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El Salvador: Divergent Interpretations Of Central American Summit Agreement

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In an Aug. 13 report, Notimex cited political analysts who said that the Aug. 8 Central American summit agreement could provoke yet another political crisis in El Salvador. President Alfredo Cristiani had barely returned from Tela, Honduras, when the war of words began. On one side are the government, the rightists and the military, and on the other, opposition parties, popular organizations and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). The summit agreement called on the FMLN to offer a cease-fire with the objective of creating appropriate conditions for dialogue with the government. The five Central American presidents also agreed to provide support for demobilization of the FMLN. For the right and the military hierarchy, the agreement marked the beginning of the end for the guerrillas, and a victory in the international arena for the government, and especially the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA). In contrast, the FMLN released a communique asserting that the agreement constituted a victory for the region's democrats and revolutionary struggle since the presidents joined forces for the demobilization of the Nicaraguan contras, and called on the Salvadoran government to negotiate with the rebels. Since its founding, ARENA has opposed negotiations as the means to end the civil war. The summit agreement could be interpreted at the very least as a rejection of "total war" as a solution to the conflict, advocated by a large number of ARENA stalwarts. Military leaders and so-called ARENA hardliners argue that the text of the agreement calls for dialogue without negotiations. In the words of Defense Minister Gen. Humberto Larios, the dialogue would provide an opportunity for the two sides to exchange ideas and discuss "specific issues." With the FMLN, said Larios, "there is nothing to negotiate." With the exception of a statement announcing the victory of democratic forces in the region, as of Aug. 13, the FMLN had remained silent on the summit agreement. The rebel command sent a proposal to President Cristiani via opposition parties. The FMLN suggests several mechanisms to initiate the dialogue-negotiation, such as ensuring a role for opposition parties and the Catholic Church in the search for a political solution to the war. According to the military hierarchy, and the Salvadoran right, the summit agreement calls on the FMLN to cease hostilities prior to dialogue. Moreover, any talks with the rebels are to be "indirect," i.e., without direct participation by the government and the military. In his first statement after the summit, Cristiani said he was willing to initiate a "direct, permanent" dialogue "without conditions." Democratic Convergence leader Guillermo Ungo told Notimex that the interpretations of the summit agreement by the extreme right and the military have effectively forestalled progress toward meaningful dialogue or negotiations. He said that "the army demands that peace first be established before it will accept negotiations for peace." In reference to the military hierarchy's refusal to countenance negotiations with the rebels, Hector Oqueli of the Revolutionary National Movement (MNR) said that although Cristiani is willing to negotiate, he is not capable of doing so. (Basic data from Notimex, 08/13/89)

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