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Salvadoran Ex-paramilitaries Demand Money

by LADB Staff

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For several years, former members of the paramilitary civilian patrols (Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil, PAC), have pressured the government to compensate them for their services in support of the military during the armed conflict of the 1980s. Since President Francisco Flores vetoed a bill that would have given them a US\$1,000 cash payment, they have staged new street protests. Flores is holding firm against any payments, and despite the arrest of two leaders, the demonstrators vowed to continue the protest. The 1992 peace accords excluded former PAC members from the compensation that the regular military received. Both the government's offers and the ex-paramilitaries' demands have followed inconsistent paths since the signing of the peace accords.

In 1998, former president Armando Calderon Sol (1994-1999) tried to resolve the problem by offering protestors a US\$34 monthly pension. But they rejected the offer and demanded instead a US\$2,000 indemnification as well as a pension. Following a bloody demonstration in August 1999, Flores shifted the problem to the legislature and said he would accept any proposal that would end the dispute (see NotiCen, 1999-08-26).

President Flores vetoes bill to pay indemnity

In June of this year, the Legislative Assembly approved a US\$1,000 payment for the nearly 38,000 ex-paramilitaries. When Flores vetoed the bill, they announced a new round of demonstrations. The Flores administration is now holding to the position that ex-paramilitaries are not entitled to compensation and that, in any case, the government does not have the money to pay it. Flores set up a committee in July to resolve the dispute, but placed any discussion on cash payments outside the committee's charge. Instead, he restated the government's offer of assistance with housing, credits, and other benefits. These benefits are included in a rural assistance program (Programa de Solidaridad Rural) that is intended for all eligible campesinos, not just former PAC members.

Beatrice de Carrillo, director of the human rights office (Procuraduria para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, PDDH), argued that the cash payment was a reasonable request, that it had support from the legislature, and that it would cost less than the other benefits the government was offering. However, the total cost of the cash settlement has never been established because the ex-paramilitary associations say they have 37,681 members while the government says the number is no more than 20,000.

In July, de Carrillo warned that unless there was agreement within 45 days, the demonstrators would again take to the streets. In August, protest leaders told de Carrillo that they would no longer insist on the US\$1,000 payment and were willing to settle for the non-cash benefits. The new position would only require the government to provide cash for widows and orphans of ex-paramilitaries and the elderly.

Luis Molina, president of the Union Salvadorena of the Ex Patrulleros, Obreros y Campesinos (USEPOC), called for a new round of demonstrations in October. He said the government had not fulfilled its promise to resolve the dispute by implementing all the non-cash benefit programs it had offered. "We think the whole process is exhausted," he said. After the demonstration, the position of the ex-paramilitaries changed again. According to Molina, they no longer wanted any kind of agricultural program but rather the money.

On Oct. 24, several hundred demonstrators descended on the government center in downtown San Salvador demanding the US\$1,000 in compensation. The demonstration ended in a clash with anti-riot police. Ten demonstrators were arrested and three officers and two protestors were injured. Scores of others were treated for tear-gas inhalation. Police said the demonstrators broke windows attempting to enter the Banco Central de Reserva (BCR). Other government buildings and passing vehicles were also reported damaged.

On Oct. 26, police from the Division de Investigacion Criminal (DIC) arrested two protest leaders, Armando Sanchez Cruz and Antonio Quijano. Prosecutor Jaime Ortega said he had enough evidence through eyewitness accounts, photographs, and videotapes of the demonstration to charge them with terrorism. The specific charges included assaulting police officers and damage to public property. Police also said they received complaints from passersby who reported they had been injured by the demonstrators. The two men denied the charges and said the arrests were a political "show." The government's negotiating committee (Comision de Garantes), which includes representatives from the Interior Minister, ex-paramilitary organizations, the legislature, and the PDDH, announced it would suspend negotiations as long as the street protests continued.

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