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Deborah Tyroler

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Peace In El Salvador Possible If U.S. Withdraws

by Deborah Tyroler

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* About one million Salvadorans, one fifth of that country's population, reside in the United States, many as undocumented workers who fled from their war-ravaged country. Between 1980 and 1990 an estimated 80,000 people died in the war in El Salvador a country with five million inhabitants, roughly the amount living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Last month hope for peace in that Massachusetts-sized Central American nation emerged when a right wing government and leftist guerrilla leaders signed a peace accord at the United Nations. Also in September, a San Salvador jury found two Salvadoran army officers guilty of murdering six Jesuit priests. These two events open the door to conflict resolution by United Nations officials. They also provide the United States with a way out of the Salvador morass. The peace agreement has kinks in it, but the conflicting sides of the civil war, President Alfredo Cristiani and the commanders of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) agreed that the guerrillas will disarm under UN supervision, that the repatriated revolutionaries will be eligible to join the police force but not the army. The government conceded that peasants living in zones controlled by the FMLN will keep their land, thus avoiding the kind of dispute that arose in nearby Nicaragua when the issue of land titles led to renewed fighting this year after the 1990 end to the civil war in that country. But conflict resolution in El Salvador will require that the United States breaks its habit of funneling military aid to El Salvador and withdraws its military advisers, so as to allow the UN peace mission to do its job. President Bush pushes Congress to give military aid to the Salvadoran government and simultaneously encourages the UN to settle the affair. He can't have it both ways. Peace in El Salvador means that Washington abandons an attitude of imperial hubris that it inherited from the turn of the Century. In the 1980s alone, the United States had military advisers and covert action operators throughout Central America and the Caribbean; Grenada and Panama were invaded. When it became clear that the recipients of US aid included the murderers of six Jesuit priests in 1989, a furious Congress held up this year's military aid package until the Salvadoran government took action on the killings. To try to get aid released President Cristiani ordered an investigation and in September a Salvadoran jury convicted two army officers of the killings. This was the first time that an officer had been convicted of a crime in El Salvador. The State Department heralded the verdict as evidence of the Salvadoran government's seriousness about protecting human rights. But the murder convictions of Col. Guillermo Benavides, the commander of the Salvadoran Military Academy, and his subordinate Lt. Rene Yushy Mendoza left something to be desired. Rep. Joe Moakley (D-Mass.), chairperson of the House Rules Committee, and head of a congressional task force on El Salvador, expressed his "disappointment with the outcome of the trial." Moakley cited evidence that the military had intimidated the judge and jury, paid the expenses of the defendants and expected President Cristiani to pardon them after the "storm blows over." The guilty verdict appeared to Capitol Hill critics as a cynical deal to get Washington to release the aid money. Benavides and Mendoza were condemned for ordering the killings of the priests and their cook and her daughter. The jury, either ignorant of or parodying Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann, acquitted another officer and the squad of soldiers who admitted their participation in the slayings on the grounds that "they were just following orders." The presiding judge fled the country after the trial. Frightened jury members begged for anonymity. Benavides, said a disgusted US congressperson, "took the rap" for the whole

high command most of whom agreed that the Jesuits merited death because they were the "brains" behind the revolution. One US adviser in El Salvador, Major Eric Buckland, concurred. He told the FBI, which was called in to help investigate the murders, that in war if you advocate human rights you belong to the enemy and "you're going to get your butt kicked." After 80,000 deaths it took one more grizzly incident to push Congress to question paying money to El Salvador when the United States has no apparent stake in the country. The ostensible reason for the continued backing of a government that developed such a notorious reputation was to stop the spread of Soviet communism in the hemisphere. It is now painfully obvious that the Soviets were uninterested in El Salvador or anywhere else in Central America since they could barely maintain themselves. In 1991 the United States has no compelling economic or security interests to protect in the area. The question at the moment is: Can Congress change the outdated interventionist impulse? What useful purpose can be served by providing weapons to a murderous military clique with whom the United States has foolishly identified just as an end to war is in sight? * Saul Landau is a Fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies, Washington, DC.

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