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Deborah Tyroler

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## Guatemala: Peace Negotiations Stagnant

by Deborah Tyroler

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Robinson \* Most diplomats and observers in Guatemala City concur that the fledgling peace negotiations between the government and the guerrillas of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) have stagnated. The central problem is the diametrically opposite approach to negotiations by the two sides. The government regards the rebels as a declining military and political force, and thus concessions at the bargaining table are not necessary. The insurgents consider peace talks as a vehicle through which to seek fundamental economic and political reforms before disarming. In addition, the absence of international mediation and the exclusion of other national organizations have weakened the talks. As a result, few concrete accords are expected in the short to medium term, and, not surprisingly, battlefield activity is intensifying as the negotiations lose steam. The signing of a broad 11-point agenda for negotiations last April (praised by all sides for addressing the most urgent problems facing Guatemala) and the approval of the first preliminary accord on "democratization" in July, raised enthusiasm among Guatemalans. But in four subsequent rounds of talks, the delegations have been unable to progress beyond the first agenda point "democratization," which is considered only a good will statement of ideal goals. Dialogue participants have since reported little if any progress on the second agenda item, human rights. Grueling debate and often acrimonious exchanges characterized the last meeting on October 21-24. President Jorge Serrano postponed further direct meetings between the two sides until basic disagreements are worked out by the National Reconciliation Commission (CNR). The CNR serves as mediator in the talks. Despite the evident stagnation, most observers doubt either side will abandon the table unilaterally, and dialogue is likely to continue, even if indirectly, through the CNR. The URNG has benefitted from unprecedented foreign and national prestige earned through the negotiations, while Serrano continues to promote the peace process as an effective bargaining chip to reduce the government's international isolation. The dialogue is thus a strategic asset for both sides. Three stumbling blocks For now, the talks will likely remain sterile, achieving tediously slow progress, if any. Most sources in Guatemala cite three fundamental obstacles that must be overcome before hard-core negotiations are possible: 1) Rather than seeking consensus over the content of the agenda issues, which would imply mutual concessions, each side appears determined to force the other's capitulation. This converts the bargaining table into a tactical political arena for the military conflict, rather than an authentic forum for negotiations. Government officials have expressed belief that the URNG has been militarily defeated and is now in a state of political decline. The government regards the dialogue as the guerrillas' last chance to down their arms and join the legal political system, or face eventual annihilation. A senior officer participating in the talks explained that Guatemala Army doctrine conceptualizes four classifications for its military adversaries. The first of the four is considered a mere "aggravation" that can do no significant damage to the state. The classifications progress to the fourth in which the military adversary is deemed a "determining force" capable of overthrowing the government. Since the 1980-1983 counterinsurgency drives, says this source, the URNG is only an "aggravation." In the government's view, this places it in a clearly "superior" position in negotiations, whereby far-reaching demands by the rebels are simply dismissed. "The army already defeated the URNG militarily, and now we are giving them the opportunity to return to a productive life," Guatemalan

Vice President Gustavo Espina candidly declared in October. "If they still believe in gaining power by arms, then they are completely nuts. The government will confront all rebel groups around the country with an iron fist, since it seems the only way to make them understand." In contrast, the URNG views the negotiations as a vehicle through which to force the government into basic economic and political reforms. In September, the URNG stated: "The negotiating agenda is, in essence, a minimal platform of revolutionary transformations, and at the same time an instrument through which to obtain them." Most diplomats believe the guerrillas are sincere in their desire to join legal politics. However, the URNG is adamant that its dialogue demands are a prerequisite to disarmament, a position which has led it to inflexibility at the bargaining table. Indeed, after the late October meeting ended in failure, one URNG commander stated that the rebels' human rights proposals are "positions of principle" which "are not negotiable." 2) The lack of international mediation in the negotiations, such as in El Salvador, is seen as a major obstacle in pushing the dialogue forward. Most sources point out that the United Nations' direct mediation in the Salvadoran peace talks chained both sides to the bargaining table during the most difficult periods, since abandoning negotiations would have meant political suicide. In Guatemala, the UN acts as a mere observer to the talks, which are mediated by the CNR. Most observers doubt the CNR commands enough authority to reconcile the delegations' opposing positions. This makes it difficult to overcome the current impasse, since it is now up to the CNR to get the process rolling again. 3) The marginalization of other national groups from the dialogue makes negotiations an elite, exclusive process, rather than a forum through which national consensus for peace could be developed an essential element in ensuring real social and political stability should the URNG disarm. In fact, some influential groups warn they will boycott negotiated accords if they are not allowed to participate. For example, the COMG (Guatemalan Council of Mayan Organizations) is lobbying for a seat at the bargaining table when the agenda issue "Identity and Rights of the Indigenous Population" comes up for discussion. The fragility of the peace process, even if the dialogue does not break down altogether, means any progress will be slow in coming, with no basic accords expected in the short to medium term. This, in turn, could weaken participants' ability to resist outside pressures by "hard line" groups opposed to negotiations. Moreover, the longer the dialogue continues without concrete accords, the weaker national faith in, and support for, the process will become. This is especially the case given the government's continuous and irresponsible claim that a final end to the war will come in December, which has raised false hopes among many Guatemalans. As the dialogue loses steam, battlefield activity is growing more intense. In September, the guerrillas launched 49 offensive assaults throughout the country, up from 25 in August. The September figure was the highest monthly tally since last January, when the URNG topped off a three-month offensive that coincided with the 1990 general elections. Guerrilla activity in September captured front page headlines for days, since the majority of the rebel attacks took place in Escuintla department. Escuintla is economically important, and is located on the southern flank of the capital. In response, the government launched massive counterinsurgency sweeps in early October along the slopes of the towering Agua Volcano (about 48 km. southwest of Guatemala City). URNG units are based on volcano slopes, since the location provides easy access to the Escuintla lowlands and the semi-urban areas surrounding the capital. Both the army and the URNG reported major battles in the Agua Volcano area in October. The rebels claimed the army suffered 105 casualties, and acknowledged six of their own. \* Robinson, a free-lance journalist, resides in Guatemala City.

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