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Zapatistas Issue 'Red Alert''; Offer Scathing Criticism of Presidential Candidates

by LADB Staff  
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After months of near silence, the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) returned to the national headlines with a big splash. First, the Zapatistas created a major stir among the left-leaning political parties and their supporters when EZLN spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos issued a statement criticizing all the major parties that are participating in the 2006 presidential election.

In his criticisms, which were made public in a communique on June 20, Marcos was especially harsh on front-runner Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), drawing some comparisons to reviled ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

Before the public had a chance to digest Marcos' comments on the upcoming election, the EZLN issued a "red alert" the following day, announcing plans to close their offices and send leaders into hiding.

The Zapatistas did not explain the reasons for their alert, asking only that all rebel combatants return to their bases. They also asked foreign supporters to leave rebel communities, or to stay at their own risk. "We are evacuating the members of governing councils and autonomous authorities to ensure their safety," said a statement signed by Marcos. "For an undetermined amount of time, they will carry out their work clandestinely."

Until the statement on the election and the red alert, the only times the rebels made headlines in recent months was when they announced that Marcos was co-authoring a novel and when the Zapatista leader invited a prominent Italian soccer club to play a couple of matches with an EZLN team.

EZLN's red alert puts Mexico on edge

The circumstances that led to the alert were initially shrouded in mystery. The early speculation was that Marcos called the alert because of the incursion of army troops into Zapatista territory. On the day before the alert, the army announced it had raided nearly 3.8 hectares of marijuana plantings in Chiapas on June 15-17. The marijuana was near the area controlled by the EZLN, but there was disagreement within the Fox administration on the exact location of the marijuana fields.

The Secretaria de Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) claimed the marijuana was inside EZLN territory, while the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB) said it was outside. Some observers speculated that the army's incursion into EZLN territory had raised a red flag among the Zapatista leaders, who were said to fear an operation similar to one conducted in early 1995. At that time, former President
Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) ordered the army to arrest Marcos and four other leaders, causing the Zapatistas to retreat (see SourceMex, 1995-02-15).

President Vicente Fox's administration downplayed the significance of the EZLN alert, which it said was called without any sort of provocation. "[The government] affirms categorically that the border zone of Los Altos and the jungles of Chiapas are completely normal," presidential spokesman Ruben Aguilar Valenzuela told a news conference.

**Zapatista leader clarifies statement**

Marcos later issued a statement that partially clarified the EZLN's action. In the communique, distributed on June 23, the rebel leader said the Zapatistas were not planning any sort of military action, and that the red alert was a means to bring Zapatista leaders together from various communities for an important consultation. "Let us clear up, so there won't be any speculation, that this...does not imply any offensive military action on our part," read the EZLN statement.

The communique said EZLN leaders had discussed the possibility of broadening their mission beyond simply advocating for the rights of indigenous peoples. Marcos said various sectors of society had sought the support of the EZLN over the past several years, but the Zapatistas had resisted expanding beyond their indigenous rights agenda.

In recent years, said the communique, the Zapatistas had begun to rethink their position. "[We were touched] by the rage and injustice we heard from farmers, workers, students, teachers, homosexuals," said Marcos, who noted that the results of the internal talks would be released soon.

Some observers speculate that Marcos has been left with making many of the major decisions for the EZLN because top leaders like Commander Tacho, Majors Ana Maria, Alfredo and Benito, and Captain Maribel have left the movement. Some left because of differences with Marcos and others to seek changes in their lives. Tacho, who had a major influence on the policies of the EZLN, "left the movement without apparent reason," wrote Rodulfo Reyes, a reporter for the Mexico City daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy.

**EZLN leader discredits PRD front-runner Lopez Obrador**

The decision of the EZLN to pursue possible avenues to promote change in Mexican society coincides with Marcos' earlier statements repudiating the major political parties in Mexico. The comments criticizing Lopez Obrador and the PRD are not surprising, given the history of animosity between the Zapatistas and the national PRD leadership (see SourceMex, 1997-05-28). The EZLN was conspicuously quiet during the series of rallies supporting Lopez Obrador as he faced the prospect of impeachment (see SourceMex, 2005-05-04).

In his criticism of Lopez Obrador, Marcos suggested that Lopez Obrador's proposals were simply a continuation of the policies of "social liberalism" embraced by ex-president Salinas. Marcos dismissed suggestions that Lopez Obrador was adopting a "populist" agenda, similar to those that brought leftists governments into power in other countries in Latin America. "Lopez Obrador does not offer to return to the 'populist past' that has so scared the economic powers," wrote Marcos.
Without offering specifics, Marcos said Lopez Obrador would simply complete the neoliberal projects that Salinas was unable to complete. Marcos also took issue with Lopez Obrador's mode of governance in Mexico City, suggesting there was a "germ of authoritarianism" in the mayor's administration. Lopez Obrador declined to comment on Marcos' statements, saying that Marcos is entitled to his opinion. "There is no reason for us to become bothered or to become angry," said the mayor.

The Zapatista leader was just as harsh on Roberto Madrazo, the front-runner to gain the nomination for the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). He described Madrazo as a "gangster without scruples" who will go to great lengths to discredit or remove all likely rivals for the nomination. Marcos expressed strong resentment toward the PRI, criticizing its history of electoral fraud and violent repression of students, indigenous peoples and teachers. The party, he said, turned its back on Mexico's indigenous peoples by reneging on an indigenous-rights accord it had negotiated (see SourceMex, 1996-02-21 and 1997-03-12).

The EZLN leader described Santiago Creel and others seeking the presidential nomination for the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) as "mediocre" politicians. Furthermore, he noted that the PAN has been "taken over by the ultra-right," partly in reference to the recent election of Manuel Espino Barrientos as party president (see SourceMex, 2005-03-30). Critics questioned the motives behind Marcos' statements. "His analysis does not offer any new or original criticisms," said Jorge R. Mancillas, a columnist for the Mexico City political newspaper La Crisis.

Similar comments came from Emilio Rabasa Gamboa, who served as Chiapas peace commissioner under former President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000). "[Marcos] has no moral right to judge the political parties or the candidates seeking the presidential nomination in 2006," said Gamboa. Gamboa, a member of the PRI, said Lopez Obrador was offering a legitimate political platform. "[The mayor's] proposals are neither neoliberal nor a continuation of the policies of Salinas," said Gamboa. (Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 06/20/05; El Financiero, 06/21/05; Notimex, 06/23/05; Associated Press, 06/20/04, 06/24/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 06/20-24/05; The Herald-Mexico City, La Jornada, 06/21/05, 06/22/05, 06/24/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 06/20/05, 06/22-24/05; El Universal, 06/20-22, 06/24/05, 06/25/05, 06/27/05; La Crisis, 06/21/04, 06/22/05, 06/24/05, 06/27/05)