

Chiapas Update: Mexican Government Launches, Then Halts, Sudden Offensive

On February 9, Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo broke the cease-fire in Chiapas, ordering a surprise invasion of Zapatista-held territory in what he termed a "police action" to arrest the EZLN leadership. Nonetheless, Indigenous, non-governmental and human rights organizations throughout Chiapas, as well as members of the national mediation commission (CONAI) headed by Bishop Samuel Ruiz, were also targeted by the government offensive. Thousands of government troops occupied communities and set up roadblocks throughout the state, sealing off the media, human rights workers, and the general population from the zones of conflict. No major conflicts between the two armies have been reported, though one Mexican officer was killed by sniper fire.

When announcing the offensive, Zedillo attempted to discredit the EZLN by linking leaders to terrorist acts in the late 1960s, and disclosed the leaders' alleged identities. Subcomandante Marcos was identified as Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente, a professor of communications from Tabasco state. Marcos escaped capture when the army swept into the Zapatista capital of San Pedro de Michoacan. Residents of this and other communities in Zapatista territory fled their houses before the army's arrival.

Generalized Repression

In launching the offensive, the Mexican government declared its intention to arrest a list of over 2,000 individuals participating in the state's social movements. The offices of CONPAZ, the largest human rights organization in Chiapas, were looted by the military on Feb. 10. The General Council of Pluriethnic Autonomous Areas, the

recently formed organization representing the Indigenous zones of Chiapas, warned in a press release on Feb. 11, "We are sure that all of us are on that list and can expect to be arrested soon." On Feb. 13, the General Council described the government's offensive as a "genocidal war," reporting that five people had been killed in the community of La Estrella, and that many had been detained and tortured by the army in three Indigenous regions and in the community of Ocosingo.

Offensive Halted

In a sudden change of strategy, Zedillo halted the military offensive on Feb. 14, and asked the national congress to approve a law granting amnesty to members of the EZLN who surrender their weapons. On the same day, the ruling party's governor of Chiapas, Eduardo Robledo Rincon resigned from office in what he called an act of peace. Both the opposition Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and the EZLN had demanded Robledo's resignation following fraudulent elections last December. During Robledo's inauguration, PRD gubernatorial candidate Amado Avendaño formed a parallel government supported by many Indigenous organizations and the EZLN. Avendaño responded to Robledo's resignation by asking PRD militants to surrender the government buildings which they have occupied in the region.

Indigenous Organizing: "You are not alone"

Over 1,000 Indigenous representatives from throughout the country met in Guerrero state from Dec. 16-18 to form the National Indigenous Convention (CNI). The CNI declared, "We take as our own the 13 positions of

the EZLN and understand the reasons for their decision to take up arms as the only method to be heard. From the heart of the mountain in Guerrero we declare, 'You are not alone'."

The Indigenous organizations who formed the Council of Indigenous and Campesino Organizations of Chiapas (CEOIC) in February of 1994, have divided the state's predominantly Indigenous regions into autonomous territories, now represented by an elected General Council of Pluriethnic Autonomous Areas. On Feb. 11, the Council announced it would organize a march from Chiapas to Mexico City to "mobilize a thousand Indigenous people from the autonomous regions," and to bring attention to the Chiapas conflict. The Council also stated its intention to continue organizing for victory in the coming municipal and congressional elections in Chiapas.

Although the cease-fire has been temporarily re-established in Chiapas, the state remains extremely tense. Indigenous organizations report that the so-called "white guards," paramilitary forces employed by large landowners, have acted with increasing violence and aggression throughout the state. The General Council of Pluriethnic Autonomous Areas made the following call for help in their last press release:

Under these conditions, we are calling out to the rest of the world to turn their eyes toward Chiapas. We are in need of distribution of information to national and international spheres; international observers; letters to the Mexican government; financial assistance; international organizing and protests, particularly in front of Mexican embassies and consulates; and caravans. We are also asking for support in the legal recognition of the autonomous regions. Our intention is to strengthen the solidarity between all oppressed people, in the midst of a crucial moment in the struggle for the liberation of the Indigenous people of Chiapas.