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Salvadoran Peace Talks: Summary

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On Sept. 13-14 in Mexico, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the Salvadoran government agreed to participate in monthly talks with the ultimate objective of ending the civil war. Both sides agreed to avoid withdrawing from the talks. The first session of the peace talks was scheduled for Oct. 16-17 in Costa Rica. The site for the talks was a Roman Catholic convent, located in Moravia, a town six miles northeast of San Jose. Heading the FMLN delegation in Costa Rica were FMLN commanders Joaquin Villalobos and Shafik Handal. Members of the government delegation included Presidency Minister Col. Juan Antonio Martinez Varela; Justice Minister Oscar Santamaria; and, personal representative of President Alfredo Cristiani, David Escobar Galindo. San Salvador Auxiliary Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chavez and two other Salvadoran bishops were present at the talks. According to some media sources, the Roman Catholic bishops acted as mediators, while others reported they served as witnesses. Next, the government agreed to a request by the FMLN that representatives of the United Nations and the Organization of American States attend as witnesses. Vicente Juan Segura, secretary of the Vatican's representative in Costa Rica, was also present as a witness. Col. Vinicio Machuca, commander of El Salvador's National Police, and Col. Mauricio Vargas, commander of the 3rd Infantry Brigade were also in San Jose. The two colonels said they were acting as advisers to the government delegation, and would not directly participate in the talks with the FMLN. Steven McFarland of the US embassy in San Salvador traveled to San Jose to "follow" the peace talks. According to Notimex, an FMLN proposal that the US representative participate in the discussions was rejected by the government. Summarized below are initial proposals by the FMLN and the government, followed by highlights of events and statements related to the peace talks in Costa Rica. FMLN proposal (first presented in Mexico, and elaborated in Costa Rica) At the Mexico meeting, the FMLN offered to participate in joint deliberations with the Salvadoran military to implement a temporary cease-fire by Nov. 15. For the first time, the FMLN proposed that it would form a political party and run candidates in future elections. A definitive cease-fire and FMLN participation in national electoral politics would be contingent on the government's agreement to undertake a series of social, political, military and constitutional reforms. Elements of the reforms are as follows: * Advancing the date for legislative elections scheduled for March 1991. A series of detailed reforms was suggested toward guaranteeing political pluralism, including restructuring the National Electoral Council. * Increasing the number of deputies in the unicameral legislature equivalent to one for each 40,000 citizens. * Reorganization and reform of the armed forces, including reduction in size, separation of civilian police and army, effective subordination of the military and the police to civilian authorities under a democratic government framework, and a prohibition on the Salvadoran military from entering into alliances and treaties with any foreign military organization or government. * Suspension of repression against civilians, and measures to ensure respect for Salvadorans' human rights and civil liberties. * Establishment of a commission comprised of representatives of the FMLN, the government, the OAS, and the UN to monitor human rights in El Salvador. * Emergency economic measures to guarantee minimum nutrition, health care and employment for Salvadorans. (Unemployment is estimated at 50%). * Implementation of an agrarian reform program effectively suspended in 1983. Included here would be established limits to farm size, pardon of debt owed by low-income and
landless peasants, and indemnization of former owners of expropriated land by the government. On the morning of Oct. 17, the FMLN called for the removal of 18 senior commanders who are directing the war. Defense Minister Gen. Humberto Larios; air force commander Gen. Juan Rafael Bustillo, and numerous brigade commanders were named. The military has been linked to most of the human rights abuses occurring during the civil war in the last nine years. Of the over 70,000 Salvadorans who have died since 1980, most were killed by the army and death squads aligned with it. In Costa Rica, the FMLN requested that the Permanent Committee on National Debate for Peace participate in the peace talks. A total of 76 political, religious, and civic organizations have joined the Committee, created last year by the Catholic Church to pressure for a negotiated solution to the civil war. Government proposal In brief, the government's proposal calls for a definitive cease-fire prior to negotiating political reforms and democratization. * Suspension of activities by the FMLN and its "support organizations" on Oct. 18. The proposal specifies the FMLN suspend "actions and hostilities that affect the civilian population," the use of mines, sabotage against the nation's economic infrastructure, and "all other acts implying violence against public order, persons and property." * Rebel organizing to participate in elections and national political life would begin immediately. * The rebels would begin demobilization at the latest by Jan. 15, 1990. * The government promises to halt offensive military operations "without prejudice that the armed forces carry out their constitutional duties," and to implement a series of measures to incorporate the rebels into the "democratic process." Included are food, medical assistance and other unspecified necessities. The halt in offensive military operations is described as "all aggression or hostile acts that affect national life in political, economic, social and military spheres by means of psychological, armed and conspiratorial actions and techniques against all civilian and military objectives." * Establishing agreements for legally constituted political, labor union and civic organizations to develop respective activities in a peaceful and legal manner. * The International Support and Verification Commission (CIAV) created under the Tela accords (August 1989 Central American summit) would be requested to monitor fulfillment of peace accord provisions. * Pope John Paul II and the secretaries general of the United Nations and the Organization of American States would be requested to monitor fulfillment of peace accord provisions. * Pope John Paul II and the secretaries general of the United Nations and the Organization of American States would be requested to monitor fulfillment of peace accord provisions. * Pope John Paul II and the secretaries general of the United Nations and the Organization of American States would be requested to monitor fulfillment of peace accord provisions. * Pope John Paul II and the secretaries general of the United Nations and the Organization of American States would be requested to monitor fulfillment of peace accord provisions. Oct. 16: At 11:15 a.m., Costa Rican President Oscar Arias opened the talks by calling on both sides to reach agreement on a cease-fire and end the civil war "in the spirit of" Esquipulas II. Earlier in the day, Arias met separately with the two delegations, and urged them to scale down respective demands to make compromise possible. In a public speech on Monday, Arias asserted that El Salvador must stop the violence. He said, "War never solved anything. There are no winners or losers." Addressing both delegations, he added, "You must not leave here as accomplices of more war and more bloodshed." Unidentified rebel spokespersons cited by Notimex said that Arias' presumed impartiality supported the government proposal for the FMLN's unconditional surrender, or a cease-fire prior to discussion of establishing democracy in El Salvador and the incorporation of the rebels into the political process. At a press conference Monday night, FMLN commanders Villalobos and Handal said the government's unilateral cease-fire plan, which leaves the causes of the civil war intact, would not work. Both sides would engage in constant violations of the cease-fire such as has occurred in Lebanon. After noting that "we are not the Nicaraguan contras," Villalobos said that unconditional surrender is simply not acceptable. He added that a definitive cease-fire and long-term peace are premised on resolving the political, economic, and social causes of the Salvadoran conflict. Handal said the governing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) "should also assume the pledge of terminating aggression against citizens...[I]n El Salvador the state has no limits on violating human rights." In San Salvador late Monday night two persons
were injured when troops opened fire to disperse participants in a vigil to demonstrate support for the peace talks organized by the Permanent Committee on National Debate for Peace. The vigil began at 8:00 p.m., and was to conclude at noon Oct. 17 in the Metropolitan Cathedral. Oct. 17: Villalobos reiterated that the government's offer amounted to no more than "a call for unconditional surrender." He told journalists the government proposal was "absurd, illogical and inflexible." Villalobos said, "The war cannot be ended through magic and without attacking the causes which have given rise to the conflict...Basically, the government proposal is to stop the fighting, without basis or discussion simply silence the guns." Justice Minister Santamaria, head of the government delegation, called the proposal "serious and responsible." He reiterated that dismantlement of the guerrillas must precede any "talk on democratization." He made no comment on the FMLN's proposals. Government spokesperson Martinez Varela denied the offer was merely a scheme to get the rebels to disarm. "We are not asking anyone to surrender," he said. He refused to answer further questions. According to a statement by the armed forces press office, at 7:00 a.m. a group of unidentified persons attacked with automatic weapons a car driven by the daughter of Col. Ricardo Casanova Vejar in the town of Santa Tecla (west of San Salvador). Ana Isabel Casanova, a 23-year-old university student, was killed about a block from her home. Col. Casanova is director of the Armed Forces Studies Center (CEFA) and former director the Gerard Barrios military academy. In a communique released in Costa Rica, the government attributed the assault to FMLN "terrorist commandos." The statement said that the incident "confirms that the FMLN is developing...a terrorist plan consisting in part of assassinations of public officials and their families." In a telephone call, Cristiani told members of the government delegation in Costa Rica to present formal protests to the FMLN commanders. At a press conference, Col. Jorge Antonio Medrano, commander of the 1st military detachment headquartered in Chalatenango, blamed the FMLN for the killing. On Tuesday morning, at least one radio station in San Salvador received a telephone call from a person stating that the FMLN claimed responsibility for the attack in an effort to pressure the government to stop its repression. In a statement released in El Salvador, rebel leaders said, "It is totally false that urban commandos from the FMLN killed Miss Isabel Casanova. We reiterate it is not FMLN policy to make attempts against the lives of relatives of military chiefs." The statement said the killing was part of the "psychological warfare" waged against the FMLN by the Salvadoran military high command's intelligence division and press office. "It is highly suspicious that this occurs just when [the Costa Rica] meeting is taking place, and that the military quickly blamed the FMLN for the attack," it said. In Costa Rica, FMLN commander Mercedes Letona asserted that the Front had nothing to do with Ms. Casanova's death. She said it appeared to be a provocation instigated by top-ranking military officers to forestall a negotiated solution to the civil war. Letona noted that "anyone" can call a radio station and claim he or she is with the FMLN. [Foreign and local media sources pointed out that the wording and rationale contained in the statement called in to the radio station did not seem to match prior FMLN claims for responsibility in assassination and sabotage cases.] Letona protested the violence perpetrated against members of the Permanent Committee on National Dialogue for Peace by troops pertaining to the 1st Infantry Brigade. Auxiliary Bishop Rosa Chavez said, "Mutual accusations get us nowhere. This is the past we are trying to overcome." On Tuesday evening, Rosa Chavez told reporters that despite a breakdown in the discussions in the afternoon, the peace talks would be resumed Wednesday morning. President Arias made a surprise visit to the site of the talks. Rosa Chavez said that given both delegations' unwillingness to discuss the other side's peace proposal, the Catholic bishops had suggested instead concrete pledges by both sides to "humanize the conflict" and "reduce the level of violence." Rosa Chavez said that the bishops' objective was to create mutual trust, and an environment more propitious for dialogue and
discussion on the major proposals. Examples of possible actions by the government are suspensions of air attacks and bombings of villages and other civilian targets, and military operations involving interrogation, arrest and detention of civilians without court orders or other judicial processes. Possibilities for the FMLN would be suspension of sabotage operations and large-scale military offensives to expand territorial control. (Basic data from several reports by Notimex, AP, Xinhua, AFP, 10/16/89, 10/17/89; New York Times, 10/18/89)

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