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EL SALVADOR

15 Years After Signing of Peace Accords, y Qué?

Jan 16 marked the 15th anniversary of the signing of the Peace Accords between the government and the leftist Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN), which ended 12 years of armed conflict in El Salvador. The ruling rightwing National Republican Alliance (ARENA) celebrated the anniversary with a series of public activities to congratulate themselves “for achieving peace in El Salvador.” Meanwhile, the FMLN and many Salvadorans challenged the alleged accomplishments of the Peace Accords.

Despite the heavy publicity surrounding President Antonio Saca’s “peace celebrations” in San Salvador, 78.8% of the population believe that there is no real peace in the country today, according to a 6-9 Jan national survey by LPG Datos published in *La Prensa Gráfica* on 16 Jan. The majority of Salvadorans (64.6%) believe that the real causes of the civil war—the deterioration of living conditions for the majority, a widening gap between rich and poor, and increasing delinquency, violence and impunity—have not been resolved.

Representatives of the Salvadoran Catholic Church argued that, after 15 years, the nation has not yet achieved the much-hoped-for social reconciliation that the Peace Accords promoted, and that the Salvadoran people remain strongly polarized between “the haves and have-nots.”

ARENA celebrated “15 years of peace” near the monument to the mastermind and founder of ARENA as well as the father of the death squads during the armed conflict, Roberto D’Aubisson, now deceased. The theme of Saca’s speech as head of ARENA was to “forgive and forget,” stating that “the Peace Accords have been fulfilled and that the country must look beyond the past conflict.” Saca declared the anniversary of the Peace Accords to be a national holiday, which opponents said was an attempt to distract people from the lack of substance in ARENA’s discourse and demonstrated Saca’s own political unwillingness “to promote the construction of peace for the majority of the population.”

Instead of celebrating a non-existing peace in El Salvador, the FMLN commemorated the anniversary in a separate event in a downtown plaza, with the participation of representatives of various leftist Latin American governments along with musicians from Venezuela and Cuba.

For the FMLN, the signing of the Peace Accords was the beginning of the process of “building a new El Salvador with social and economic justice.” The commemoration of that important event served as an opportunity to demand the real fulfillment of the Peace Accords, which includes the reactivation of the so-called “National Forum” for economic and social agreements, meant to be the mechanism to alleviate social and economic disparity in Salvadoran society. At the same time, the FMLN and social movement organizations denounced the fact that State institutions, such as the National Civilian Police (PNC) and parts of the judicial system, remain repressive and often militaristic in nature.

Social Activists Oppose Amnesty Law

Part of the public protests surrounding the 15th anniversary of the Peace Accords deal with the opposition of civil society groups to the current Amnesty Law, approved by the Legislative Assembly in '93, which blocked legal investigations concerning massacres and other forms of human rights violations that occurred during the nation's 12-year civil war ('80-'92).

Many human rights organizations, including those affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church and other religious groups (Lutherans and Presbyterians, among others), family members and opposition political parties (ARENA has been in power since '89) have asked that the Amnesty Law be eliminated so that justice can be done for thousands of victims of the bloody conflict, which claimed the lives of an estimated 75,000 people and more than 8,000 disappeared and assumed dead.

“We have not achieved a true reconciliation; to achieve this we must have justice and in El Salvador justice has been denied for thousands of victims of human rights violations during the war because of the Amnesty Law,” stated the president of the Commission of Families of Victims of Human Rights Violations, Guadalupe Mejía.

Water Privatization Protests Held Countrywide

Between Oct '06 and Jan '07, thousands of people from all walks of life—campesinos, union members, environmentalists, civil society and political leaders, among others—gathered in San Salvador and many departmental capitals and other strategic locations (such as major bridges and highways) to publicly protest against the government's water privatization plans (Vol. 25, No. 11).

For example, on 22-24 Jan, hundreds of social activists opposed to the government's proposed General Water Law, which calls for decentralization of ANDA (the State-run water company) and concessions to private water companies, gathered outside the Legislative Assembly, blocking several major streets for more than two hours, to back legislation that would “increase [water] coverage, quality and sustainability and guarantee access ... for low income families.”

They presented a new proposal, entitled “The Potable Water and Sewage Sub-sector Law,” for legislative discussion and approval. The alternative proposal was developed by a number of civil society organizations in close consultation with communities struggling for access to clean water.

“This country has among the lowest levels of potable water coverage in Latin America. There is a serious water quality problem, constant shortages and, what's more, there are threats of water privatization. That's why we decided to work in a collaborative way toward a Potable Water Law. It closes all doors to privatization,” said Armando Flores of the Consumer Defense Center.

The Roman Catholic-based charity Caritas, the environmental group UNES, ASTAC and 17 other civil society groups contributed to the development of the alternative proposal. “This law would regulate water usage, rates and service providers ... and in a way that puts the service under human control,” said Zoila Quijada, an FMLN legislator, whose party is supporting the measure.

Surprisingly, the rightwing National Conciliation Party (PCN), often at odds with the FMLN on high-profile issues, also supports the Potable Water Law proposal. Quoted by the Diario *CoLatino*, PCN deputy Orlando Arévalo hinted that, rather than a whole-hearted backing of the measure, his party’s support is based on frustration with the ARENA government’s repeated failure to present much-needed water sector reform legislation. However, the future of both law proposals is unclear.

New Tax on Cell-Phone Use Proposed

The intention of President Sacca to finance the recently-created Ministry of Public Security and Justice (MSPJ) by means of a new tax of cell-phone usage was rejected in Dec by opposition political parties as “punishment for the Salvadoran economy.”

In early Dec, President Sacca officially appointed René Mario Figueroa as the new Minister of MSPJ, and charged him with the enormous task of promoting public security policies to combat common delinquency and organized crime, at a moment when criminal violence is one of the nation’s major problems (Vol. 25, No. 12).

New Law Against Organized Crime

On 22 Jan, President Sacca put his official signature on the new Law Against Organized Crime, which provides new legal tools for combating organized crime, narco-trafficking and corruption.

The new law permits the creation of “special tribunals” that will deal with such legal cases in all 14 departments of the country. The judges for these tribunals, which will be appointed by the Supreme Court, will decide the penalties for those convicted of these grievous offenses.

The term “organized crime” is considered a form of delinquency characterized by the participation of two or more people who conspire over a certain length of time for the purpose of committing one or more criminal acts. This applies to a variety of criminal gangs, whether public or private individuals, and specifically to *pandilleros* or street gangs, who allegedly are responsible for most of the nation’s delinquency and violence.

Protests Against Santa Rita Gold Mine

On 13 Dec, the Pacific Rim Mining Corp (PRMC) elected to temporarily suspend its drilling program at the Santa Rita gold mining project in El Salvador in order to “constructively manage localized protests” related to the company’s activities at Santa Rita.

The company began the first phase of its drilling program at its 100%-owned Santa Rita gold mine after securing from various branches of the Salvadoran government an Exploration License for the property and a permit to conduct its planned operations, and after negotiating surface access rights from local landowners.

Since the beginning of its drilling operations on 9 Nov '06, small, intermittent and localized protests have taken place at Santa Rita. PRMC alleges that “opposition to its mining activities at Santa Rita has come from a number of NGOs, utilizing primarily protesters from outside the Santa Rita area.”

In order to prevent further escalation of these protests, PRMC stated in a press release that it had initiated “a temporary suspension of its Santa Rita drill program so that a peaceful resolution can be reached between all parties.”

—*Clifton L. Holland*