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State police maintain a security checkpoint at the entrance of Chilpancingo, Mexico, Feb. 15, 2024. Four Roman Catholic bishops met with Mexican drug cartel bosses in a bid to negotiate a possible peace accord, according to the Bishop of Chilpancingo-Chilapa, José de Jesús González Hernández. (AP/Alejandro Gonzalez)

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Four Roman Catholic bishops met with Mexican drug cartel bosses in a bid to negotiate a possible peace accord, one of the bishops said, and President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said Feb. 15 he approves of such talks.

The revelation by Bishop of Chilpancingo-Chilapa, José de Jesús González Hernández, in remarks at a public appearance, illustrate the extent to which the government's policy of not confronting the cartels has left average citizens to work out their own separate peace deals with the gangs.

López Obrador acknowledged it wasn't the first time church leaders had held such talks, and that they have done so before in the neighboring state of Michoacan and in other states.

"Priests and pastors and members of all the churches have participated, helped in pacifying the country. I think it is very good," López Obrador said the day after the existence of the negotiations was revealed.

He said such talks had been held in the neighboring state of Michoacan and in other places in Mexico as well. "The church does it, I can vouch for this, in Michoacan, and they do it in other places."

López Obrador said that while he had no problem with the talks, he wouldn't approve of "any agreement that meant granting impunity, privileges, or licenses to steal."

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That rang hollow to one parish priest whose town in Michoacan has been dominated by one cartel or another for years. "It is an implicit recognition that they (the government) can't provide safe conditions," said the priest, who cannot be quoted by name for security reasons.

"Undoubtedly, we have to talk to certain people, above all when it comes to people's safety, but that doesn't mean we agree with it," said the priest. For example, he said, local residents have asked him to ask cartel bosses about the fate of missing

relatives.

Many average Mexicans have quietly agreed to pay protection payments to drug cartels for fear of being attacked or having their homes or businesses burned. The church has also suffered — priests have also been killed by the cartels — but some gang leaders talk with church leaders.

The bishop said the most recent talks failed because the cartels and drug gangs didn't want to stop fighting over territory in the Pacific coast state of Guerrero. Those turf battles have shut down transportation and led to dozens of killings in recent months.

"They asked for a truce, but with conditions," González Hernández said of the talks, held a few weeks ago. "But these conditions were not agreeable to one of the participants."

Asked by local reporters what those conditions were, the bishop answered "territories."

Drug cartels and gangs in Mexico don't just sell or smuggle drugs; they extort money from nearly every line of business in territories they control.

Under López Obrador's "hugs, not bullets" policy, the government has avoided direct confrontation with the cartels, allowing them to essentially take control of a dozen or more mid-sized cities, where the prices of most products are higher because they include a 'tax' charged by the cartels.



People attend Mass at the Cathedral in Chilpancingo, Mexico, Feb. 15, 2024.
(AP/Alejandro Gonzalez)

Retired Bishop Salvador Rangel, who headed the same diocese until 2022, told The Associated Press that he had been informed of the talks by people who were there.

He did not identify which cartels that attended, but there are at least a dozen such gangs fighting for control of various regions in the Pacific coast state of Guerrero, home to the resort of Acapulco.

Rangel confirmed that the talks failed because the gangs "did not want to concede anything."

However, he defended the talks. While serving as bishop, he had previously spoken openly about meeting with gang leaders to pursue peace. "I think that any attempt to achieve peace and harmony is valid," he said.

González Hernández suggested the approach had been at least implicitly approved by Pope Francis during a meeting with bishops last year.

A Vatican spokesman didn't immediately respond when asked about the bishop's remarks. The Vatican rarely comments on the pope's private audiences.

That said, the position articulated by the bishop is consistent with Francis' tendency to defer to the expertise of bishops on the ground, and his strong belief in the need for dialogue at all costs.

Francis has frequently been asked, for example, about his willingness to send an envoy to Moscow to try to negotiate with the Kremlin. While Francis has said you should "never dialogue with the devil," he has insisted that in real-world matters of war and peace, dialogue with the aggressor is the only way to find paths of peace, "even when it stinks."

Clearly, it is not a role the church relishes. As the parish priest noted, "we wouldn't have to do this if the government did its job right."