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FMLN Party Members Losing Faith

The Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN) is facing inevitable change as its leftist leaders and members continue to disagree on the future direction of the party. FMLN legislators Miguel Navarrete, Nicolás García, José María Portillo and Óscar del Cid were expelled for disagreeing with decisions made by their party leaders. On 19 Jan, García and Portillo voted in favor of the '05 budget for El Salvador. The two legislators were then quickly dismissed from the FMLN for their actions.

The budget proposal, introduced by the National Republican Alliance (ARENA), would be partially financed by the sale of \$541.8 million in government bonds. The FMLN believes that financing the budget by selling government bonds will only increase the domestic debt. Currently the domestic debt is 40% of the GDP. With inflation increasing an average of 3% a year, by '10 it is projected that the debt would be 65% of the GDP.

Meanwhile, Navarrete was banished from the FMLN for his vote in favor of ARENA's '04 fiscal reform package and for allegedly persuading García and Portillo to vote in favor of the bond proposal.

Although some party affiliates have been dismissed, others have chosen to leave the FMLN on their own accord. On 30 Jan, 500 members of the FMLN from Sonsonate renounced their affiliation with their party and joined the United Democratic Center (CDU).

One week later, on 6 Feb, Jesús Ventura Santos, former-FMLN candidate for mayor of Olocuilta in '97, announced his resignation from the FMLN. Ventura joined the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) and stated that his reasons for leaving were issues regarding the party leaders and the need for reform. Héctor Silva, a CDU legislator but formally the mayor of San Salvador for two terms under the FMLN banner, stated that he believes the FMLN is currently unable to foster the kind of change that is needed to transform the country in positive ways.

The FMLN has had a rigid response to the recent changes in the party. For those who remain faithful to the orthodox ideals of the leftist party, party members voting in opposition are considered to be traitors and their decision to align themselves with opposition parties is unacceptable. This kind of inflexibility

expressed by the most extreme party leftists has made reform and change difficult. In turn, the less defiant party members join smaller factions within the party or seek affiliation with new parties altogether.

The FMLN submitted nine amendments to the proposed '05 budget, none of which were approved. The party continues to be concerned about the course of action being taken by the ARENA government due to the increasing unemployment and poverty, the high cost of living and the effects of the dollarization of the economy. The FMLN proposed that the government return to using the colón as the primary currency rather than the US dollar, and sought to eliminate the president's secret discretionary fund. Neither of the proposed modifications was included in the approved budget.

The Birth of Port Cutuco

El Salvador and Japan are celebrating 70 years of diplomatic relations by a joint effort to construct a new port in La Unión, El Salvador, 185 km southeast of San Salvador. President Elías Antonio Saca held the inaugural ceremony for the construction Port Cutuco on 16 Jan. The presidents of Guatemala (Óscar Berger), Honduras (Ricardo Maduro) and Nicaragua (Enrique Bolaños) were among the 500 people in attendance during the inauguration.

The International Cooperation Bank of Japan is loaning El Salvador \$107 million of the \$170 million needed to develop Port Cutuco. The development of the port area will also include the construction of the El Amatillo bridge and a loading dock. The port will extend over 358 acres of the coastline in the Gulf of Fonseca. The development of the port will also result in the construction of new electricity lines and a substation at an estimated cost of \$8 million.

This mega-project will not only benefit the La Unión area by providing increased access to electricity, but also it will create employment opportunities. The actual construction will create 600 new jobs, the operation of the port will provide 500 jobs, activities related to the development of Port Cutuco will result in 2,500 jobs and, finally, free trade zones will employ an estimated 10,000 people.

The port will serve as an area for both cargo and passenger ships to load and unload. Port Cutuco will become a main point for the potential shipment of goods from the Pacific Coast of El Salvador to the Atlantic Coast in Honduras. President Saca views the creation of Port Cutuco as an important modern infrastructure that will coincide with the potential ratification of the Central American Free Trade Agreement.

New Law to Conserve Nature

After a year of debate, the Legislative Assembly unanimously approved the Environmental Protection Law. According to this law, 118 areas considered to be of high ecological value throughout El Salvador will be preserved against any type of destruction to their biodiversity. However, the regulations under this law do not apply to privately owned property. The law was proposed in the Legislative Assembly in Dec '03, but was not passed until 27 Jan due to disagreements between ARENA and FMLN legislators.

The debates between the two parties were centered around the 250,000 people who currently inhabit many of the newly protected areas. The FMLN was especially concerned about the potential relocation

of families currently living in the protected areas; many of the inhabitants were former FMLN combatants who were permitted to live in areas near coastal rain forests since the signing of the '92 Peace Accords.

The first draft of the Environmental Protection Law did not include specific language regarding the poor families living in these zones. However, two weeks later appropriate modifications had been made that give the inhabitants two years to obtain property titles for the land where they presently reside.

Rotavirus Plagues Salvadorans

Salvadorans by the thousands are seeking medical aid for a diarrhea epidemic that has forced the Minister of Public Health, Guillermo Maza, to declare a national emergency. From 2 Jan to 7 Feb there were 43,175 registered cases of diarrhea and 15 deaths throughout the country. Declaring a state of emergency allows the Ministry of Health to purchase supplies where they are readily available without going through the process of open bidding.

According to Maza, 70% of the registered cases of diarrhea have been provoked by a rotavirus. This virus is spread through the inadequate disposal of waste and enters the body through contaminated drinking water, poor hygiene habits and the improper preparation of food. To date, the Ministry of Health has spent \$2.2 million fighting this epidemic. Seven departments in El Salvador are greatly affected including La Libertad, San Salvador, La Paz, San Miguel, Sonsonate, Morazón and Usulután.

Unfortunately, supplies, medical professionals and more hospital beds are not the only resources El Salvador needs to combat this problem aggressively. The Pan-American Health Organization (OPS) has suggested that all government institutions work together to find a solution to improve the situation. The most important issue is water. Eduardo Guerrero, representative of OPS, stated: "If the population had sufficiently chlorinated water, the number of infections from bacteria and fungus would be significantly diminished." The second point that Guerrero emphasized was the importance of seeking immediate medical attention when diarrhea has developed from contaminated food or water. Finally, education is vital. Parents need to educate their children about the maintaining personal hygiene to prevent diarrhea and other similar infections.

—Katie Gilman