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Tensions Escalate After Government Sends More Troops And Federal Police To Chiapas Conflict Zone

by LADB Staff
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Tensions escalated between the government and sympathizers of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) after authorities dispatched hundreds of soldiers, state police, and federal anti-terrorism police (Policia Federal Preventiva, PFP) to the community of Chenalho in the Chiapas highlands. The military and police units were sent to the area allegedly to disarm paramilitary groups, who are said to have assassinated three Tzotzil Indians and wounded two others during an attack in early May. Authorities said the attack resulted from a personal dispute over land and had no political implications. "I insist, it's a family matter stemming from land disputes," said Interior Secretary Diodoro Carrasco Altamirano, who denied rumors that the EZLN might have been involved in the attacks. "Chiapas authorities have already identified the aggressors." But the government's decision to send such a large contingent to the area angered human rights organizations and opposition parties. "[This operation] intends to promote an escalation of violence in Chiapas," said a statement from the Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolome de las Casas, affiliated with the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas. The Mexican legislature's Chiapas peace commission (Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion, COCOPA) also criticized the intrusion of armed police and soldiers into Chenalho and nearby Polho, where one of the alleged assassins was said to be hiding out. "This is a delicate matter that could become more complicated in the country's political climate," said COCOPA chairperson Aurora Bazan, a member of the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM).

Deputy Felipe de Jesus Vicencio Alvarez of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) accused the government of attempting to gain control of the area by sending police and army units. "The government has failed to consider the explosive nature of these actions," said Alvarez. Legislators from the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and several independent organizations said the PFP presence in the area is part of a government strategy to eventually remove all indigenous residents from the areas surrounding the protected region of Montes Azules. "[The government] wants to move them to other locations outside the reserve, where they will no longer have access to housing, clinics, schools, and other necessary services," said Mario Hernandez Perez, president of the area's Asociacion Rural de Interes Colectivo (ARIC). The presence of military and police units in Polho is particularly sensitive for residents, since many are survivors of the massacre at Acteal, where paramilitary groups sympathetic to the government assassinated 45 Tzotzil Indians in December 1997 (see SourceMex, 1998-01-07). Polho is also one of the independent communities formed by EZLN sympathizers without government authorization. "We villagers don't have weapons, but we're prepared to die to defend our autonomous municipality," said Polho leader Jose Santis Santis. Bishop Felipe Arizmendi Esquivel of San Cristobal de las Casas also expressed concern about the "environment of insecurity and violence and the excessive militarization" in some communities in northern Chiapas. Arizmendi was appointed by the Vatican in late March to replace retired Bishop Samuel Ruiz (see SourceMex, April 12, 2000).
Zapatista leaders say incursion has electoral implications

The increased presence of the soldiers and police near Chenalho also drew criticism from EZLN leaders. In a letter signed by seven EZLN commanders, the Zapatistas condemned the increased militarization of the Chenalho area as a "desperate attempt to repair the disastrous campaign" of Francisco Labastida, presidential candidate of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Several public-opinion polls indicate Labastida is facing a tougher-than-expected challenge from PAN candidate Vicente Fox Quesada (see SourceMex, May 3, 2000). Meanwhile, two other presidential candidates, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the PRD and Manuel Camacho Solis of the Partido del Centro Democratico (PCD), announced a campaign to seek a "definitive peace" for Chiapas this year, regardless of who wins the July 2 elections. The campaign promotes recognition for the San Andres accords signed with the EZLN in 1996, a proposal to send COCOPA's indigenous-rights initiative to the full Congress, a withdrawal of the PFP and army units from the conflict areas of Chiapas, and control over paramilitaries sympathetic to the PRI. "I would hope that other candidates would adopt this document so we can attain a definitive peace in Chiapas," Cardenas told reporters.

The Zedillo administration has taken some symbolic steps to demonstrate some semblance of a commitment to prosecute illegal activities in Chiapas. In mid-May, a federal court sentenced retired Gen. Julio Cesar Santiago Diaz and police chiefs Roberto Garcia and Martin Mendez to eight years in prison for failing to take sufficient steps to prevent the Acteal massacre. The court found the three officers guilty of "murder by omission." The sentences were based on a report from the Procuraduría General de la Republica. "They were aware of the violence in Acteal, but acted only as bystanders instead of taking action," the PGR report said. "They had sufficient means to intervene and prevent the killings." (Sources: Reuters, 05/09/00; Associated Press, 05/09/00, 05/11/00; Excelsior, 05/11/00, 05/12/00; El Universal, 05/12/00; Proceso, 05/14/00; El Economista, 05/15/00; Notimex, 05/16/00, 05/17/00; The News, 05/19/00; Spanish news service EFE, 05/23/00; La Jornada, 05/04/00, 05/10-12/00, 05/15/00, 05/16/00, 05/18/00, 05/22/00, 05/24/00; Reforma, 05/09/00, 05/12/00, 05/23/00, 05/24/00; El Financiero, 05/19/00, 05/23/00, 05/24/00; Notimex, 05/24/00)

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