2-21-1992

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El Salvador: Challenges Of Peace, Democracy & National Reconstruction (part 1)

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Category/Department: General
Published: Friday, February 21, 1992

...With the Feb. 1 cease-fire between the government of President Alfredo Cristiani and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), El Salvador entered into a complex and difficult transition period. Signing of the 94-page treaty in Mexico City's Chapultepec Palace on Jan. 16, in the presence of Latin American heads of states and other foreign dignitaries, constitutes a symbolic milestone in Latin American history. The peace accords, which put an end to nearly 12 years of civil war that cost several billion dollars and 80,000 lives, have raised hopes for further pacification and economic recovery in Central America. The accords also set an example of peace-through-negotiations for countries in other parts of the hemisphere, and indeed, throughout the Third World. However, the signing of the accords also opened up an extremely complicated transition, fraught with uncertainties. What the two sides agreed to on paper must now be transformed into reality. Salvadorans face a process of reconciliation, reconstruction and democratization in the context of a highly politicized and polarized society, and widespread poverty aggravated by enormous expectations generated by the prospects for peace. The next few months are sure to be marked by conflicting interpretations of the accords, setbacks, mutual accusations of breaches in compliance, splits within the armed forces, the government and opposition camps, heated political battles and even sporadic violent clashes. Some of the critical issues that Salvadorans face in the transition to peace, democracy and national reconstruction are summarized below. 

An unmitigated economic crisis and delays in reconstruction could generate social tensions that undermine the peace process. The war caused an estimated $1 billion in direct damages plus billions more in indirect losses, a shattered infrastructure, stagnation and even total paralysis of entire industries, and widespread poverty. Foreign aid is considered essential for reconstruction and economic recovery. The Salvadoran government has estimated reconstruction costs at nearly US $2 billion. Some aid is expected from the US, the European Economic Community (EEC), Japan, the "Group of Friends" (Colombia, Mexico, Spain and Venezuela), and multilateral financial institutions. However, in times of austerity, global recession and an international emphasis on free market forces as panacea, it is doubtful that the government will obtain US$2 billion in foreign assistance. For example, after having sent about US$4 billion in economic and military aid to El Salvador during the 1980s, the US has so far pledged only US$250 million for reconstruction. The experience of neighboring Nicaragua is not encouraging in this regard. The government of President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro had hoped to receive about US$2 billion in international relief and reconstruction assistance after the armed conflict in that country was resolved. Since Chamorro took office in April 1990, the government has received less than half that amount. Much of the aid obtained is earmarked for debt relief or consists of loans to support economic liberalization policies, not reconstruction. The peace process is bitterly opposed by the far right. The far right has clearly lost much of the power it once enjoyed. Nonetheless, remnants of the traditional oligarchy, together with far-right factions within the armed forces and certain political parties, including the governing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party, still wield enough influence to attempt sabotage of the transition. A new death squad made its appearance on Jan. 8, only a week before...
the accords were signed. The "Secret Army of National Salvation" issued death threats against 11 members of the National Council of Churches, and accused Catholic Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas and Auxiliary Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chavez of being "communist collaborators." In veiled reference to the far-right threat, Chavez said, "There will be other sources of violence that will remain active...If we want to achieve reconciliation in El Salvador, dismantlement [of death squads and other violence-prone groups] must be the first step." * Over 25% of all Salvadorans (5.4 million) have been displaced by the war. At least 700,000 Salvadorans are in the United States and another 300,000 in neighboring countries. An estimated half a million more are considered internal refugees. Any sudden or massive repatriation especially in the absence of large-scale foreign aid could place enormous strain on existing social infrastructure and exacerbate political tensions. The threat by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service to deport Salvadoran refugees could very well undermine the peace process. Once again, the Nicaraguan experience is instructive. Given the lack of resources to reintegrate repatriated populations, the return of some 250,000 former contra combatants, their family members, and refugee and exile communities from neighboring countries and the US has sharply escalated tensions and contributed to the resurgence of armed movements in the countryside. * The position assumed by the US during the transition period will be crucial. Many consider the US responsible in large part for prolonging the Salvadoran conflict through direct political and military intervention aimed at sustaining repressive and anti-popular regimes. Until 1990, Washington consistently opposed a negotiated solution. Many were encouraged by assurances reportedly given to the FMLN by assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs Bernard Aronson that Washington's war against the Salvadoran rebels has definitively ended and that the US is committed to the reforms outlined in the accords. The same is true regarding statements made by Secretary of State James Baker in San Salvador on Jan. 17 that the US would not tolerate attempts by the far-right to sabotage the peace process. On the other hand, many observers suspect Washington will shift to new forms of political intervention by supporting favored groups in El Salvador through such entities as the quasi-governmental National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Will the US oppose any significant role for the left in post-war reconstruction? Will Washington work openly and/or clandestinely to prevent the left and progressive forces from achieving significant institutional influence, or to come to power through elections, such as occurred in Haiti? (See article by Robinson, NotiSur 01/22/92.) (cont.)

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