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Civic Organizations Demand Peace Accords Compliance

by LADB Staff

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Guatemalans are debating the government's record on compliance with the 1996 peace accords, which attempted to restructure the social, economic, political, and military shape of society. During observations of the fifth anniversary of the accords, President Alfonso Portillo tried to defend his administration against charges that it had abandoned the accords in favor of pleasing the international financial institutions and right-wing interests. Although former President Alvaro Arzu (1996-2000) took some steps toward compliance, progress slowed after the election of Portillo in 1999.

The former guerrilla organization Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) and Portillo agreed on a revised schedule of deadlines after it was clear they could not achieve full compliance by the original deadline of 2000. The new schedule extends the period to coincide with Portillo's 2000-20004 term in office (see NotiCen, 2001-01-18). Civic groups say the process of compliance has stalled under Portillo, especially in human rights, indigenous rights, improvements in the justice system, reduction of impunity, and demilitarization. The URNG, which signed the peace accords with the Arzu administration, joined with such human rights organizations as the Myrna Mack and Rigoberto Menchu foundations to charge that the governing Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG) does not believe in the accords and has allowed the country to backslide on compliance.

Claudia Samayoa, director of the Fundacion Rigoberta Menchu, said, "The consequences for the country could not be worse," adding that Guatemala cannot resolve its economic and social crises unless it fulfills the promises in the accords. Portillo has said he recognizes that the peace process is unfinished and agrees that "there cannot be peace if there is no economic and labor justice and equality of opportunity."

In July 2001, an Amnesty International (AI) report complained about repression against nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The report cited the case of a nun killed allegedly because she had links to human rights groups and attacks in June 2001 against AI workers. No one has been charged in any of the cases cited. AI concluded that the attacks may have been part of "a systematic campaign" to silence human rights organizations. Various NGOs also reported a resurgence in the repressive activities of the paramilitary Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil (PAC).

Portillo assesses his record

In a speech last December commemorating the anniversary of the accords, Portillo listed accomplishments that he said advanced Guatemala toward full compliance. These included attaining civilian control of the military, educational reform, increased medical coverage, fiscal reform, and advances in the participation of women in civic affairs. But he also launched one of his customary attacks on his enemies. "If we had a political class and an organized civil society

with strategic and purposeful vision, convinced that the peace accords are the national agenda for the medium and long term, progress would have been infinitely greater." He told the media that his administration had not done enough about agrarian reform, and he promised to work to reduce poverty and inequality. But he criticized the opposition in Congress and the private sector for opposing his tax reforms while they attack him for the nation's economic crisis.

Questions raised about the military

In November 2001, the UN human rights verification team in Guatemala (MINUGUA) and many NGOs criticized Portillo for appointing a general to head the Interior Ministry. MINUGUA pointed out that the peace accords required demilitarization of the police, which Interior controls (see NotiCen, 2001-12-06). In 2001, the administration allocated US\$166 million to the Defense Ministry US\$61.4 million more than Congress approved for the year. Despite the increased allocation, the military was way over budget, and, by July 2001 had spent more than US\$100 million. The additional transfers raised the military's budget share to 0.81% of GDP, whereas the peace accords set the maximum at 0.66% of GDP. A key element in the accords was the agreement on fortifying civil authority and assigning the military to functions consistent with the democratic process.

In a Dec. 22, 2001, statement, MINUGUA said the "repeated transfers to the defense budget did not help demilitarize public security, strengthen civil authority, or make the necessary prioritization of social spending." Portillo said the additional funds were needed to maintain the troops and were not used to buy weapons. Defense Minister Alvaro Leonel Mendez Estrada said the expenditures were within the 0.66% of GDP limit set by the peace accords.

Compliance tied to meeting fiscal goals

In some ways, the battle over compliance is a replaying of the civil war the accords ended. Human rights, labor, campesino, and other groups are still pressing for the social and economic justice and demilitarization called for in the accords. But meeting most of these goals means radical changes in the tax laws, a redistribution of wealth, and providing access to productive resources such as in agrarian reform. Arzu and Portillo deflected criticism by arguing that compliance was more an issue of outside funding and turned to the multilateral lenders and donor nations for credits, aid, and debt relief.

Gabriel Aguilera, Secretary of Peace (SEPAZ) said in 2000 that, with the new schedule of deadlines, all that was needed for compliance was funding from the donor nations. However, because the administration could not show it had met the fiscal goals agreed on in the accords, especially a tax-collection rate equal to 12% of GDP, meetings with the donor nations' advisory group (Grupo Consultivo) have been postponed three times in recent years. Portillo tried meeting the fiscal goals with a sweeping tax-reform bill passed in July 2001 that included an increase in the value-added tax (impuesto al valor agregado, IVA) and in various business taxes. The bill satisfied the multilateral financial institutions and cleared the way for a meeting with the donors this year. But the tax law also brought a nationwide protest organized by business leaders, prompting Portillo to declare a state of siege (see NotiCen, 2001-08-09) and step up his attacks on his business "enemies."

Dissatisfaction with the government's record on the accords is coming to a head just as the administration prepares to meet Feb. 11 and 12 in Washington with the Grupo Consultivo. In January, Vice President Juan Francisco Reyes led a delegation on a world tour to drum up support for more financial aid, arguing that full compliance with the accords requires more resources.

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