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Salvadoran President Salvador Sánchez Cerén Offers Early Nod to War-Era Rights Victims

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New Salvadoran President Salvador Sánchez Cerén has made a pair of early overtures to human rights victims, raising hopes that his presidency, which began just last month (NotiCen, June 19, 2014), might usher in an era of greater accountability regarding the many abuses and atrocities committed during the country’s dozen-year civil war (1980-1992).

Two weeks ago, the left-wing president welcomed a group of rights defenders and war victims to his new home, the upscale Residencia Presidencial in San Salvador. The guests included members of the Comité de Familiares de Víctimas de Violaciones a los Derechos Humanos (CODEFAM) and the Comité Pro Memoria Histórica. The encounter was the first in a series of "citizen meetings" that Sánchez Cerén and his wife, first lady Margarita Villalta de Sánchez, plan to host on a fortnightly basis. Journalists were not invited.

"These events will give us an opportunity to hear the demands of different social sectors and see how, as the government, we can offer solutions to the different problems," the president, a war-era guerrilla commander, explained in press release.

Sánchez Cerén tipped his hat to the human rights community again the very next day, July 8, when he introduced a special committee tasked with identifying civilian war victims and developing mechanisms to offer reparations. The Consejo Directivo para Reparación de Víctimas de Violaciones de Derechos Humanos durante el Conflicto Armado, as the group is officially called, is staffed by officials from various government ministries and by representatives from different civil-society organizations.

"Human life cannot be repaired. We know that it’s impossible to fulfill this principle of restoration, because we can’t restore the lives of so many innocent people who died within the context of the armed conflict," Sánchez Cerén said. "But as a country we do have the obligation, and not just on moral grounds, to make a reparation."

"Now we really do have hope"

The Salvadoran civil war pitted US-backed government forces against a coalition of left-wing guerrilla groups known collectively as the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN). Peace accords signed in 1992 put an end to the conflict and led to the FMLN’s transformation from an affiliation of fighters to a political party. The war cost the lives of an estimated 75,000 civilians. Another 8,000 disappeared. A UN-sponsored truth commission report (NotiCen, March 26, 1993) published in 1993 attributed 85% of the acts of violence to state agents (official military and government-backed death squads).

Led for two decades by the hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), founded by Roberto d’Aubuisson, a soldier and death-squad organizer, El Salvador took a "let-sleeping-dogs-lie" approach to the dark legacy of its bloody internal conflict. Calls for investigations into atrocities
such as the El Mozote (NotiCen, Nov. 15, 1991) and El Calabozo massacres, which took place in 1981 and 1982, respectively, and resulted in the wholesale slaughter of more than 1,000 campesinos, went largely unheeded. The same was true for other high-profile crimes from that era, including the assassination in 1980 of Archbishop Óscar Romero and the military slayings in 1989 of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her teenage daughter, an episode that came to be known as the Jesuit massacre (NotiCen, Nov. 17, 1989).

The government’s treatment of the past underwent a shift starting in 2009, when El Salvador elected its first FMLN president, former journalist Mauricio Funes (2009-2014), who lost a brother to the conflict. Funes, a political moderate, made a series of emotionally charged statements and appearances acknowledging, for the first time, the state’s role in the atrocities.

In early 2012, for example, he visited the site of the El Mozote killings and offered an official apology for what he called "the worst massacre of civilians in contemporary Latin American history (NotiCen, Feb. 23, 2012)." He also broke an unspoken code of silence by mentioning out loud the names of three senior officers thought to have been involved in the atrocity.

Rights groups welcomed Funes’ various gestures but bemoaned that the perpetrators of such crimes continued to be protected by a now 21-year-old amnesty law—officially called the Ley de Amnistía General para la Consolidación de la Paz—that was rushed into place just days after the truth commission report went public. President Funes opted in the end not to tackle the amnesty issue. Human rights defenders and surviving war victims are hoping that his successor, President Sánchez Cerén (also of the FMLN), perhaps will.

Unlike Funes, a political independent whose relationship with the far-left FMLN was in many ways a marriage of convenience (NotiCen, Jan. 6, 2011), Sánchez Cerén, 70, is a true party insider. He is also a veteran of the civil war, in which he served as comandante with the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí (FPL). Rights groups view that background, combined with his early gestures on their behalf, as encouraging signs.

"This day provides us with much hope and happiness," said CODEFAM founder Guadalupe Mejía Delgado following Sánchez Cerén’s presentation of the reparations council. "This Consejo Directivo is what will lead the reparations program. Thanks to the president’s statements, now we really do have hope," the iconic human rights activist, now in her 80s, added.

**Wearing out their welcome**

The human rights community has also been keeping a close eye in recent months on developments outside the country, particularly in the US, where a number of Salvadoran ex-military officials who took up residence there after the war are now facing possible deportation primarily because of their objectionable human rights records.

The latest such case involves former defense minister Gen. José Guillermo García (1979-1983), who was granted political asylum in the US in 1990. Groups such as the Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA), a nonprofit legal group based in San Francisco, California, have long alleged that García is a war criminal—and should be treated as such. An immigration judge in Florida now agrees. On Feb. 26, Judge Michael C. Horn ordered that García be deported based on "clear and convincing evidence" that the former general "assisted or otherwise participated" in 11 acts of violence, including Archbishop Romero's assassination.
In his 66-page ruling—which was made public in April thanks to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request filed by The New York Times—Judge Horn also made mention of the El Mozote massacre, about which García, as defense minister, either "knew or should have known." Horn believes as well that García helped cover up the 1980 rape and murder (by Salvadoran soldiers) of four US churchwomen who were in El Salvador doing charity work.

García held "the greatest power and authority in El Salvador," Judge Horn wrote. And yet, rather than press for change, the general "rebuffed reform, protected death squad plotters, denied the existence of massacres, failed to adequately investigate assassinations and massacres, and failed to hold officers accountable for the killing of their fellow countrymen."

Horn’s ruling came two years after a similar decision involving Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, another former defense minister living in Florida. The Vides Casanova ruling was not made public until April 2013. Both of the ex-military officials are exercising their right to appeal the deportation orders and are, in the meantime, free. Rights activists, nevertheless, hail the two US immigration court rulings as setting an important precedent.

"This raises questions about both the amnesty law and the foreign policy of the US, which financed and supported the actions of these executioners," Juan Romagoza, a Salvadoran human rights abuse victim, told the AP earlier this year. "We’ve gained hope [in the struggle] against silence. We hope the silence comes to an end." Romagoza, a young doctor at the time, was abducted in 1980 by state agents who tortured and mutilated him (he lost three fingers on each hand) during the course of several weeks.

A third former military official who ran afoul of authorities in the US was jailed late last year after being found guilty of various immigration violations (NotiCen, Sept. 26, 2013). The soldier in question, former Col. Inocente Orlando Montano, has been implicated in the Jesuit massacre. He, too, could face deportation after he completes his 21-month US jail sentence, which began in October 2013. The CJA is hoping Orlando Montano will instead be extradited to Spain, where Judge Eloy Velasco is hoping to prosecute him—along with more than a dozen other Salvadoran officers—on terrorism charges (NotiCen, July 28, 2011).

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