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Central American Summit Postponed

by Deborah Tyroler

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Jan. 6: Costa Rican President Oscar Arias suggested postponing the Central American summit, scheduled for Jan. 15-16 in San Salvador, until after President-elect George Bush's inauguration. The delay, he said, would give Central American leaders more time to prepare themselves, and would provide Bush with time to formulate a Central America policy. Bush assumes the presidency on Jan. 20. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said that the proposed postponement could "practically kill" the peace plan. He added that it would be ironic for President Arias, promoter of the peace plan and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, "to be the one who now buries Esquipulas." In a letter to Ortega, Arias said a postponement of the summit was preferable to "failure." Without indicating a date, he mentioned the possibility of rescheduling for mid-February. Jan. 7: Ortega said Arias' proposal "is under consultation and the meeting definitely has not been suspended." The president said he opposed any delay of the summit. Guatemalan President Vinicio Cerezo reiterated his opposition to postponing the summit. Honduran Foreign Minister Carlos Lopez Contreras said he was "surprised" by Arias' decision. In statements to the press, Guatemalan Vice President Roberto Carpio said that Cerezo told him via telephone from the US that he disagrees with the proposal to suspend the meeting. Cerezo was in the US on a private visit. Carpio said, "Guatemala will employ all means...to avoid postponing the meeting." He added that Cerezo was making telephone calls from Washington to leaders in El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica in an effort to avoid the suspension. Jan. 8: Costa Rican Deputy Foreign Minister Carlos Rivera was cited as saying in *La Nacion* (San Jose) that Ortega was "out of line." Rivera said, "We reject what Ortega said, because everybody knows that our president and our people are the ones most interested in seeking peace in our region." Nicaraguan President Ortega sent a letter to his Salvadoran counterpart President Jose Napoleon Duarte asking him to oppose the schedule shift. "To delay this meeting, at a time when enormous expectations have been created around the dialogue, could negatively affect the Esquipulas II (peace) process," he wrote. Ortega also said it was "urgent" that the Central American presidents discuss a Nov. 30 letter from UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar offering assistance in verifying the peace accord. In San Salvador, Catholic auxiliary archbishop for the city, Gregorio Rosa Chavez, also called for the summit to be held in January, calling on the five presidents to "understand that they must respond to the hopes for peace in their respective countries and in the region." Bishop Rosa also said the capital had become "insecure, because of the violence that could break out anytime, anywhere." During a homily, Rosa Chavez said that one hopes the postponement is temporary and not indefinite, considering that it is necessary to reactivate the peace process and treaty mechanisms to achieve peace in the region. "Here in El Salvador, it is necessary to terminate the war, since otherwise the war will terminate us," he said. Jan. 9: The Costa Rican government announced the indefinite postponement of the summit. At a news conference in San Jose, Foreign Minister Rodrigo Madrigal Nieto said there would not be a meeting in San Salvador next week, and that the presidents of El Salvador, Costa Rica and Honduras had agreed to the postponement. According to Madrigal, "The new date will be negotiated, adjusting the agendas of the presidents and of the foreign ministers." Meanwhile, he said, foreign ministers will meet in Managua on Jan. 17-18. Madrigal Nieto denied that postponement could jeopardize the Central American peace plan. "What we want is not to hold up Esquipulas II, but

to so organize it that it can give better results than achieved so far," Madrigal Nieto said. Earlier in the day, the Nicaraguan government said the summit should be held as scheduled. Salvadoran Foreign Minister Ricardo Acevedo said President Jose Napoleon Duarte argued that it could be held on schedule only if all five presidents agreed. President Ortega's press office said that he had telephoned Arias on Jan. 8 to express "his concern about the postponement." Jan. 10: Costa Rican Minister Madrigal said that the Central American governments were close to agreement on a date for the presidential summit during the third week of February. In Managua, President Ortega said the summit would probably take place during the second half of February. Salvadoran Foreign Minister Acevedo proposed that the meeting go ahead Feb. 19-20. He expressed regret that a technical planning meeting, which was to have begun in Managua on Jan. 12, was delayed because the Guatemalan delegation had not arrived. The other four delegations met informally. In Guatemala City, Foreign Minister Alfonso Cabrera said his government would make every effort to see that the summit would go ahead as soon as possible. He said the meeting could take place either January 29 and 30 or February 15 or 20 in San Salvador. Cabrera said Guatemala would be ready to attend a summit at any time, adding that his government respected Arias' reasons for postponing the date. In Managua, President Ortega said, "President Arias' position has maintained an inflexible position regarding his decision not to attend the meeting." He added that Salvadoran President Duarte is sounding out his counterparts on tentative dates in the second half of February for the rescheduling. (Basic data from Notimex, 01/06-08/89; AP, 01/08-09/89; AFP, 01/10/89)

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