexican citizens not carrying identification are cited to appear before immigration authorities. Road construction in the conflict zone is one solid leg of the Zedillo government's strategy to encircle and isolate the EZLN base.

But the military encroachment on Zapatista outposts in the Lacandon canyons is accompanied by political imposition as well. Gov. Albores has created seven new municipalities or counties in areas where the EZLN had formed autonomous communities five years ago.

The new municipalities, which will be managed by PRI sympathizers, are financed by Chiapas industrialists and protected by military garrisons. These municipalities are being connected by the rural roads under construction. The road construction has succeeded in isolating the EZLN command. After declaring that the "army is now at our backs," Subcomandante Marcos disappeared into the jungle mountains on Aug. 15 after a meeting with supporters.

The crisis atmosphere in the canyons has some supporters fearing that a final assault on the EZLN command is imminent. But Luis Hernandez, a columnist with the daily newspaper La Jornada, suggests the government's intentions are not to attack the EZLN but to keep the rebels isolated ahead of the 2000 presidential elections. In March of this year, the EZLN pledged to consolidate ties with other militant struggles in Mexico following a political referendum on indigenous rights.

The referendum drew more than 3 million participants (see SourceMex, 1999-03-24). EZLN leaders have held consultations in recent months with such varied groups as independent school teachers, electrical workers, anthropologists, and university students. These groups are united by what they claim are the Zedillo administration efforts to "sell out" to the private sector. But the administration's plan to isolate the EZLN was most clearly stated by Chiapas peace coordinator Rabasa, who said the contacts with the Zapatistas are "contaminating" other movements.

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