4-28-2004

Congress Reactivates Chiapas Peace Commission

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Congress Reactivates Chiapas Peace Commission

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2004-04-28

The Mexican Congress has reactivated its special Chiapas peace commission (Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion, COCOPA), partly in response to increasing tensions between supporters of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) and residents of nearby communities on April 10. COCOPA, a joint committee of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, had been put on the back burner as other matters took precedence in the legislative agenda of the Congress. Sen. Rutilio Escandon, who has been pushing to bring COCOPA back to the forefront, said the decision to reactivate the commission followed reports of violent clashes between residents of the municipality of Zinacatan and their neighbors in the autonomous community of Jecho.

Violence in Zinacatan tied to dispute over water

On the surface, the April 10 conflict appears to have resulted from a decision of authorities to cut off utilities to residents of Jecho, and nearby autonomous communities of Elambo Alto and Elambo Bajo, which are contained within Zinacatan. According to city officials, they cut off water and electrical power to indigenous Tzotzil residents of the three communities last December because they refused to help pay for maintenance of the municipality's utility systems. After coping for more than three months without electricity and water, the residents of the three autonomous communities finally received assistance from thousands of fellow EZLN sympathizers, who traveled to the area with water and other supplies.

The EZLN visitors, who covered their faces with the traditional ski masks worn by Zapatistas, also took the opportunity to hold a rally to commemorate the 85th anniversary of the death of revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata. Upon their departure, the visitors were ambushed by authorities and other residents of Zinacatan. There were no immediate casualties, but dozens of injuries were reported, some serious. The attacks forced hundreds of residents of Jecho to flee the area, mostly to San Cristobal de las Casas, because of concern for their safety.

The residents were able to return to their communities after two weeks because of protection offered by Chiapas Gov. Pablo Salazar Mendiguchea. To prevent further violence, the Salazar administration dispatched 500 state police officers to Nachig, Pashte y Jecho. The governor also ordered water and electricity to be restored to the residents of Jecho and other nearby autonomous communities.

The intervention from the Salazar government was welcomed, but also described as a temporary solution. "We are pushing for effective actions that will guarantee access to water as a fundamental right for all communities, regardless of affiliation," said the Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolome de las Casas.

Municipal authorities clash with autonomous communities

The Chiapas government said a major source of conflict between the Zinacatan government and the autonomous communities was a longstanding dispute over who will control a local well. But
the conflict has deeper roots, linked partially to differing political philosophies among indigenous communities. Communities like Jecho, Elambo Alto, Elambo Bajo, Pashte, and Nachig have fully embraced the model of autonomy and self-rule developed by the EZLN (see SourceMex, 1998-05-13 and 2004-02-18). Under a new structure created by the Zapatistas last year, autonomous communities became linked through Municipios Autonomos Rebeldes Zapatistas (MAREZ) and their leaders became part of governing councils known as Juntas de Buen Gobierno (see SourceMex, 2003-09-17).

Jecho is among the communities that belong to a Junta del buen Gobierno known as Corazon Centrico. The problem for these communities is that they are contained within the municipality of Zinacatan, where residents prefer the traditional system of government and are loyal to the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). The potential for conflict is wider than the Zinacatan municipality.

In early April, representatives of about a dozen indigenous communities, some loyal to the PRD and others to the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), wrote to federal authorities, accusing the EZLN of attempting to extend their governing structure to communities outside its sphere of influence. "These people who call themselves the Zapatistas don't respect the Mexican Constitution, they don't respect our rights, and they don't respect our ways of working and thinking," the letter said.

On the other side of the argument, supporters of the EZLN contend that the traditional political parties are attempting to destroy the model of governance developed by the Zapatistas. "The ambush, aggression and violence against the communities of resistance in Zinacatan were intended to force them to abandon their affiliation with the EZLN," said the non-governmental organization Comision de Apoyo a la Unidad y Reconciliacion Comunitaria (CORECO). Just two weeks after the incident in Zinacatan, reports emerged of aggression against EZLN supporters at a collective farm near the municipality of Tila, which is located northeast of San Cristobal de las Casas.

According to representatives from Consejo de Buen Gobierno Semilla, the aggressors were members of the paramilitary group Paz y Justicia, who forced members of the local collective farm to flee their lands. No other details were immediately available. EZLN criticizes PRD In Zinacatan, EZLN sympathizers directed their criticism not only at PRD Mayor Martin Sanchez Hernandez and his aides, but also at the national party leadership. "[National party leaders] do not care about the good of the people," said representatives from the Junta de Buen Gobierno Corazon Centrico. "All they care about is money, and that is why they associate with caciques (local political strongmen) and paramilitary groups."

National PRD leaders immediately distanced themselves from the actions of the Zinacatan government. "It would be a mistake to label this as a political conflict, when it was clearly a social dispute," said PRD spokesperson Javier Hidalgo. Still, the incident led the party's national council (comite ejecutivo nacional, CEN) to suspend Sanchez Hernandez' party membership. The Zinacatan mayor immediately denounced the decision. "They are simply caving in to the demands of the EZLN's Junta de Buen Gobierno," Sanchez Hernandez said of the PRD leadership.
Bishop Felipe Arizmendi of the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas said the confrontation should not be viewed as simply a local problem but as a symptom of the low priority that state and federal authorities have devoted to the issue of indigenous rights and poverty in Chiapas. This view was echoed by COCOPA member, PRD Sen. Escandon, who called on President Vicente Fox to assume a more active role in promoting dialogue. "The clash in Zinacatan should act a warning to federal authorities [about the explosive situation in the region]." Other legislators were more blunt in their criticism of the Salazar and Fox administrations. "The truth is that there has been no recent effort to make a connection with the EZLN," said PRD Deputy Bernardino Ramos.

Still, the incident has led the Fox administration to put Chiapas higher up on its agenda. Following the Zinacatan incident, Interior Secretary Santiago Creel Miranda held an emergency meeting with COCOPA members to discuss how the executive and legislative branches could work together to restore contact with the EZLN. The Zapatistas have had little contact with the Mexican government after the Congress approved only a diluted version of an indigenous rights bill promoted by the EZLN (see SourceMex, 2001-05-02 and 2001-07-18). "We have to join efforts to restore dialogue," said Fox’s Chiapas Peace Commissioner Luis H. Alvarez. "The social costs of remaining closed are very high." (Sources: El Sol de Mexico, 04/16/04; El Universal, 04/12/04, 04/20/04; Notimex, 04/21/04; Spanish news service EFE, 04/10/04, 04/16/04, 04/25/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 04/20/04, 04/25/04; Unomasuno, 04/12/04, 04/26/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 04/12/04, 04/13/04, 04/19/04, 04/26/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 04/26/04; La Jornada, 04/12-16/04, 04/20/04, 04/21/04, 04/23/04, 04/27/04, 04/28/04)

-- End --