

El Salvador: Emerging Challenges Ten Years After Peace Agreement

From "Frank Imhoff" <franki@elca.org>

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Lutheran Bishop Underlines Struggle Against Institutional Corruption

SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador/GENEVA, 26 February 2002 (LWI) - Bishop Medardo E. Gomez Soto of the Salvadoran Lutheran Synod describes the peace agreement between the government and the leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation (FMLN) group ten years ago as a "deed well done for peace and blessed by God."

Pointing to the agreement's contribution to national development, Gomez says it had honored those who charted it, and had not disappointed the people of El Salvador in their search for peace.

But peace must continue to be strengthened. Ten years since the pact, external conditions have changed and new challenges have emerged. The "guidance" provided by the agreement has historic significance. It "will always be a light in the people's path of hope," Gomez says.

From the early 70s, leftist guerrilla groups fought El Salvador's After the country's opposition groups united to form the FMLN, the bloody civil war escalated claiming over 75,000 lives. Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero was murdered while celebrating military did not spare members of the clergy either. In 1980 mass, and in 1989 six Jesuit priests were victims of an attack.

Negotiations eventually led to the 16 January 1992 peace agreement between President Alfredo Cristiani's government and the FMLN in Chapultepec, Mexico, formally ending the war.

Gomez notes that the environment in which the 1992 peace agreement was signed had been influenced by the break-up of socialism as it existed in the then Soviet Union and its political sphere of control. "This opened the door for neo-liberalism, and for a market economy dominated by the multinationals. It became the paradigm for the whole world."

This economic model failed for El Salvador, Gomez says, pointing out that the poor have become poorer. In some of the industrialized nations the economic situation has deteriorated as well, he says. Today, Gomez perceives even more poverty, unemployment and marginalization. Apart from the worsening social conflicts and industrial action which threaten to "aggravate the crisis and make the land ungovernable," there are countless refugees trying to escape poverty. He notes that "paradoxically,

these conflicts originated in the conditions which years ago led to the civil war that was ended by the peace agreement."

Gomez agrees that the Salvadoran military is the one institution that must strictly adhere to keeping the peace agreement. This includes honoring the principles of the rule of law and establishing a new military policy recognizing that safeguarding national sovereignty is the military's basic responsibility and does not include maintaining internal security.

Since 1992 the former guerrilla group FMLN has transformed itself into a political party and become integrated into the constitutional system, according to Gomez. In the 1999 presidential elections the FMLN was the second strongest party, after the conservative, rightist National Republican Alliance (ARENA). The FMLN won 31 out of 84 seats. At the local level it now has a majority.

The Lutheran bishop regrets that although judges today are democratically elected and the judiciary is open for public scrutiny, many court cases including those dealing with serious crimes end in acquittals. He sees this as an indication that the judicial process requires more transparency and that the struggle against institutional corruption must be redoubled.

The 1992 peace agreement provided for the establishment of a socio-economic forum comprising workers', employers' and government representatives with the aim to establishing rules for relations between the participating partners, and to discuss economic models and productivity. But so far the government and private businesses have refused to set up such a body. The prevailing situation—redundancies, attacks on trade unions, resistance to raising the minimum wage and other measures taken against workers—only say that the government is not ready to fulfil its obligations under the peace agreement in this regard.

Gomez formulates his church's position thus: "As a Christian church we believe that peace grows out of justice, and that social peace is possible within an economic system which exists to serve people."

The 12,000-member Salvadoran Lutheran Synod joined the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in 1986. Roman Catholics make up 92 percent of El Salvador's 6.2 million people, with Protestants representing eight percent.

(The LWF is a global communion of Christian churches in the Lutheran tradition. Founded in 1947 in Lund (Sweden), the LWF now has 133 member churches in 73 countries representing over 60.5 million of the 64.3 million Lutherans worldwide. The LWF acts on behalf of its member churches in areas of common interest such as ecumenical relations, theology, humanitarian assistance, human rights, communication, and the various aspects of mission and development work. Its secretariat is located in Geneva, Switzerland.)

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LUTHERAN WORLD INFORMATION

PO Box 2100, CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

Editor's e-mail: pmu@lutheranworld.org

Tel: (41.22) 791.63.54

Fax: (41.22) 791.66.30

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