

Mexican President faces down terrorists

by Valerie Rush

In his very first week in office, Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo was forced into a showdown with the narco-terrorist Zapatistas in the southern state of Chiapas. The government stood its ground, and won, but the foreign-sponsored insurgency still threatens to spread nationwide.

The focus of the confrontation was whether Eduardo Robledo, the ruling PRI party's gubernatorial victor in last August's national elections, would be inaugurated as governor of Chiapas on Dec. 8. The opposition PRD party and its Zapatista-backed candidate, Amado Avendaño, charged that Robledo's clear-cut electoral victory had been "stolen," and that a "civil resistance" movement would be launched to force his resignation and Avendaño's accession to the governorship. Dire threats of civil war were sounded, and the pace of land invasions and violent confrontations with non-Zapatista farmers and cattlemen intensified.

In an effort to defuse the situation, President Zedillo sent newly named Government Secretary Esteban Moctezuma to Chiapas to negotiate a return to dialogue with the Zapatistas. At the same time, Robledo announced his plan to take a "leave of absence" from the PRI so that he could serve as governor—with a non-partisan cabinet—over "all citizens of Chiapas." He even offered to resign the governorship as a supreme gesture of conciliation, if the Zapatistas agreed to lay down their weapons in return.

The Zapatistas rejected Moctezuma and Robledo's peace overtures, and on Dec. 6, Zapatista chieftain "Subcomandante Marcos" issued several communiqués to the press in which, among other things, he charged President Zedillo with being "the personification of an unjust, undemocratic, and criminal system" and called for mass demonstrations across the country to demand Zedillo's resignation. He declared an end to the tenuous cease-fire that his Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) had signed with the government following last January's Zapatista assault on military installations in Chiapas, which left several hundred dead, saying "the period of peaceful civil resistance ends the moment Eduardo Robledo takes office and usurps executive power" in the state.

An unruffled President Zedillo, who had already announced plans to attend Robledo's gubernatorial inauguration, answered Marcos's declaration of war during a presentation to the National Association of Small Industrialists. He

departed from his prepared text to "reiterate the firm intention of my government to secure a just and worthy peace through negotiation, dialogue, political agreement. . . . Let me be clear: There is no room for threats or ultimatums, nor will the Constitution of the Republic be violated. . . ."

His bluff called, "Subcomandante Marcos" backed off, and issued a statement denying that he had declared war, and insisting that he was only warning "that time is running out." He said that his movement was not adverse to signing a peace agreement with the government, "if done out in the open and not secretly." Zedillo's firm response had averted an immediate explosion, and Robledo was inaugurated as governor of Chiapas with the Mexican President in attendance. A series of measures to meet at least some of the Zapatista demands—electoral reform, a review of land distribution, rezoning of municipalities—was announced by Robledo.

The separatist gameplan

The insurgents have a different agenda, however, which is explicitly separatist. EZLN supporters wearing PRD T-shirts gathered on inauguration day in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, the base of EZLN patron Bishop Samuel Ruiz, to swear in Avendaño as "governor" of Chiapas. Avendaño set up his own "cabinet" and said that his "government" would be active in communities across the state. Zapatista supporters in the state have announced they will not pay taxes to Robledo's government. Zapatista-held territory has been declared "autonomous indigenist regions." Bishop Ruiz told the media that there now exist in Chiapas two governments, two governors, and two armies.

The destabilization scenario goes beyond Chiapas, however. The EZLN/PRD has announced plans for nationwide "actions of civil resistance," while Rosario Ibarra de Piedra, president of the pro-EZLN National Democratic Convention, told the press that the EZLN would now only lay down its arms if President Zedillo himself resigned.

The Chiapas crisis, stoked by elements of British intelligence whose ultimate design is the dismantling of the Mexican state itself, will not be resolved by negotiating with narco-terrorists nor by sharing power with them. President Zedillo's firm stand in defense of Governor Robledo won him a little time, but some tough choices will have to be made in the period immediately ahead.

Unfortunately, Zedillo has already made one serious blunder. Under the mistaken conviction that he can keep his nation stabilized by keeping the international financial community happy and its speculative money flowing in, Zedillo has named an economic cabinet which continues the free-market policies of his predecessor, Carlos Salinas. Ironically, it is those very free-market policies which have wreaked havoc with Mexico's real economy for the past six years, and which are now providing grist for the Zapatista mill.