

4-5-1991

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### Recommended Citation

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## **Salvadoran Rebel & Government Delegations Commence Talks In Mexico Aimed At Arranging Ceasefire By May 30**

*by Deborah Tyroler*

*Category/Department: General*

*Published: Friday, April 5, 1991*

In March, at a meeting of Central American foreign ministers in Managua, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) presented a proposal to "accelerate" the peace talks. (See CAU 03/20/91.) In summary, the rebels suggested simultaneous focus on conditions for a ceasefire to begin before May 30, reforms to the nation's constitution, and restructuring of the armed forces. Since then, both sides agreed to convene for a marathon round of peace talks in Mexico, beginning on April 4, one year after the Salvadoran government and the rebels accepted United Nations mediation in peace talks. The "semi-private" talks at an undisclosed location in Mexico may last for 20 days. The delegations are headed by Presidency Minister Oscar Santa Maria, and deputy chief of the army high command, Col. Mauricio Vargas. The rebel delegation is headed by FMLN general command chiefs Shafick Handal and Joaquin Villalobos. According to several news media sources, at least 41 persons are participating in the talks. Summarized below are highlights of statements and events surrounding the talks. \* FMLN sources said recently that a mandate for constitutional reform must be passed on from the current National Assembly, since two successive assemblies must approve any constitutional amendments. The current Assembly's three-year term expires at the end of April. The new legislature, comprised of deputies elected on March 10, will convene later in the year. If the current assembly does not act on reforms, the next two assemblies would be expected to, and that could mean a three-year wait. Assuming the current Assembly mandates amendments to the constitution, and the new Assembly ratifies the mandate, another mechanism to bring the Salvadoran electorate into the process could be adopted. This mechanism may take the form of a referendum, enabling Salvadorans to decide on the specific nature of constitutional reform. \* Rebel field commanders are participating in the peace talks for the first time. Their presence means that detailed negotiations on the mechanics of a ceasefire are on the agenda. Territorial control is a key issue in the ceasefire proposal. Government and rebel armies would be confined to their respective "zones of control" with the assistance of UN forces while negotiations proceed on incorporating the rebels into civilian life, and on concrete measures to implementing the army's new status. Senior military officers refuse to acknowledge that the FMLN controls any portion of national territory. For instance, 1st Infantry Brigade commander Col. Francisco Helena Fuentes made a public statement on April 4 asserting that the rebels have no control over national territory. Consequently, he said, this topic should not enter into the peace talks. On April 3, Raul Hercules, leader of the National Resistance Armed Forces (FARN), and commander of rebel military operations in the central region, and Jorge Melendez (Jonas), leader of the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) and top commander for rebel forces in eastern El Salvador, arrived at the airport in the capital and were flown to Mexico. They were escorted separately by UN representatives and diplomats from Venezuela, Colombia, Spain and Mexico, from conflict zones to the airport. Both commanders were accompanied by a few of their field officers. Other field commanders participating in the talks left the country earlier. Late Tuesday, after arriving at the isolated hamlet of Santa Marta in Cabanas department (120 km. northeast of San Salvador), Hercules spoke with reporters. According to the commander, "We

are at a crucial moment that could end the war. Conditions exist for negotiations and the people can't stand more war." Hercules said the failure of the government and military high command to acknowledge rebel control over a significant portion of Salvadoran territory "is hardly realistic." The FMLN claims to control towns and villages in nine of the country's 14 departments, and "extensive" areas in Chalatenango (north), Cuscatlan, Cabanas and San Vicente (central), Morazan, Usulután and La Unión (east). According to Hercules, "We aren't going to cede anything we control. But neither are we going to insist on territory we don't control." In a Radio Venceremos broadcast on April 4, the FMLN pointed out that rebels have controlled Guazapa hill, located only 30 km. from the capital, since the war began, despite the army's frequent artillery and aerial bombardment over the past 10 years. The rebel spokesperson said, "If we have no area under control, from where are transmitting at this moment?" According to the FMLN, the two sides in the conflict have reached military stalemate. "Over 10 years of war are more than sufficient to determine that the conflict cannot be resolved militarily...Nor can negotiations proceed on the basis of seeking surrender or unilateral disarmament. Military stalemate must be accepted, and respect must be accorded to combatants in order to end the fighting." \* In several statements and communiqués on April 3 and 4, the FMLN asserted that the government had created a "negative environment" for talks aimed at arranging a ceasefire. According to a communiqué broadcast by Radio Venceremos, the military had launched offensive operations throughout the country in an attempt to "provoke" the rebels into a response that would "justify" further delays in substantive negotiations. According to the communiqué, in Chalatenango department during the March 28-April 4 period, about 2,000 soldiers from 17 different companies were carrying out counterinsurgency operations. The escalation in attacks by army troops led to numerous clashes with the guerrillas, resulting in 72 government troop casualties, and 10 soldiers taken prisoner by the rebels. In addition, said the communiqué, the government has applied increased pressure on the Salvadoran news media to avoid airing the FMLN's views on the talks and related matters. A separate statement broadcast by Radio Venceremos said the government must terminate its stepped-up "psychological war tactics," and open up political maneuvering room for all Salvadoran social sectors. If government officials and military officers, said the statement, continue the present campaign of "war-mongering," and threats against the media and supporters of peace negotiations of all occupations and political proclivities, achieving a ceasefire will be extremely difficult, and the talks will wind down. According to the FMLN, the government and military have stepped up propaganda claims about the rebels' "weakness," while simultaneously subjecting religious, humanitarian and civic organizations as well as political opposition parties to a constant barrage of intimidation and threats. \* In a statement to the UN Security Council, Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuellar said the UN-mediated talks in Mexico "could soon lead to a cease-fire under the supervision of the United Nations." He emphasized, however, time restrictions (in reference to the current Assembly's mandate to reform the constitution), and numerous other difficulties which must be overcome by negotiators. Although a peace agreement or ceasefire accord has not yet developed, said Pérez de Cuellar, progress has occurred. He mentioned the agreement on human rights verification concluded last July by the government and the rebels. UN involvement in such monitoring activities would become effective immediately after a cease-fire is declared. In January, said the secretary general, the UN established an office in San Salvador to begin preparations for the monitoring activities, followed by a 10-day visit by UN experts. Pérez de Cuellar said, "I am prepared to present an official proposal to the Council for the creation of a verification...component to a mission I am calling ONUSAL." The ONUSAL would be in charge of all UN functions requested in the event of a peace agreement, and in due time, supervising the separation of combatants, and a ceasefire." UN spokesperson

in Mexico, Mario Zamorano, said Alvaro de Soto, the secretary general's personal representative in peace talk mediation, has confirmed the absence of time limits on the negotiations currently underway. De Soto heads a 10- member UN team of experts in diverse areas, including military affairs. \* On April 4, in San Salvador, members of the National Assembly initiated debate on an eventual mandate to amend the constitution. Participants in the debates include members of the Permanent Committee on National Debate for Peace, headed by the Rev. Edgar Palacios. The Committee is an umbrella organization comprised of over 80 trade union, religious, humanitarian, and small business groups. According to Palacios, the debate is focused on "persuading the ruling Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party of the need to reform the constitution." Roberto Angulo, vice president of the Assembly and high- ranking ARENA leader, said his party is willing to accept reforms "necessary to achieve peace." He added, however, that it is not absolutely necessary to reform the constitution to achieve a cease-fire. (Basic data from several reports by AFP, EFE, Notimex, 04/03/91, 04/04/91; AP, 04/03/91)

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