5-28-2008

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Recommended Citation
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Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2008-05-28

President Felipe Calderon's administration and the Ejercito Popular Revolucionario (EPR) have agreed to open a dialogue through a special seven-member commission that will act as an intermediary for the guerilla group. The EPR, which last year engaged in some acts of sabotage against government facilities, has refused to hold direct talks with the federal government until authorities in Oaxaca state release two comrades. The problem, says the Calderon government, is that it cannot find any evidence that the two EPR members are being held in Oaxaca or anywhere in Mexico. Still, the agreement by the two sides to negotiate by proxy has raised hopes that some sort of peace agreement will be reached down the road.

The EPR burst into the scene in the mid-1990s on the first anniversary of the massacre of campesino activists in Aguas Blancas in Guerrero state (see SourceMex, 1996-07-17 and 1996-12-18). The group employed violent methods to make its point, unlike the other guerrilla movement in Chiapas, the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN), which emerged at about the same time (see SourceMex, 1996-09-18).

The EPR made a splash with a series of ambushes on rural police and army facilities, but then went underground for about 10 years. The EPR returned to prominence in 2007, with a series of attacks on government facilities, primarily pipelines and other infrastructure belonging to the state-run oil company PEMEX. The attacks resulted in temporary disruptions of service to commercial users in industrial states in central Mexico, but did not cause any long-term damage (see SourceMex, 2007-07-25 and 2007-09-12).

In communiques, the EPR said the attacks were intended to highlight its demands for the release of its two comrades, Edmundo Reyes Amaya and Gabriel Alberto Cruz Sanchez, who it claims are being held by the administration of Oaxaca Gov. Ulises Ruiz. The relatives of Reyes Amaya and Cruz Sanchez have already said they will take the cases to international organizations such as Amnesty International and the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights if the whereabouts of the two EPR members are not revealed.

The EPR, in the meantime, rejected the government's initial proposal that it agree to denounce violence as a condition for dialogue. "As a revolutionary insurgent force, we cannot abandon any means of self-defense that guarantee the integrity and the defense of the people," the organization said in a statement. The administration criticized the EPR's refusal to give up arms, but left the door open for discussions. "To me this is deplorable," Calderon told reporters. "However, the Mexican government, my government, will always be open to dialogue."

**EPR demands that government find missing comrades**

Questions have arisen on why the EPR is willing at this time to consider a suspension of its armed struggle in order to reach a peace agreement with the government. The rebels have not made
any statements regarding their motivation, but columnist Carlos Marin of the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario suggests that the EPR may have realized that it was not reaching its aim to transform society through simple acts of sabotage and was looking for a different way to affect policy. "The EPR is in great need of a political solution, and the government is the only one offering a bridge," said Marin. The columnist said the EPR's decision to enter into dialogue with the government was "a splendid present" for the Calderon administration. "All that was missing was gift wrap, a bow, and a card," said Marin.

Still, the EPR offered some conditions for discussing a peace agreement, such as a demand that the administration set a timetable for the release of Cruz and Reyes, who disappeared in May 2007. The EPR has also demanded that any government official who participated in "the fabrication of charges, engaged in torture, illegal detentions, and assassinations" be brought to trial. This last directive was aimed at the Ruiz administration, which has faced a series of conflicts with civil society during its tenure in office, particularly the teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion, SNTE) and the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca, APPO).

The SNTE and the APPO contend that the governor's policies have contributed to instability in Oaxaca (see SourceMex, 2006-08-22, 2006-11-01 and 2007-08-22). The Ruiz administration has consistently denied that it has any members of the EPR in custody, and federal officials have been unable to confirm any detentions of members of the guerrilla group. According to the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada, the accusation that it has the two EPR guerrillas in custody has left the Ruiz government in a difficult position. "The [Oaxaca state government] has expressed its willingness to cooperate with any investigation conducted by the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) regarding this matter," said the newspaper.

But Manuel Corpus, a top aide to Ruiz, said that the federal government has only requested minimal information regarding any charges that Oaxaca prosecutors may have brought against Reyes Amaya and Cruz Sanchez. Corpus' comments would tend to support the EPR's claim that the federal government has not done enough to determine the whereabouts of its two comrades. Because of this, the guerrilla group has refused a government overture for face-to-face negotiations.

**Special commission to represent EPR’s interests during talks**

Conversely, the EPR has agreed to make contact with the government through a seven-member panel, which it describes as "social witnesses" to the negotiations. The panel includes journalist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa; anthropologist Gilberto Lopez y Rivas; writer Carlos Montemayor; retired Roman Catholic Bishop Samuel Ruiz of San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas; Sen. Rosario Ibarra de Piedra, a member of the Partido del Trabajo (PT); attorney Juan de Dios Hernandez Monge; and Enrique Gonzalez Ruiz, former rector of the Universidad Autonoma de Guerrero.

The Calderon government accepted the panel without hesitation. Interior Secretary Juan Camilo Mourino designated two officials from the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB), Abraham Gonzalez Uyeda and Alejandro Poire, to meet with the commission. At a meeting on May 20, the two SEGOB officials and the commission agreed on the procedures and the conditions under which the dialogue would take place. Even though the meeting, which lasted about two-and-half hours, mostly involved a discussion of procedural and technical matters, members of the commission were encouraged by
what they saw as a willingness of the government to take its first step toward a peace agreement. "We view the formal start of discussions as a positive signal," said Montemayor.

Neither the commission nor the SEGOB officials said when a follow-up meeting would take place. Sen. Ibarra, whose son Jesus Piedra disappeared during the government's "dirty war" against leftists in the 1960s and 1970s, was also encouraged by the recent developments. Jesus Piedra was detained by authorities in 1974 during a demonstration in Monterrey and was never seen again (see SourceMex, 2003-11-12). The PT legislator, who chairs the human rights committee (Comision de Derechos Humanos) in the Senate, described the meeting with the SEGOB officials as extremely positive. "I believe that finding a solution to any type of conflict is the correct path to take," the senator told the Spanish news service EFE.

But some detractors criticized the Calderon administration for talking to the guerrillas. "The government committed a serious mistake when it accepted the dialogue proposed by the EPR," said Jaime Sanchez Susarrey, in a column published in the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. "One must not negotiate with an armed movement whose stated goal is to take power and to destroy the bourgeoisie state. The Constitution prohibits this."

Still, Sanchez Susarrey acknowledged that the EPR had made a legitimate request in asking for an investigation into the disappearance of Reyes Amaya and Cruz Sanchez. "The guerrillas have a right to demand that the government investigate the disappearance of their colleagues," said the columnist.

The EPR, for its part, reiterated its commitment to maintain a cease-fire as long as talks are continuing with the government. At the same time, the group asked for the federal and state governments to stop intimidating the families of its members, their friends and the nongovernmental organizations that have shown solidarity with the EPR. "We ask that the government cease its efforts to find and arrest members of our organization."

During recent investigations of the EPR, the government gained some insights into the structure of the guerrilla group, which had generally operated in secret. The EPR has 30 leaders, including one of the two missing EPR members, Gabriel Alberto Cruz Sanchez. Cruz's brother Tiburcio, is also among the leaders of the EPR, said the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior.

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