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Salvadoran Rebel Leader Ferman Cienfuegos On Arena Government's Plans, Guerrilla Response

by Deborah Tyroler

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[Eduardo Sancho, alias Comandante Ferman Cienfuegos, is one of five members of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) General Command. Cienfuegos has been a guerrilla for nearly 20 of his 41 years. The rebel commander was interviewed in May in Cabanas department during a rebel offensive. The interview below appeared in an 05/28/89 report by the Regional Coordination for Economic and Social Research of Central America and the Caribbean (CRIES, Managua).] CRIES: How do you interpret the results of the [March 19 presidential] elections?

Cienfuegos: US plans included the possibility of ARENA [Nationalist Republican Alliance] coming to power. ARENA understood this and prepared itself to take office, making its leadership and what it said more suitable. That's why [ARENA founder and former major Roberto] D'Aubuisson was replaced by someone more "moderate" like Alfredo Cristiani. This does not mean there are two competing tendencies inside ARENA. Instead, there is a division of labor wherein some put forward a moderate image and others do the dirty work. The election results are the product of a strategy to take power that ARENA outlined after signing a pact with the Christian Democrat Party (PDC) at Apeneca in 1983. The pact was the beginning of the Reagan administration's attempts to create a political cover or facade for its low intensity warfare strategy. The pact was a "bipartisan" arrangement allowing one or the other party to win the elections. It's a system of restricted pseudo-democracy, in which only the two parties signing the pact have access to freedom of action, organization, and propaganda. In the elections, everything was stacked in favor of the bipartisan system that the US wants to impose on El Salvador in imitation of its own system of alternating parties. ARENA became stronger by taking up the call for change. The PDC lost control of the Legislative Assembly and then split apart. The PDC also lost control of the judiciary. The executive was then blocked, incapable of executing anything. Apparently, the Armed Forces stood aside from the bipartisan struggle, acting as an...institution that would guarantee the pact imposed by the US. However, there is a separate pact between the Armed Forces and the US on which economic and military aid depends. Recently, ARENA initiated efforts to exercise direct control over the Armed Forces. The US, with the aim of adapting the Apeneca pact to the current situation, acted to become a partner of sorts with ARENA in such efforts. But, the Armed Forces are not really controlled by ARENA, since they are dependent on the US. CRIES: What are the major aims underlying the FMLN's latest proposal for negotiations? Cienfuegos: We proposed that a real democratic process be opened up. Our proposal implies that the electoral route can be a political way out of the crisis via identifying another government. The FMLN does not propose to disarm or surrender, nor do we propose to commit political suicide. After negotiations a cessation of hostilities would begin toward creating a situation in which the causes of the war could disappear. The FMLN is looking for an end to the shooting and the start of a process to end the armed struggle. Before a cease-fire or verification as put forward in the Esquipulas agreements take place, negotiations that would focus on addressing the causes of the war would first have to occur. If not, the war will be reactivated. The crisis of legitimate power and the current situation of struggles to seize power continue because the causes of the war and the structural crisis have not been resolved. Cristiani is buying time until
October, the date for the approval of new US aid which is the first thing that he has to guarantee. Until then, he will put on a moderate face. CRIES: With ARENA coming to power, will there be a reshuffling of the alliances of Salvadoran political forces? Cienfuegos: The political maturity exists for there to be a unification of all the organizations opposed to the military dictatorship of the oligarchy. Today, more than ever, it's easy to understand that the dictatorship exists. With [outgoing Christian Democrat President Jose Napoleon] Duarte, it was more difficult to clearly see the continued existence of a counterinsurgency dictatorship since he carried out a program of reforms. The dictatorship today has nothing to offer the people and it cannot claim that it supports national unity. The oligarchy does not have the historical or practical capacity to be able to combine forces and interests with the popular sectors. There is concern among members of the popular movement over ARENA's rise to power. They will have to find ways to defend themselves from the attacks by the state, and to form a very large popular opposition. CRIES: What will ARENA do about the mass organizations? Cienfuegos: The oligarchy, in order to secure its victory, has budgeted for a quota of death. Our intelligence sources have told us of a three-phase plan. The first is to get rid of the leadership of the popular movements. They have a list of some 2,000 leaders including those of the UNTS [National Union of Salvadoran Workers], the UNOC [National Union of Workers and Campesinos], the CTS [Salvadoran Workers' Central], and some Christian Democrats. During this phase, the Armed Forces, in the capacity of soldiers and government security agents, will not have to come into play, since they figure that heavily armed civilian groups can kill these 2,000 leaders. The second part of the plan consists of another round of massacres in the countryside such as those which occurred in 1975 and 1982. They will go into the villages and exterminate families that are part of the FMLN's network of collaborators. This means killing groups of 40 or 50 in each village in order to instill terror. This phase of massive extermination would have the cutting edge of psychological warfare as well. The third phase of the plan is to wipe out a large number of people who support the FMLN. One sector of the army disagrees with this plan, which is being promoted by ARENA's military committee inside the Armed Forces. Coercion and selective repression of the media, and the recent killings of journalists are elements of the plan. One of the objectives is to make foreign journalists shy away because of fear so that international repercussions are reduced. They will try to provide a legal cover to all these activities. The Legislative Assembly will pass laws to provide cover for the arrests or disappearances of people, or to justify actions by the Armed Forces in this new phase of the war. This plan actually originated during a 1975 meeting between members of the oligarchy and some military officers. At that time, then-major Roberto D'Aubuisson, and Colonel Romero, who later became president, put forward the idea that it was no problem to do away with some 100,000 people. The discussion at that meeting has been revived by a group controlled by Sigfredo Ochoa [vice president of the Legislative Assembly] and D'Aubuisson, and by a group within the oligarchy led by Orlando de Sola. CRIES: Can the popular organizations defend themselves, or will ARENA be able to implement this plan? Cienfuegos: The FMLN won't stand by with its arms folded. There are also various factors on the international level that would block such massive repression. In the US itself, it is clear that any authorization of large-scale massacres will carry a very high political cost. The United States Congress cannot long support a policy with such a high degree of disrespect for human rights. CRIES: Will the FMLN change its military strategy now that ARENA is in power? Cienfuegos: The FMLN won't stand by with its arms folded. There are also various factors on the international level that would block such massive repression. In the US itself, it is clear that any authorization of large-scale massacres will carry a very high political cost. The United States Congress cannot long support a policy with such a high degree of disrespect for human rights. CRIES: Will the FMLN change its military strategy now that ARENA is in power? Cienfuegos: The FMLN won't stand by with its arms folded. There are also various factors on the international level that would block such massive repression. 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we did not do this; we hit the war economy related to electricity, transport, and communications. It was a war of sabotage directed at the economic power of the state. But with a state of the oligarchy, the war against the economy of the oligarchy will be intensified, hitting its property and its means of production. The actions which we have already carried out are an indication of what is to come: destruction that would leave the oligarchy without means of production. They would be left with just the army, the government, and US aid. And there's already nothing in which to invest this aid. There cannot be a Taiwanese process here; this isn't Hong Kong. The little dragons cannot grow here. So the FMLN's message is clear: Let's negotiate, now! First we negotiate, because we're not going to stop the war until there are real negotiations. Without real negotiations, the war will intensify to the point where the country will be left in ruins. We have offered an opportunity to the private sector and we believe that there are important businesspersons who want to see negotiations. But the problem is with those inside ARENA like D'Aubuisson, Valdes, and Cristiani, who are behind the death squads and who really do not represent the interests of all economic groups. Within the Armed Forces, there are officers who want negotiations and peace, but there's been no way to hold talks with them. The US has done everything to block anything like that. We have sent a very serious letter to those officers, putting forward the need for dialogue. CRIES: Given the current situation, is the FMLN going to prioritize the political struggle? Cienfuegos: Our April 6 proposal aims at making it clear that there is a chance to save the country from having to live through more military conflict. The US is once again lining itself up with a minority and, in practice, what they are doing is obstructing the negotiations process, even though they have not dismissed it. Our proposal shows there are opportunities to resolve the problem using political means. The FMLN militarily has defeated numerous kinds of war strategies and will continue to defeat all the new ones. Right now, the FMLN is on the offensive. In other words, the only way to resolve the conflict is to have the FMLN participate in a national search for a political solution. We are saying to the US that war is costly. Peace is cheaper.

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