

A Presidential Summit in Central America

The Esquipulas meeting of Central American presidents didn't solve the region's problems, but it was a small step towards a non-military resolution of their differences

Despite enormous political and ideological differences, and in the midst of the tension that pervades the region, the Presidents of Central America's five countries held a summit meeting on May 24 and 25 in Esquipulas, Guatemala. Guatemala's President, Vinicio Cerezo, was the meeting's sponsor. Since he took office in January, Cerezo has repeatedly expressed his desire to promote a neutral foreign policy, in hopes of facilitating a solution to the region's crisis.

Three other countries in the area had also just inaugurated new governments (Honduras, Guatemala and Costa Rica), and this helped reduce tensions somewhat, just in time for the summit. But above all, the Central America President's Meeting should be understood within the context of the Contadora peace process. It was not at

all coincidental that the summit was held just two weeks before the proposed June 6 deadline for signing the Contadora Pact.

The summit meeting was attended by the Presidents of Honduras, José Azcona, of

El Salvador, Napoleón Duarte, of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, of Costa Rica, Oscar Arias Sánchez and of Guatemala, Vinicio Cerezo. According to many reports, Erick Arturo Del Valle, President of Panama, was also invited, but declined the offer since Panama is one of the four member nations of the Contadora Group.

There were four points on the meeting's official agenda: the creation of a Central American Parliament, negotiations surrounding the signing of the Contadora Treaty, the restructuring of the regional integration process and the region's foreign debt. Nonetheless, most analysts agreed that the critical point would be the Contadora Plan. Prior to the summit, Nicaragua's position had been that it could not sign the Treaty unless the United States promised to end its aggression against the Nicaraguan government.

Even before the meeting started, the Chiefs of State had begun to emphasize their differences. This led many to believe that the



Esquipulas: The holiest Catholic temple in all of Central America, was chosen as the site of the presidential summit.

summit would be extremely tense and confrontational. President Arias Sánchez threw the first stone. At his arrival in Guatemala, he announced that he would refuse to sign any declaration that recognized President Daniel Ortega as freely-elected by the Nicaraguan people.

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Nonetheless, following two days of talks, the Presidents agreed to sign a joint statement called the Esquipulas Declaration, which includes five basic points: their willingness to sign the Contadora Treaty, although without fixing a deadline; the creation of a Central American Parliament, chosen through free and direct elections; the recognition that peace in the region will only be achieved through authentically democratic, pluralist and participatory processes; and the commitment to review regional plans for economic and social integration and to bring them up to date.

President Cerezo stated that the most controversial aspects of the meeting were related to the issues of "political development, pluralism, democracy and verification mechanisms for the Contadora Treaty," although he recognized that "all of the presidents were sincere, and in the end everyone made concessions in order to reach an agreement." President Duarte commented that "the meeting helped to break the ice."

During the meeting, President Ortega gave each of his peers a proposal regarding the kinds of weapons that his government would be willing to negotiate, within the arms reductions sections of the Contadora Treaty. Ortega explained that the proposal was made "in the hope that the Presidents of Central America would take it into account as a starting point for the discussion of issues still pending in the Contadora Peace Plan." The Honduran government immediately rejected the proposal.

It is rather revealing that one day after the summit ended, Honduran President José Azcona flew to Washington to meet with Reagan and other high-level U.S. officials. After providing a detailed report on the Esquipulas summit, Azcona agreed with Reagan that the Contadora Pact should not be supported in its present form, arguing that there can be peace in Central America only if Nicaragua carries out democratic reforms and if there are verifiable reductions in its military strength.

While the presidential summit was underway, the heads of the military forces of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras were also meeting in Esquipulas. They were discussing the possibility of reactivating the Central American Defence Council (CONDECA), a regional military alliance founded by deposed dictator Anastasio Somoza and inactive since the brief war between El Salvador and Honduras in July 1969. The Salvadoran Army Chief of Staff, Adolfo Blandón, disclosed that with the reactivation of CONDECA they hoped to draw up "a tactical-strategic doctrine to assure our defense from any kind of Nicaraguan aggression."

The Esquipulas meeting also served as a kind of individual forum for El Salvador and Honduras, whose Chiefs of State signed an agreement by which their long-standing border conflict will be placed under the jurisdiction of the World Court in the Hague. The two countries had been unable to reach an agreement during the last five-and-a-half years, a period which they had previously established for negotiations regarding the matter.

On balance, the most solid achievement of the Esquipulas summit was the decision to create a Central American Parliament, which will doubtless become the most important forum for regional debate and com-

munication. As the summit ended many analysts also claimed, rather hurriedly, that another very important achievement had been the President's unanimous decision to express their total support for the Contadora process. Nonetheless, Azcona's joint statement with Reagan, combined with difficulties in the negotiation process, which arose shortly after the summit, have since demonstrated that the decision was really quite fragile.

One thing that was made clear in the summit, according to the correspondent from the Mexican newspaper *Novedades*, was that President Ortega "became a full member of the Central American club." Beyond whatever differences and conflicts may exist, the fact that Ortega was able to sit down at the same table with his peers in the region to discuss issues of importance to all of them, lent *de facto* recognition, both to his government and to his role as President. In addition, the Nicaraguan Chief of State showed flexibility by committing himself in principle to signing the Contadora Pact, without conditioning his signature to an end to hostilities by Washington, although that had been his government position prior to the meeting.

On the whole, analysts agreed that the Esquipulas meeting had positive effects for peace. Despite the fact that radically different positions still separate Washington's allies in the region (the "Tegucigalpa Group," composed of Costa Rica, El Salvador and Honduras) from Nicaragua, and that the region's governments remain intransigent regarding aspects of the Contadora negotiations, the presidential summit allowed the five leaders to come together in a forum for dialog and mutual understanding.★

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