

Zapatista "Red Alert" Shakes up Mexican Politics

By Laura Carlsen | June 24, 2005

The announcement of a "general red alert" by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) has once again turned Mexican politics on its head.

In a curt communiqué issued on June 19, the Zapatista General Command announced a series of drastic measures including the closure of the "Good Government Board" offices, and the withdrawal of outside support groups from Zapatista territory.

Subsequent communiqués called the alert a "precautionary defensive measure." The Zapatistas also announced a general consultation with troops and base communities to decide on "the next step" for the organization.

The EZLN has only announced two red alerts before, both in the context of a deteriorating national political climate and increased threats to the Chiapas communities. An alert mandates military readiness and in this case was accompanied by the announcement of a reorganization to assure "the conditions necessary to survive an attack or enemy action that takes out the current leadership or tries to annihilate us completely."

Although the recent messages make no reference to present hostile actions by the government, they follow an announcement by the Secretary of Defense that it had discovered marijuana fields "in the Zapatista zone of influence." Several reports from human rights organizations and others have confirmed that the zone in question is not in fact majority Zapatista. These groups warn that the staged linkage of narcotics production to the insurgents could be a prelude to intensified military action in the region.

There have also been reports of troop movements, fortifying some positions and abandoning others, possibly to open the door to paramilitary action. Reporters in the region describe semi-deserted towns, suspicious residents, and a palpable tension in the air.

In its latest message of June 21, the EZLN lays to rest fears that the insurgents plan to launch a new offensive. After thanking civil society for its support over the past twelve years, the message assures that the next phase "implies no military offensive action on our part."

The red alert came on the heels of Marcos' harsh critique of the Mexican political class published in national newspapers the day before. Marcos paints a grim portrait of corruption and betrayal among the political parties "above" and contrasts it with the continuing hardships and injustices faced in Zapatista territories "below". He extensively criticizes the left-center Party of the Democratic Revolution and its pre-candidate Andrés Lopez Obrador, and concludes: "the destruction caused by the neoliberal bomb in Mexican politics has been so effective that, from our point of view, there's nothing that can be accomplished from above...Supposedly up above there's a center, left and right. But at election time, everyone piles into the center... shouting 'I'm the one!'"

With its critique of party politics and warnings of possible aggressions against the communities, the Zapatista red alert is--first and foremost--a wake-up call to Mexican society. It once again reminds the populace and the world that despite the self-complacency of a president frequently criticized for glossing over the nation's problems, those problems still exist. In Chiapas, they include not only the poverty endemic to the Mexican countryside but continued low-intensity warfare and the suspended promise of indigenous rights.

Although the EZLN messages leave many questions open, it is best to await the results of the consultation and further notice before leaping to conclusions that obscure rather than elucidate the situation.

For the time being, the clear message is that as Mexico prepares for another round of electoral sideshows, the Zapatistas are no longer willing to accept business as usual. The rejection of their petitions for full rights and justice, the military and paramilitary harassment of their communities, the poverty and displacement still rampant in the zone have led to a need for a dramatic political repositioning that gives new leverage to the movement and at the same time challenges traditional politics to respond to demands from the grassroots. The new stage,



however it is defined as a result of the consultation, will likely place the Zapatistas squarely on the national political scene.

That gadfly role, backed up by the commitment and conviction of thousands of indigenous communities, has proven to be something at which the Zapatistas are particularly adept.

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