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Salvadoran Government & Rebel Delegations Meet In Mexico City; FMLN Offers Peace Proposal

by Deborah Tyroler

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For the first time since President Alfredo Cristiani took power on June 1, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) and Cristiani's government agreed to participate in "preliminary" talks to eventual peace negotiations. Delegations from both sides commenced private talks in Mexico City on Sept. 13. (See CAU 09/08/89, 09/13/89 for discussion of events leading to the talks.)

According to delegation members from both sides, the talks on Sept. 13 and 14 were marked by disagreement. Government representatives were focused on procedural issues, while the rebel delegation wanted to discuss elements of their peace proposal. The delegations were also divided on whether negotiating sessions should take place without the presence of observers or Roman Catholic Church mediators. The government has not presented a peace plan. Instead, the delegation arrived with a proposal calling for two days of talks every two months. The FMLN representatives said they preferred regular talks every 30 days, and that the agenda must include substantive negotiations toward ending the war. At a press conference on Sept. 13, rebel delegation chiefs Joaquin Villalobos and Schafick Handal described the three stages of the FMLN's peace proposal. The first calls for a ceasefire by Nov. 15, broad reforms including appointment of a new Supreme Court and Justice Minister, redesigning electoral legislation, moving up legislative and municipal elections scheduled for 1991, cessation of repression, establishing a special procedure to identify and prosecute persons responsible for the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, and prosecution of "all persons implicated in the death squads." The second phase would involve legalization of a political party comprised of FMLN leaders and activists and the rebels' existing communications media and networks; and the continuity of certain economic reforms commenced by the government of President Jose Napoleon Duarte, mainly agrarian reform. The third phase would include negotiations for the definitive cessation of hostilities no later than Jan. 31, 1990, the total integration of the FMLN into the nation's political life; and constitutional and electoral reforms formulated by all political parties, legally constituted and "in formation"; reorganization of El Salvador's several security forces into a single military force under the control of and orders by elected civilians, and a reduction in the number of troops "strictly necessary for national defense." Another element of the final phase would see the FMLN and the government requesting that Washington replace military aid to El Salvador with funds for economic and social reconstruction. Villalobos and Handal insisted on the presence of international observers during future negotiations, and of the Catholic Church as mediator. The FMLN has proposed, they said, that the observers be appointed by the United Nations and the Organization of American States. The two multilateral organizations, they added, could select Mexican diplomats to serve as witnesses. Handal said the government's refusal to accept proposals regarding a moderator/mediator and witnesses is evidence of its intransigence. According to Villalobos, the government was apparently interested in the Mexico City talks as part of its dilatory tactics, while the FMLN was attending with the aim of bringing an end to the war as soon as possible. Bishop Romeo Tovar Astorga, a witness at the talks selected by the government, said the rebel demand for prosecution of Archbishop Romero's assassins is rather "partisan," given that "the armed
struggle...has caused more than 70,000 deaths." The bishop added that acceptance of this rebel demand implies discriminating against the dignity of the many thousands of other Salvadorans killed and otherwise damaged in the fighting. On Sept. 14, Handal told reporters the government's concern for procedural matters is "very restrictive." Auxiliary Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chavez, attending the talks as an observer, told reporters that if the peace talks achieve progress toward ending the war in 1990, the Salvadoran Church would invite Pope John Paul II to attend the signing of peace accords. He said that the Pope is scheduled to visit El Salvador in May 1990. In San Salvador, Deputy Defense Minister Col. Orlando Zepeda called the rebel proposal to reorganize and reduce the size of the armed forces a thinly disguised attempt to seize power. Also in San Salvador, Guillermo Ungo, general secretary of the Revolutionary National Movement (MNR), told reporters that before negotiating with the rebels, President Cristiani must first negotiate with El Salvador's "real power": the armed forces, and wealthy business interests in the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA). Although the peace process is now "irreversible," said Ungo, the two sides are still far apart, and their strategies and timeframes are different. Ungo said the government is beginning to recognize everyone must pay a price for peace. At present, government officials, he added, are attempting to achieve a peace for which they give up nothing or an insignificant price. The leftist political leader stated that the FMLN has demonstrated great flexibility. For instance, he said, the rebels have suspended economic sabotage and decreed a 10-day unilateral ceasefire as a goodwill gesture. Meanwhile, he added, all the government does is demand more and more, and gives nothing. In reference to the government delegation's "procedural" proposal, Ungo said it is an offer to realize "a clandestine dialogue without mediation, without a negotiator, and without witnesses." (Basic data from AP, Xinhua, 09/14/89; New York Times, 09/14/89; and several reports by Notimex, 09/13/89, 09/14/89)

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