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Critics Say Transfer Of Bishop Raul Vera From Chiapas Diocese Is Politically Motivated

by LADB Staff
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In a controversial decision, the Vatican transferred Bishop Raul Vera Lopez out of the embattled Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas, raising concerns that his departure was influenced by President Ernesto Zedillo's administration and the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Vera, widely expected to succeed retiring Bishop Samuel Ruiz in San Cristobal, was instead appointed to head the Diocese of Saltillo in the northern state of Coahuila. He will take over the Coahuila diocese March 19. Ruiz, a strong defender of the rights of indigenous communities in Chiapas, announced his retirement at the end of 1999, after reaching the mandatory retirement age of 75 last year (see SourceMex, December 1, 1999). He will officially leave his post Jan. 25. Vera had been named coadjutor bishop in the Chiapas diocese in 1995 to assist Ruiz. At that time, many of Ruiz's followers feared Vera was sent to San Cristobal de las Casas to monitor Ruiz's activities. But after witnessing repression against indigenous sympathizers of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN), Vera became an outspoken critic of the Mexican army and the governing PRI. "Instead of seeing the situation resolved over the past four years, I have seen it deteriorate," Vera said in an interview with the daily newspaper El Universal.

Vera criticized governing party
Vera said the PRI-led federal government and administration of Chiapas Gov. Roberto Albores appeared to have no desire to promote social justice in the state and instead wanted indigenous communities to continue living under the domination of an elite. "The PRI could have already resolved the conflict if the party had not adopted a strategy of trying to destroy all opposition forces in Chiapas," Vera told El Universal. Some church groups, human rights organizations, and members of opposition parties have gone as far as to accuse the Zedillo administration of lobbying the Vatican to remove Vera from the diocese because of his outspoken criticism of government policies in Chiapas. "We are greatly concerned about the government's actions in the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas to discredit our work," said local human-rights activist Juan Banuelos. "The government has expelled priests, allowed paramilitary groups to close down churches, and embarked on a campaign of disinformation to blame the diocese as an agent of violence." Opposition politicians said Vera's transfer would weaken the clergy's efforts to mediate in the conflict between the government and the EZLN, stalemated since peace talks fell apart after the government failed to recognize an agreement on indigenous rights negotiated in February 1996 (see SourceMex, February 21, 1996). "This was a political decision consistent with the Mexican state, which for a long time has claimed that the church should regain control of the situation in Chiapas," said independent Sen. Adolfo Aguilar Zinser. But Foreign Relations Secretary Rosario Green dismissed the speculation, saying the government had nothing to do with Vera's transfer. "What you are suggesting is that the Foreign Relations Secretariat is a super powerful entity that can influence the decisions of the pontiff," Green told reporters. The Vatican also went out of its way to defend the transfer of Bishop Vera to the Saltillo Diocese, the country's largest diocese. "He is a good pastor and deserved the reward of a more serene diocese," Archbishop Justo Mullor, the
Vatican representative in Mexico, said in a press conference. Catholic Church officials also denied that the church had abandoned its indigenous constituencies in Chiapas. A Vatican statement said Vera's departure "will certainly not diminish the church's commitment in favor of civil peace and the spiritual and humane promotion" in the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas. Retiring Bishop Ruiz, in an effort to ease tensions over Vera's transfer, said he was not concerned that the decision could spark civil unrest in the diocese. "We do not fear a rupture in the diocese," Ruiz told reporters.

**Speculation grows about successor to Samuel Ruiz**

Mexican Catholic Church officials, meanwhile, have presented the Vatican with a list of possible successors to Bishop Ruiz. The daily newspaper Novedades said the appointment could turn into a power struggle between Papal Nuncio Mullor and church organizations in the San Cristobal de las Casas Diocese. Some diocesan organizations, such as the Centro Antonio Montesinos, Mujeres para el Dialogo, and Servicio de Asesoria para la Paz, urged the Vatican not to appoint a bishop whose ideas are "contrary to those espoused by Bishop Ruiz. The weekly news magazine Proceso reported rumors that the Vatican was strongly considering appointing conservative Felipe Padilla, the coadjutor of the Tehuantepec Diocese, to the post in San Cristobal de las Casas. Proceso said Padilla has had numerous disagreements with Tehuantepec Bishop Arturo Lona, a staunch advocate of Liberation Theology and the preferential option for the poor. The rumors about Padilla's appointments were quickly dismissed by Papal Nuncio Mullor. Proceso said other likely candidates to replace Ruiz are Bishops Felipe Arizmendi of the Chiapas diocese of Tapachula and Felipe Aguirre of Tuxtla Gutierrez. Other names that have surfaced are Hector Gonzalez Martinez, archbishop of Oaxaca; Oaxaca Auxiliary Bishop Miguel Alba Diaz; Merida Archbishop Emilio Carlos Belie Belauizaran; and Bishop Jose Luis Dibildox, a Jesuit who heads the Tarahumara Diocese in Chihuahua state. Proceso said Dibildlox has been a strong defender of the rights of indigenous and mezitio communities and an outspoken critic of militarization and drug trafficking. "If Jose Luis Dibildox is appointed Bishop of San Cristobal, this would be a great development for Chiapas," said fellow Jesuit Ricardo Robles. "But this would represent a great loss for the Tarahumara Indians." (Sources: The New York Times, 12/31/99; Reforma, 01/04/00, 01/11/00; Excelsior, 01/04/00, 01/05/00, 01/13/00; El Universal, 01/13/00; Reuters, 01/06/00, 01/13/00, 01/14/00; The Dallas Morning News, 01/14/00; Proceso, 01/02/00, 01/09/00, 01/16/00; Notimex, 01/17/00; La Jornada, 12/31/99, 01/06/00, 01/07/00, 01/11/00, 01/13/00, 01/18/00; Novedades, The News, 01/18/00)