

# NGOs attack the Mexican Army and defend the Zapatistas

by Carlos Méndez

On Aug. 14, Agence France Press news service reported that the Vatican has designated Bishop Raúl Vera López as coadjutor bishop, with full succession rights, to the San Cristóbal de las Casas diocese in Chiapas, Mexico. The move was to be understood, according to the account, as an “offer of help” by Pope John Paul II to Bishop Samuel Ruiz, who currently heads the diocese, to alleviate his burden of pastoral duties. With this help, the “Red Bishop” Ruiz and his terrorist hosts in the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) have been dealt a strong and timely blow.

The nomination occurs at precisely at the moment that the EZLN and Ruiz have launched a new offensive to prolong “peace talks,” and to hold another national plebiscite on the EZLN’s demands. Their strategy is to stall, to allow sufficient time for the consolidation of a political machine headed by Manuel Camacho, with international backing from the human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which would topple the Zedillo government and install an overtly pro-Zapatista regime.

As they stall, patience is running out among various sectors, especially the military.

In statements to the July 27 issue of *Siempre!* magazine, Congressman Luis Garfias Magana, president of the Defense Commission of the Mexican House of Representatives and an Army general on leave, said that despite the willingness of the government to negotiate, the EZLN insists on “prolonging the conflict unnecessarily for propagandistic effect, both domestically and abroad. They have reached the absurd point of creating a rebel embassy in Paris, and indicate that they plan to do the same in Barcelona, Spain.”

Gen. Tomás Angeles Dauahare, military adviser and member of the government-appointed negotiating body with the EZLN, declared on July 25 that if the EZLN continues its stalling tactics, there is “an option in the air” that the dialogue will rupture.

## Foreign attack on the Mexican Army

In a June 29 report, Human Rights Watch-Americas Watch launched a violent attack against the Mexican Army for supposed human rights violations in Chiapas.

The timing of the campaign by Americas Watch, which has repeatedly defended the “human rights” of Peru’s Shining

Path narco-terrorists, intersected a number of developments: President Ernesto Zedillo changed his government secretary; the Armed Forces, which refuse to withdraw from Chiapas, began a fierce offensive against the drug trade; and there was an outbreak of what could become a “second Chiapas” in the state of Guerrero.

In its report, Human Rights Watch-Americas Watch accused the Mexican Army of exonerating Army personnel accused of committing massacres, torture, and other human rights violations during the Zapatista uprising in January 1994 in Chiapas. Immediately, the Foreign Relations Ministry (SRE) rejected the charges, saying that “these imputations have no basis in fact, and seem more designed to garner publicity than the truth.” Human Rights Watch Executive Director José Miguel Vivanco angrily responded that the SRE, “instead of basing itself on facts, attacks the messenger who brings bad tidings.” He complained that “it is most unfortunate that [the response] is so personalized; it is the first time that we have met with such a response from a country in Latin America.”

The Americas Watch charges—which as usual make no mention of the atrocities committed by terrorists, in this case the Zapatistas—are pathetically weak, but the publicity they received in the press was immense. On June 30, Mexico’s leading pro-Zapatista daily, *La Jornada*, said that “the black shadow that hovers over the Armed Forces and over the national government in general comes from the Human Rights Watch report on the Army’s behavior in Chiapas.”

The British have had a direct hand in stirring things up as well. On June 17, Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, a British intelligence agent and Washington correspondent for the London *Sunday Telegraph*, published a violent attack against the government of President Zedillo, and “predicted” a new destabilization wave. Two days later, in its June 19 edition, the Mexican magazine *Epoca* published statements by Howard Davies, the director general of the Confederation of British Industry and the next deputy governor of the Bank of England, who said that British investors were concerned with Mexico’s “uncertain future.”

Davies specified that his visit to Mexico was because “we are seeking to establish a protection agreement for British investments in Mexico, in addition to winning guarantees for

those investors against expropriation of their properties and assets, and for the government to give them legal status to care for their investments. In addition, should unresolvable legal difficulties present themselves in the country, they would have the right to turn to international forums in search of help."

### **A key institution of the State**

The Mexican Army is attacked for one simple reason: It is one of the three institutions upon which the Mexican state rests, and it is the key institution opposing the destabilization represented by the EZLN's irregular warfare. As Gen. Luis Garfias declared in his capacity as head of the House of Representatives National Defense Commission, "the Army has always been the most prestigious and honorable institution, in which the citizenry has confidence."

Accused of being "hard-liners" for defending the Constitution, the national territory, and Mexican sovereignty, the Army has been systematically attacked by the EZLN and by its accomplices both within and outside the country. As Zapatista commander Bishop Ruiz said in a Nov. 3, 1994 interview in the daily *Excelsior*, the EZLN's "war was not against the local landholders, but against the Mexican Army."

In statements published last May 18 in the daily *El Herald de México*, Sen. Alvaro Vallarta Ceceña, president of the Senate's National Defense Commission and a brigadier general on leave from the Army, said that the Army should continue to serve as the guarantor of a state of law in Chiapas. Implicitly alluding to the concessions that the government has been making to the EZLN, he said, "there are unheard-of things happening in this country which appear strange to us. How to explain how a few hooded ones can continue to bear arms, while the Mexican Army stands aside? Well, there is the good will of the government; this must be understood and we hope that there is also good will on the other's part."

The senator emphasized, however, that the military's withdrawal from Chiapas "is not on the agenda for discussion. In any way. For this to be a subject of negotiation would also mean withdrawal from Nayarit, Jalisco, or Chihuahua. No. The Mexican Army, throughout the country, is carrying out its constitutional function. The withdrawal of the Mexican Army from a zone of conflict is not a matter for discussion, much less for negotiation."

In statements to *Excelsior* on July 3, Sen. José Antonio Valdivia (a general on leave from the Army) referred to the Americas Watch report. He pointed out that in the early days of the uprising in Chiapas, the Army was not responding to threats, but to physical attacks, and that there had been an open declaration of war. He asked: "What does a citizen naturally do in its own legitimate defense, if there is premeditated and treacherous aggression against him? How should the Armed Forces react when they are under crafty and cow-

ardly attack? Why has the EZLN not said that 14 soldiers and 55 police officers died?"

### **'We could have suffocated the uprising'**

One of the first slanders thrown at the Army when the EZLN appeared on the scene, was that the Army had failed to protect national security. The Army has vehemently denied this, and new information has shed light on the political aspect of these charges. Brig. Gen. Mario Arturo Acosta Chaparro, author of a book on subversion in Mexico, told *El Herald* on July 10 that since 1990, the Defense Ministry had warned the government that "representatives of extremist groups of known and proven aggressivity in the last decade, are working clandestinely to regroup, organically fuse, and provoke new outbreaks of violence at a moment they judge most appropriate."

On July 11, the same daily published statements by Congressman Garfias, who said that "if the President [Carlos Salinas de Gortari] did not act, it was because he didn't consider it the right moment, but it is obvious that as head of the national security cabinet, the defense secretary surely had informed the previous government of the presence of subversive groups in Mexico."

In an extensive interview in *El Universal* on July 10-11, Senator Vallarta Ceceña said, "On the night of Dec. 31, 1994, Army intelligence detected movements by the EZLN to occupy San Cristóbal de Las Casas. We could have trapped them and suffocated the uprising, but the national security cabinet ordered us confined to barracks. Since then, as after 1968, the Armed Forces have been perversely criticized."

Senator Vallarta Ceceña also said that the military believes that "there is a deliberate attack against the President of the Republic and the institutions," and that "the goal is to destabilize us so that the foreigners can take our oil, our natural wealth." He added that there are "very serious pressures from abroad," and that the Zapatistas "could be used, without their even realizing it, to divide the country."

In a July 12 interview in *El Herald*, Congressman Jesús Esquinca Gurrusquieta (a general on leave from the Army), and secretary of the House Defense Commission, described as "an error of the previous administration" the fact that the government had not acted when the first armed groups were detected in the country. "They would not have grown and we would have prevented their reaching the extreme of attacking the institutions—principally the Armed Forces—as they have," he said.

Esquinca indicated that "the current administration should avoid making the same mistake by allowing the Armed Forces to continue to operate in Chiapas, to guarantee the security of the peace dialogue there. . . . As I said at the beginning, the Executive must avoid any further ruptures in the state of law, and the fact that an armed group exists represents a risk that at any moment, they could once again attack the Army."