

8-22-1990

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Recommended Citation

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Fourth Round Of Peace Talks Between Salvadoran Rebels & Government: Summary Of Events & Statements

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Category/Department: General

Published: Wednesday, August 22, 1990

The fourth round of UN-mediated peace talks between the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) and President Alfredo Cristiani's government commenced Aug. 17 in San Jose, Costa Rica. The talks were scheduled to conclude on Aug. 22. The FMLN delegation was comprised of Shafik Handal, Eduardo Sancho, Ferman Cienfuegos and Francisco Mena Sandoval. Justice Minister Oscar Santamaria heads the government delegation along with Col. Mauricio Vargas. Alvaro de Soto, personal envoy of UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar, acted as mediator. The third round of talks produced the first agreement since the mediated discussions commenced. The two sides agreed to invite the UN to organize an international team to monitor the observation of human rights in El Salvador. The UN effort is to commence after the two sides enter into a cease-fire. Prior to the third round, both sides established Sept. 15 as a deadline date for establishing cease-fire terms. The agenda of the fourth round centered on the military. Since the conclusion of the third round, the FMLN's position has not changed, i.e., military personnel numbers must be reduced, and officers accused of human rights abuses must be removed. Other items on the agenda included electoral, judiciary and constitutional reforms, social welfare issues, and international supervision to ensure that agreement terms are fulfilled. Aug. 17: Rebel delegate Miguel Saenz announced that the FMLN had developed a new proposal calling for immediate establishment of the UN observer team, or prior to a cease-fire agreement. The FMLN also proposed dismantlement of the armed forces, and a purge of officers accused of human rights abuses "which does not mean a military witch hunt." In addition to demanding prosecution of persons responsible for the assassinations of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the six Jesuit priests, the FMLN proposed investigation of 20 additional specific cases, as well as "all the crimes, murders, disappearances and massacres committed since 1979 (and) the murders, massacres and bombardments of civilians that have occurred during the negotiations." Justice Minister Santamaria said that the government had prepared no new initiatives for the fourth round on the military question. He added that the government is committed to previous statements on such issues, or that the armed forces will be subordinated to the existing democratic system. Aug. 18: Notimex reported that the Permanent Committee for National Debate (CPDN) comprised of 73 political, religious, union and civic organizations had described the FMLN proposal for demilitarizing Salvadoran society as positive, "clear and specific." According to CPDN coordinator Rev. Oscar Palacios, minimal agreements during the fourth round on the armed forces are necessary. Under the FMLN's new proposal, the Salvadoran army and the rebel forces would be simultaneously dismantled in a series of stages, each marked by the fulfillment of specific conditions. A CPDN delegation traveled to San Jose, and presented a document outlining the "needs of the Salvadoran people." The delegation also proposed that the Committee become directly involved in the negotiations process. Guillermo Rojas, leader of the National Union of Salvadoran Workers (UNTS), emphasized that demilitarization, an end to military impunity, and a purge of the armed forces hierarchy are mandatory to achieve peace. He told reporters, "For more than 10 years we have been the victims of abductions, assassinations, arbitrary seizures, disappearances and searches of union offices all at the hands of the armed

forces." In a press statement, UN mediator Alvaro de Soto said that "favorable conditions do not exist" for the immediate installation of a UN human rights observer team in El Salvador. A cease-fire, he added, must first be in place to create an "appropriate atmosphere" for the UN team's work to "proceed in full." Col. Vargas said that UN regulations prevent the immediate installation of a human rights observer team, not government opposition. He added that a cease-fire must be in place in order to avoid the possibility of UN team members being caught in weapons crossfire, and subjected to bombings. Vargas told AFP that the FMLN proposal to gradually dismantle both the army and the rebel forces "represents a regression" with respect to prior rounds of peace talks. "Several months ago President Cristiani issued a clear warning, asserting that the existence of the armed forces is not open for discussion. Now the FMLN proposes that it should be done away with." In a letter addressed to President Cristiani and released to the press, the FMLN proposed that a joint government/FMLN commission be created to monitor legal proceedings in case of the six Jesuit priests murdered last November. The commission would report its findings to peace negotiators and the general public. The FMLN reasserted that Cristiani is implicated in the crime since he has publicly acknowledged authorizing a search and seizure operation at the Jesuits' home three days prior to the killings. Aug. 19: According to a report by AFP, both government and rebel negotiators have indicated that establishing terms for a cease-fire before the Sept. 15 deadline defined in May has become unlikely. During a sermon at the cathedral in San Salvador, Auxiliary Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chavez said that the San Salvador Archdiocese had presented to UN mediator De Soto a proposal outlining concrete mechanisms for "confronting the polemical theme of military impunity." The plan consists of means for establishing prosecution, sanction and amnesty procedures within the framework of the nation's constitution. Rosa Chavez outlined certain major obstacles to negotiating peace. He cited military impunity, and the fact that the attitude of "certain instances" of the armed forces have obstructed the investigation of the murders of the Jesuit priests. The prelate also described FMLN conditions for a cease-fire as "excessive," and that they "fuel the pessimism and sense of defeat about the possibilities of achieving peace" in El Salvador. According to Rosa Chavez, the FMLN's position has hardened, and "appears to have regressed on several points." Next, the bishop said he supported the FMLN demand that the agreement on human rights verification signed in July should be "revised and implemented" prior to a cease-fire. In San Jose, FMLN delegate Eduardo Sancho told reporters that the two sides were deadlocked. He said, "At this point, the government delegation does not wish to enter into a serious discussion of the armed forces." At the third round of talks, the government delegation introduced a document outlining what were described as steps in restructuring and upgrading the army. The FMLN said the proposal offered only "cosmetic" changes within the armed forces. Sources close to the rebels were cited by journalists in San Jose as saying that the FMLN has reiterated its plans to intensify attacks against military targets in the absence of any real progress at the peace talks. At a press conference, De Soto said the UN could develop a proposal for purging and restructuring the armed forces if the government and the guerrillas find such action desirable. The mediator said that a UN initiative may facilitate continued discussion, since the two sides appeared to be deadlocked on military issues. De Soto said that conclusion of a cease-fire agreement on Sept. 15 was highly unlikely. Thus, the arrival of a UN monitoring team in El Salvador within the near future was not possible. He added that a UN mission would arrive in El Salvador four to six weeks after a cease-fire agreement. During a press conference, FMLN delegate Mena Sandoval, a former military officer who defected and joined the rebels, said that Col. Vargas had ordered summary executions and participated in the decapitation of "prisoners" in Santa Ana department. Consequently, he added, the colonel does not have the "moral authority to defend the military institution." According to

Mena Sandoval, Vargas was a founding member of the Organization for Freedom from Communism (OLC), a death squad responsible for the murders of hundreds of Salvadorans. When Vargas was put in charge of the 2nd Infantry Brigade in Santa Ana in 1980, corpses bearing notes reading "death for betrayal of the fatherland" began appearing in roadways, garbage dumps and other locations. "Vargas claimed that at he was acting in the name of the institution and ordered his troops to parade in front of the cadavers in order to inspire us," Mena Sandoval said. Questioned about these accusations, Vargas said, "I came here to resolve problems and to bring peace to our country, not to polemicize...It is the people in (Santa Ana) who can say what my trajectory during 10 years of service was. The problems we are trying to resolve do not have a name. The individual characterizations with attacks on institutions or persons must not be allowed to affect the negotiating table." Mena Sandoval responded by saying that "the question of the armed forces is the ulcer eating away at the negotiations," and insisted that whatever accord is reached will be marginal unless a purge of the military is carried out. Referring to an Oct. 15, 1979 coup led by young military officers which he participated in prior to joining the guerrillas, Mena Sandoval said, "We attempted an institutional move to reorient the armed forces. We were able to depose 40 colonels, but we made the error of leaving in place five who later occupied the high command and worsened the split from the people." According to Mena Sandoval, the 1979 action was the first attempt to effect a military purge. Ten years of civil war "has given us the right to question the armed forces," he said, adding that the FMLN petition to dissolve the military and the guerrilla forces is not unrealistic. Aug. 20: Participants said that the talks were deadlocked over FMLN demands that the army be dismantled, and military officers responsible for political murders be punished. Minister Santamaria called the FMLN demands a setback. "The introduction of new documents with further demands alters and distorts the course of the negotiation. It (the FMLN proposal) is not in accord with the seriousness of the peace process," he said. FMLN sources reiterated that if accords are not reached soon they will launch another military offensive. According to AP, rebel commanders have noted in private three factors which render the army more vulnerable at present than at any point in recent years: the impact of last year's rebel offensive, the implication of several officers in the murder of the Jesuit priests, and the imminent reduction of US military aid. On Monday evening, the FMLN attacked an army barracks in San Salvador across the street from President Cristiani's residence. Military sources reported that seven civilians were wounded and one died as a result of the attack. Aug. 21: In San Jose, Minister Santamaria described the attack as a "flagrant violation" of the human rights accords signed in July, as they provoked "death and injury to the civilian population." Although the UN observer team has not yet been installed, "both sides owe a moral commitment to begin respecting the rights of civilians," he said. UN mediator De Soto called on both sides to continue the negotiations, pointing that the military has launched several attacks during previous talks and in those instances discussions continued. Col. Vargas acknowledged the fact of military attacks during previous negotiations. However, he justified the earlier attacks since they took place "in remote areas of the country," and because there were no civilian casualties. (Basic data from Notimex, 08/15/90, 08/17-19/90, 08/20/90; AFP, 08/18/90, 08/19/90; ACAN-EFE, 08/19/90; AP, 08/18/90, 08/20/90, 08/21/90)

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