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Senate Appoints Jose Luis Soberanes as Director of Human Rights Commission

by LADB Staff

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The Mexican Senate has voted to approve jurist Jose Luis Soberanes Fernandez as the new director of the government-sponsored human rights agency (Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos, CNDH). Soberanes, former director of the Instituto de Investigaciones Juridicas at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), received nearly unanimous support from the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). Most members of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) abstained from voting.

Soberanes will take office immediately and serve until 2004. Senators bypass former director Mireille Roccatti by approving Soberanes, the Senate removed President Ernesto Zedillo's appointee Mireille Roccatti from the post. In June of this year, Congress approved changes to the Constitution to give the CNDH greater independence. A key change was to remove the power of the executive branch to appoint the commission's director and transfer this function to the Senate (see SourceMex, 1999-06-30).

The Senate had the option of reappointing Roccatti, who was one of nine candidates under consideration. But some senators from the PRD announced early on that they would oppose Roccatti because they were not pleased with her job performance. PRD president Sen. Amalia Garcia said Congress gave the CNDH a mandate to increase its independence from the executive, but failed to do so under Roccatti's leadership. The Senate's appointment of Soberanes effectively ended Roccatti's term more than a year ahead of schedule. Roccatti had been scheduled to serve as CNDH director until January, 2001.

On the day Soberanes' appointment was approved, the Tijuana-based Centro de Apoyo al Migrante (CAM) filed a formal complaint against Roccatti for the CNDH's failure to act more forcefully in the face of US restrictions against undocumented immigrants. The US Border Patrol's Operation Guardian, which tightened vigilance at traditional crossing points in California, forced Mexican immigrants to cross into the US in more remote and dangerous areas, which has resulted in scores of deaths (see SourceMex, 1998-08-12, 1999-09-01)

In accepting the post, Soberanes pledged he would not "politicize" the CNDH. "I will need the cooperation of everyone, from civil organizations and political parties to the communications media and the government," said Soberanes. "As everyone knows, the CNDH has moral authority, but not physical enforcement capabilities to perform its function."

Questions surround new appointee

Soberanes' appointment has not been without controversy. Some PRD senators raised concerns about reports that Soberanes has been affiliated with the ultraright Roman Catholic organization

Opus Dei. "I am not questioning his religious preferences, but the links to Opus Dei," said PRD Sen. Mario Saucedo. "In Mexico, that organization has been linked to the power structures on the political right."

Nongovernmental human rights organizations said they would take a wait-and-see stance on Soberanes. Alfredo Castillo, director of the Miguel Agustin Pro Juarez human rights center, said his organization is concerned because Soberanes' stance on individual rights is totally unknown. "He has strong academic credentials, but we do not know where he really stands," said Castillo. Castillo said the organization would have preferred that the Senate select one of the other candidates who had taken more of an activist role in promoting human rights, such as Guadalupe Morfin, Luis de la Barreda Solorzano, or Miguel Sarre.

But the leader of another organization expressed doubt that the CNDH could change much, regardless of which candidate gained the Senate appointment. Rosario Ibarra, director of the *Comite pro Defensa de Presos, Perseguidos, Desaparecidos y Exiliados Politicos de Mexico*, questioned whether the commission could move away from its traditional role of covering up the illicit activities of the government. "We have no confidence that this role is going to end," Ibarra told the daily newspaper *El Universal*.

One of Soberanes' first tasks will be to help coordinate a visit by Mary Robinson, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Robinson, who will visit Mexico Nov. 23-28, will meet with Foreign Relations Secretary Rosario Green and Attorney General Jorge Madrazo Cuellar and will address the Mexican Congress.

Robinson is scheduled to visit Chiapas state on Nov. 27, where she will hold separate meetings with controversial Gov. Roberto Albores Guillen and retiring Roman Catholic Bishop Samuel Ruiz of the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas. The meeting with Bishop Ruiz will also involve indigenous women from the town of Acteal, the site of a paramilitary massacre of supporters of the *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN)* in December 1997 (see *SourceMex*, 1998-01-07). Robinson's trip will include a stop in the Mexican border city of Tijuana, where she will look into complaints of mistreatment of Mexican emigrants to the US. (Sources: *Notimex*, 11/11/99; *Excelsior*, 11/01/99, 11/11/99, 11/13/99; *Reforma*, 11/04/99, 11/09/99, 11/10/99, 11/12/99, 11/13/99; *Novedades*, 10/20/99, 11/05/99, 11/17/99; *La Jornada*, 10/28/99, 11/09/99, 11/10/99, 11/17/99; *El Universal*, 11/04/99, 11/12/99, 11/17/99)

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