2-28-1992

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Guatemala: Next In Line For Peace?

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Category/Department: General
Published: Friday, February 28, 1992

The peace settlement reached in January between the government and rebel forces in El Salvador, following resolution of the Nicaraguan conflict 18 months earlier, has raised hopes among Guatemalans that attention will shift to their country as the last remaining conflict in Central America. However, neither the government of President Jorge Serrano nor the international community seem disposed to attach the same importance to bringing an end to the conflict in Guatemala as they did to those in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Guatemalans were genuinely surprised that their country was hardly even mentioned in the congratulatory speeches given by Latin American heads of state and other dignitaries assembled for the Jan. 16 signing of the Salvadoran peace treaty in Mexico City's Chapultepec Palace. In attendance were all five Central American presidents, representing the countries which signed the Esquipulas peace agreement in August 1987. That agreement paved the way for resolution of the Nicaraguan conflict, gave impetus to the Salvadoran negotiations, and provided the framework for what is now a near-stagnant dialogue between the Guatemalan government and rebels. Yet none of the current Central American leaders mentioned the need to end the war in Guatemala, an armed conflict which has persisted for 31 years, the longest-running insurgency in the hemisphere. Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez exemplified this attitude. During a speech in Chapultepec, Perez proposed that given the resolution of the Salvadoran conflict, the international community should turn its attention to Haiti as the "last remaining issue" blocking peace and democracy in all of Latin America. For Guatemalans, this sentiment was reinforced when US Secretary of State James Baker made stopovers in San Salvador and Managua following the Chapultepec ceremony, ignoring Guatemala both in his itinerary and public speeches. This was interpreted by Guatemalans as a sign that the US does not plan to use its influence to pressure for serious peace negotiations in their country, in contrast to the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran cases. Following high-profile coverage of the Salvadoran accords in the Guatemalan news media, President Jorge Serrano was forced to address the issue publicly on his return from Mexico. According to Serrano, "There are no parallels between the Guatemalan and Salvadoran situations. The Guatemalan rebels are not at the same level as their Salvadoran counterparts." Near-stagnant dialogue Despite dim prospects for a speedy resolution to the armed conflict, direct negotiations between the government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) were resumed January 23-25 in Mexico City, after a four-month impasse. The talks were stalled over issues related to respect for human rights. The peace talks began last April in Mexico City, where agreement was reached on an 11-point agenda for ongoing negotiations. In July, the two sides signed the "Queretaro Accord" on democratization, the first of the 11 points (see Robinson article, CAU 09/13/91). But in three subsequent meetings, the negotiations became deadlocked over the second agenda item, human rights. In November, President Serrano announced that the government was pulling out of direct talks. But communications continued through a so-called "pendular dialogue." Msgr. Rodolfo Quezada Toruno of the Guatemalan Bishops Conference served as message carrier, shuttling between Guatemala City and Mexico. Toruno heads the National Reconciliation Commission (CNR), which is acting as mediator in the negotiations. Despite the resumption of direct dialogue, the two sides are still far from an agreement on the human rights issue. The government rejects
as "unconstitutional" the rebels' call for a "truth and justice commission" similar to that set up in El Salvador to investigate past human rights abuses. Government negotiators also insist that any human rights agreement should be implemented after an overall peace accord and cease-fire is signed. The URNG is demanding immediate human rights agreements, independent of a final resolution to the conflict. In addition, the government delegation is unwilling to uphold the Geneva convention rules of war, since this would imply recognition of the URNG as a belligerent force, something the army refuses to concede. Meanwhile, the Guatemalan insurgent movement has been expanding rapidly over the past few years. URNG leader Carlos Gonzalez recently told daily newspaper Siglo XXI (Guatemala) that in 1991 rebel units were active in over half the nation's 22 departments and brought the war closer to the capital. The URNG claims it inflicted more than 1,700 casualties on government forces in 1991, although the government says only 22 soldiers and five officers were killed last year. For the first time since the counterinsurgency drives of the early 1980s, the rebels are now operating on the outskirts of the capital. This was dramatically demonstrated in a major strike last November in the strategic and well-defended city of Esquintla, just 25 miles southwest of Guatemala City. On Feb. 14, rebels waged an eight-hour battle with government forces after occupying two stretches of the Pan-American Highway, just a few miles southwest of the capital. In early January, recently-appointed Defense Minister Gen. Jose Domingo Garcia declared that "militarily, the guerrillas no longer exist." But Guatemalan newspapers report clashes on a near-daily basis in the southern departments of Esquintla and Retalhuela, in the eastern jungles of El Peten, and in the highlands regions of El Quiche, San Marcos, and Quetzaltenango departments, among other locales. According to URNG Commander Pablo Monsanto, "We can affirm that our actions will continue because the guerrilla movement is on the ascent." He added that the conditions which gave rise to armed insurgency in the first place remain: military impunity, human rights violations and a climate of terror, social injustice and severe economic inequalities. Such an assessment was shared by Bishop Toruno. After the last round of talks, he said, "There are those who genuinely want to see the war end. But it is not so easy; the conflict must be brought to a satisfactory end [by eliminating] social injustice, hunger, corruption and indifference for one's fellow Guatemalans, which is what provoked the war" in the first place. Grisly escalation of human rights violations Meanwhile, observers have cautioned that a wave of renewed political violence and human rights violations in February represents a jittery response by security and paramilitary forces to expectations raised by the Salvadoran peace treaty. On Jan. 30, the eve of the cease-fire in El Salvador, a powerful bomb ripped through the headquarters of the University Students Association (AEU), which had been organizing public forums on the Salvadoran peace process. One day earlier, six leaders from the country's popular organizations, five of them affiliated with the Union and Popular Action Unity (UASP), received death threats from a group calling itself the "Anti-Communist Unity." Death threat targets included Amilcar Mendez of the Runujel Council of Ethnic Communities, Byron Morales of the UASP leadership, Armando Sanchez of the Federation of Public Employees (FENASTEG), Rosalina Tuyuc of the National Coordinator of Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA), Juan Mendoza of the Campesino Unity Committee (CUC), and Nineth de Garcia of the Mutual Support Group (GAM). The five are among the most important popular leaders in Guatemala who have not been killed, driven underground or forced into exile. On Jan. 31, four corpses were discovered in different places around the capital. All had been tortured and shot in the head at point-blank range. According to the GAM, these four brought the "political assassination" toll by death squads since Jan. 1 to 18. In January, several national and international human rights organizations released their 1991 annual reports. Americas Watch noted a sharp deterioration in the human rights situation last year, although it also affirmed "encouraging
"judicial progress" in investigating crimes committed by the military. The Guatemala Human Rights Commission (CDHG) recorded 1,967 violations in 1991, including 764 extrajudicial executions. Twenty-one trade union leaders were among the 764. The Center for Investigation, Study and Promotion of Human Rights (CIEPRODH), the national legislature's human rights committee, and the autonomous Human Rights Attorney General's Office all reported similar statistics. The Human Rights Attorney General's report added that the "principal obstacles regarding human rights were impunity and the Serrano government's lack of political will." Indeed, despite the grim evidence, the government continues to maintain that the reports on human rights abuses can virtually be ignored. In the words of Manuel Conde Orellana, general secretary to President Serrano, the reports consist of "propaganda by organizations close to the URNG who are bent on slandering Guatemala" before the international community. In late January, the foreign ministry launched a "diplomatic offensive," sending high-level delegations to the US, Latin America and Europe, with the aim of countering international criticism of Guatemala's human rights record. In particular, the government fears that a condemnation by the UN Human Rights Commission in session from Jan. 27 to March 6 in Geneva could jeopardize future economic aid from abroad. Military shake-up Despite the fears of a "Salvadoran-style" settlement, implementation of the peace process in El Salvador, and discussion throughout the region of demilitarization and pacification (see "Demilitarization in Central America," CAU 01/17/92 and 01/24/92) will inevitably breathe new life into the Guatemalan talks. Recent changes in the Guatemalan armed forces high command could also contribute to such prospects. In an audacious move last December that sparked rumors of a possible coup d'etat, President Serrano ordered a thorough shake-up of the military's top leadership and at command posts throughout the country. The changes included replacement of Defense Minister Gen. Enrique Mendoza with a Serrano confidant, Gen. Jose Domingo Garcia. Serrano also sent two generals and six colonels from the high command into early retirement and placed officers considered loyal to him in the most important command posts in the capital and at strategic rural garrisons. Throughout 1991 a rift had been developing between Mendoza and Serrano. Mendoza was seen as blocking efforts to prosecute several key human rights cases, and it was widely rumored that the US Embassy had pressured for his replacement. In addition, Mendoza had assumed an increasingly hard-line position regarding negotiations with the URNG. Mendoza complained bitterly that Serrano had fired him "without reason," and that his dismissal was due to pressures from US Ambassador Thomas Strook. The new members of the high command and the new base commanders are considered "moderates" who support military subordination to civilian rule and negotiations with the guerrillas. The US, the Serrano government, and "moderates" within the military who advocate a "National Stability Doctrine" (see "Guatemala: A Democratic Transition?," CAU 02/27/91) share the goals of reducing the military and placing it under greater civilian control, as part of a broader project of economic and political modernization in Guatemala, and in line with changes in US policy throughout the hemisphere. This project includes negotiations with the URNG and some type of social "concertacion" as the only means to achieve stability. However, in this context, peace negotiations are not seen as a vehicle to bring about fundamental reforms in Guatemalan society, but rather as a mechanism for defusing the insurgency and integrating the guerrillas into the existing political system. The government's position is that peace talks should be, above all, a forum for negotiating the terms of guerrilla disarmament and reintegration into civilian life through existing political structures. The army is convinced that it can militarily force the rebels into accepting such an arrangement. In contrast, the URNG sees the talks as a means to address the social, economic and political causes of the war, not unlike the Salvadoran case. The current rebel escalation of military activity is intended to demonstrate that negotiating the
issues which caused the war is the only viable option for peace. Fear of a Salvadoran-style peace settlement. The US suspended military aid to Guatemala in December 1990 in protest over human rights violations. Washington called for reducing the size of the military and for instituting civilian authority over the armed forces. The US government has also threatened to tie future economic aid to progress in key human rights cases. However, US concern has been focused on a handful of high-profile cases, including a US citizen Michael Devine, and Guatemalan anthropologist Mirna Mack, whose brutal murder in mid-1990 captured international headlines. US officials have stated that the resolution of these cases would constitute satisfactory progress in human rights performance. The US State Department's annual report on human rights for 1991 singled out the Guatemalan security forces as major human rights violators and criticized continued impunity. However, the report came under fire from independent human rights monitors because of its assertion that the situation has improved, and because State accepted the Serrano government's claim that many assassinations and disappearances were the results of "common crime." Moreover, the US delegation to the UN Human Rights Commission currently meeting in Geneva has opposed a condemnation of Guatemala. During a Feb. 17 visit to Guatemala, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney praised the Serrano government for progress in human rights and said that military aid might be resumed in 1993. Cheney's statements came just four days after UN special human rights investigator for Guatemala, Christian Tomuschat, declared in a Guatemala City press conference that he had found no indication of an improvement in human rights in 1991, and that impunity and massacres continue. Observers in Guatemala City interpreted Cheney's visit as a sign that the US intends to back the Serrano government in its insistence that there will be no "Salvadoran solution" in Guatemala. The US, the Serrano administration and the Guatemalan military are united behind the objective of stemming the growth of the URNG insurgency so as to avoid a Salvadoran-style settlement which mandates basic socioeconomic and political reforms and opens broad space for grassroots and leftist politics. Guatemala and El Salvador: distinct situations The context for the Guatemalan negotiations is notably different than in the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran settlements. At present, the most important difference between El Salvador and Guatemala is the political and military balance between the insurgency and the popular movement, on the one hand, and the army, government and private sector, on the other. The Salvadoran Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) had developed into an alternative military-political bloc, challenging the government for hegemony over the nation and forcing a situation of dual power and inability to govern in El Salvador. The rebels negotiated from a position of real battlefield strength, consolidated control over a significant portion of national territory, and with a secure social base which the rebels were capable of protecting. The URNG does not wield such military strength nor political influence. The insurgency still operates at the level of ambushes, harassment and a "war of positions" in the hinterland and a few other small areas around the country. The Guatemalan rebels do not control any fixed territory, and therefore cannot provide effective protection to their social base or accumulate forces in a stable rearguard. After a decade of civil war, the dominant bloc in El Salvador was fractured and underwent realignment, the army was divided, and the right too weak and isolated to impose its will or stabilize the country. Although not controlled by the rebels, trade unions, popular movements, and center to left political parties in Salvadoran civil society had converged with the FMLN to bring about an internal correlation of forces that left the government with little choice but to negotiate not just the technicalities of peace, but serious changes in the political system and the status quo. In contrast, years of naked terror and systematic repression in Guatemala have left a desolate and chilling internal political landscape. Popular movements are unable to organize or operate above ground. According to UN investigator Tomuschat, left
and center civic movements are unable to participate in Guatemalan politics without constant fear of repression. Consequently, there is no mass movement at the level of civil society and legal politics to give resonance to the goals of democratization and basic social reform advanced by the insurgency. Writing in Guatemalan daily newspaper Siglo XXI, political columnist Edgar Gutierrez noted that "the asymmetry of internal forces" in favor of the status quo has become an obstacle to progress in the Guatemalan peace talks. Such "asymmetry" has left the government and army convinced that their opponents do not have the strength to force concessions and can be won over to demobilization without being recognized as a belligerent force. Such issues as "the size of the army, the formation of a joint civilian police force, or implementation of an agrarian reform (all points in the Salvadoran settlement) are not even considered by the government as subjects for debate" in the Guatemala talks. For this reason, the URNG views rebel military belligerence as a key factor in bringing about the conditions that will allow for a successful negotiations process, and for its transition from military struggle to political participation. Indeed, the November 1989 FMLN offensive was largely credited for serving as a catalyst for the Salvadoran negotiations process which began in earnest in April 1990. The other crucial factor in the Nicaragua and El Salvador settlements was international pressure which played a key role in tipping the balance on several occasions in stalemated negotiations. Such pressure in Guatemala could well provide the missing ingredient for animating what is at this time a near-stagnant peace process.

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