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EL SALVADOR: INTERIM CEASE-FIRE THIS ROUND?

As the peace talks reconvene in Mexico today, both sides seem committed to building on the progress made last month in New York. The Mexico round will probably last ten days and could lead to an agreement on an interim cease-fire, though a final cease-fire is not expected until the end of the year. The main obstacle to be overcome is determining the sequence of a cease-fire, constitutional reforms, and military reductions. Most other issues are expected to be deferred for resolution by COPAZ (National Commission for the Consolidation of Peace) and by other bodies envisaged in the New York accords.

Setting priorities

The items to be discussed in Mexico were agreed on in New York, but the priority for El Salvador's government will be getting a cease-fire agreement, while the FMLN will insist that previously agreed reforms (on human rights, elections, and the judiciary) be implemented before a cease-fire takes place. The FMLN knows the government will push for a cease-fire, but fears that rebel field commanders may not comply unless the FMLN can "save face," for example by obtaining enactment of the constitutional reforms.

In one of the "secret" annexes to the New York accords, the government and FMLN agreed that military reductions would follow a cease-fire; the military, however, is reluctant to see reductions until the FMLN actually disarms. Both sides now seem resigned to having at least a brief period of armed peace. Though its duration continues to be contentious, this acknowledgement represents a narrowing of differences between the negotiators, and may open the way for a final cease-fire.

The COPAZ problem

The New York accords established the mechanism for COPAZ to be composed of

members of government, military, political parties, and the FMLN; it would oversee implementation of any agreement, prepare legislation, and act as a negotiating body. It is not clear what authority COPAZ will have to enforce its decisions, however, or how the job of oversight will be divided between COPAZ and ONUSAL, the UN body now in place to oversee agreements already in force.

The New York agreement contains other ambiguities: the FMLN has interpreted the accords to mean that the left-wing Democratic Convergence coalition will get two representatives on COPAZ, one for each party, but the government insists the intent was for the CD to get one vote; intelligence suggests the government and the FMLN may work out a compromise involving non-voting alternates.

Another ambiguity is that although COPAZ is supposed to come into existence only after a cease-fire is signed, it is assigned to perform several duties (including laying the groundwork for a civilian police force) before the cease-fire is signed. Initially, President Cristiani's ARENA party had been opposed to allowing FMLN members to enter Salvador to work on COPAZ, but this problem may be sidestepped by holding COPAZ meetings at a neutral site such as the airport or a foreign embassy in El Salvador. Both parties seem disposed to compromise on these technical difficulties.

Troublesome issues remain

The FMLN continues to plan military activities, to convince the government that the FMLN is negotiating from a position of strength—thus irritating the military and making it less willing to compromise or reform. The armed forces may be willing to accept direction from Cristiani concerning FMLN political participation and social issues, but they will take a hard line on issues

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affecting their own powers—especially on force reductions, purging themselves of human rights abusers, and allowing the

FMLN territorial spheres of influence.

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