

THE CONTADORA GROUP AND PEACE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Ricardo Córdova

In recent years much has been commented on the role played by the Contadora Group in peace negotiations in Central America. This group of countries has on the one hand received wide political support and international recognition, and, on the other, has been

criticized for not reaching a peace agreement.

But either supportive or critical, little is known of the history of this group's pacific efforts. In this article we shall attempt to present a view of what the Contadora Group has done, from its establishment (January 1983) until the signing of the Agreement of Esquipulas II (7 August 1987).

Establishment of the Contadora Group

On the invitation of the Panamanian Chancellor, the Foreign Ministers of Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela met on January 8 and 9 1983, on the island of Contadora. Their intention was to examine the complex panorama existing in Central America, as well as the political processes taking place in

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The initial measures taken in the integrations process were to eliminate tariffs and permit free trade

region. The future now seems bright in this regard, thanks to efforts by Contadora and its Support Group, as well as to the Arias Plan and the Esquipulas II accords.

In short, one of the persistent mistakes in Latin American integrationist efforts (not only in the above mentioned attempts, but also in others like the ALADI and the Caribbean Free Trade Association) has been to model their programs after the European Economic Community, ignoring the fact that our economies depend to a large extent on primary sector activities and especially the export of raw materials (about 70 percent of total exports). To make things even more complicated, we don't all depend on the same raw materials: for Mexico and Venezuela, it is oil; for Colombia, coffee and cotton; for Peru, copper and fish meal; for Bolivia, tin and natural gas; and so forth. In addition, a serious problem with all raw materials is that their market prices rise and fall cyclically, with tremendous variation between products. The result of a great range of factors, coffee prices can be rising at the same time that oil prices plummet. In other words, our insertion into the world market as producers of raw materials makes economic integration very difficult.

Political Factors

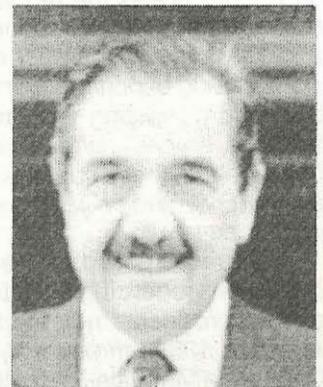
These experiences offer conclusive evidence that it is utopian to aspire to significant levels of economic unification, without also establishing a basis for more general under-

standing, especially on political issues. Thus, it is clear that new criteria are needed for Latin American integration. The Group of Eight (working from an agenda broadened beyond the original concerns of Contadora and its Support Group) is breaking important ground in this regard. All of the members are distinguished as having democratic governments: Mexico, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Peru and Uruguay.

The decision by the presidents of these eight countries to meet in Mexico on November 27 and 28 (thanks to efforts by the Permanent Mechanism for Consultation and Political Harmony, established in Rio de Janeiro last December 18) reflects the levels of political agreement already reached. Efforts by the Group of Eight, with support from the Central American countries, first contributed to the search for regional peace and for balance between the legitimate interests of each state and the region's col-



José Sarney, President of Brazil.
(Photo from Novedades archive)



Raúl Alfonsín, President of Argentina.
(Photo from Novedades archive)



Ministers of the Contadora Group. (Photo from Novedades archive)

the region, their interrelation and the effect of these on regional stability and peace. They called on the countries in the area to reduce tension, by means of dialog and negotiation, and establish the basis for a permanent climate of peaceful co-existence and mutual respect among the States.

Taking its name from the island of their reunion, the Contadora Group, comprising the countries of Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela, was established. Its aim: to give momentum to a process of peace negotiations in the region.

Declaration of Cancún

A meeting of the Presidents of the countries forming part of the Contadora Group took place on July 17 1983, in Cancún, Mexico, as a result of the intensification of the

lective security. Now the Group not only continues to promote the agreements reached through the combined negotiating efforts of Contadora, the Arias Plan and the Esquipulas II meeting, but has broadened its agenda to include such items as the foreign debt. As regards the latter, it has agreed that the Cartagena Consensus must define its authority over such related matters as trade and finance, which form part of a series of unavoidable political decisions.

The first meeting by the Group of Eight's Permanent Mechanism was held in San Carlos de Bariloche, Argentina, from April 14 to 16, 1987. It acknowledged important legal aspects of Latin American integration, concluding that it is necessary "to coordinate and strengthen efforts to harmonize national legislations (of the different countries), so they do not block joint undertakings, but rather facilitate the integrationist activities of the public and private sectors." An ad hoc commission was created to identify the major issues needing discussion; to carry out an inventory of regional communitarian laws and of "private, conventional international law"; and to organize a comparative study of basic national legislations in order to analyze "the possibility of adopting homogeneous legislation or multilateral agreements on integration."¹⁴

The Permanent Mechanism's second meeting was held August 9 to 11, 1987 at Campos do Jordao, Brasilia. There, the foreign ministers agreed to ask the Argentine chancellery, in collaboration with the other foreign ministries and the General Secretary of ALADI, to present a study on the juridical aspects of regional integration for its next meeting.

Novel Definitions

As part of the preparations for the Presidential Meeting,

the Group of Eight's foreign ministers will meet at Punta del Este, Uruguay, from October 23 to 28. Participation in the Group of Eight is extremely important for each of its members, especially as it begins to explore the application of such novel concepts as *concertación*. In fact, this concept has fast become part of the doctrinal framework for Latin American integration. *Concertación* can be understood as the search among a community of states

The insertion of individual economies into the world market makes economic integration very difficult

to coordinate and make compatible certain strategies toward common aspirations, purposes, interests or ideals. In short, it is a new concept of integration, more viable and better suited to our own history.

Given the increasing complexity of international economic and political affairs, and the specific difficulties confronting Latin America, including the foreign debt and the Central American crisis, among others, regional *concertación* takes on special importance. The area's democratic governments have begun the effort to promote it.

While it is true that the search for *concertación* integration has not always produced significant concrete results, it has, nonetheless, helped the participants in the process to analyze its potential and its limitations, to explore possibilities heretofore unexamined and to draw attention to its relevance and importance. Latin American

One of the principal obstacles to peace has been the lack of will on the part of the U.S. government

conflicts in Central America.

At this meeting they expressed their preoccupation with the rapid deterioration of the situation in Central America, its escalation of violence, the progressive increase in tensions, border incidents and the threat of generalized war. They also outlined the achievements of the Contadora Group: initiating a dialog between all of the Central American governments; the establishment of a consultation mechanism; and the outline, by unanimous agreement, of an agenda assembling the most relevant

aspects of the region's problems.

Aware of the necessity of translating the will for peace into specific proposals, they established the general directives of a program to be proposed by the Central American countries: the creation of agreements and political pacts that would lead to an effective control of the arms race; the elimination of foreign intervention; the creation of demilitarized zones; the prohibition of the use of the territory of some States to develop political or military actions that would destabilize other States; the eradication of antagonism and arms-trafficking; and the prohibition of other forms of aggression or interference in the internal affairs of any of the countries in the area.

It was also stated that these measures, designed to eliminate the peace-disturbing factors,

should be accompanied by a great internal effort to strengthen democratic institutions and guarantee the observance of human rights.



Bernardo Sepúlveda, Secretary of the Mexico's Foreign Department. (Photo from Novedades archive)

countries need to understand the idea of concertación integration, not as a utopian formula, but rather as a concept based on peoples' very real needs, on the painful lessons of history and on the fact that it's time to respond to the shared aspirations for true cooperation.

At the recent XLII Annual Assembly of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in Washington, many countries emphasized their belief that the world economic crisis has a negative impact on their attempts to restructure the economies of their countries. The crisis has heightened the need for *concertación* toward implementing plans or tactics for problems such as those caused by the foreign debt; to defend the prices of our traditional export products; and to explore the potentials of inter-regional cooperation. This has all been difficult until now, due to the international economic disorder and the lack of a solid political foundation, impossible during the long years of military rule in several countries.

The tasks ahead for the Group of Eight will demand *concertación*, the persistent search for accord, putting the region's democratic countries to the test as they seek Latin American solutions to Latin America's problems. They sound a hopeful note for the region's immediate future, as they explore possibilities in other terrain, beyond the specific challenges of integration. □

¹ Dell, Sydney, 1966. *Integración de América Latina. Experiencias y perspectivas*, Fondo de Cultura Económica; México, p. 97.

² Cfr. *Bolsa Review*, febrero de 1981, p. 8.

³ Cfr. *Comercio Exterior*, Vol. 29, No. 7 (julio de 1979); México, p. 799.

⁴ "Comunicado Conjunto de los Cancilleres de los Grupos de Contadora y Apoyo al término de la Reunión de San Carlos de Bariloche" (Joint Communiqué by the Foreign Ministers of Contadora and the Support Groups at the Close of the San Carlos Bariloche Meeting), *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior*, No. 16 (julio-septiembre de 1987); México, p. 109.

Document of Objectives

On September 9 1983, a document with 21 basic points for peace in Central America, better known as the "Document of Objectives", was published. The most outstanding of the objectives indicated in this by the Contadora Group are as follows:

- to promote the lowering of tension and to put an end to the conflictive situations in the area, abstaining from any action which would endanger political confidence or tend to be an obstacle to the peace objectives, the security and the stability of the region;

- to adopt measures leading to the establishment and, in this case, the perfecting of the democratic, representative and pluralist systems, which guarantee effective popular participation in the decision-making process and

assure free access of the various currents of opinion to honest and periodic electoral processes, based on the full observance of citizen's rights;

- to halt the arms race and begin negotiations for the control and reduction of the present inventory of arms and on military forces.

- to reach agreements to reduce, and finally eliminate, the presence of foreign military intervention and other foreign elements participating in military and security activities;

- to forbid the use of territory and neither lend nor permit military or logistic support to persons, organizations or groups attempting to destabilize the governments of any Central American countries.

In this reunion it was stated that the foreign ministers of the

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Hay publicaciones que informan lo que sucede en cada país latinoamericano, y lo hacen bien. Nosotros reseñamos mensualmente los principales sucesos del continente, pero nuestra principal tarea no es esa, porque no somos solamente periodistas. Por eso, muchas veces, no hablamos de lo que pasó, sino que decimos lo que va a pasar.

* En nuestro número dos, correspondiente al mes de agosto, dijimos que el peronismo iba a ganar las elecciones argentinas, que era exactamente lo contrario de lo que decían todas las encuestas y sondeos de opinión publicados; un mes después, el 6 de septiembre, el peronismo ganó las elecciones.

* En nuestro número 3, a principios de septiembre, indicamos a Carlos Salinas de Gortari como el candidato más idóneo del Partido Revolucionario Institucional a la Presidencia de México; un mes después, el 4 de octubre, todos los sectores se pronunciaron por él.

* Para nuestro número 4, dialogamos con el

presidente Arias en Sa. José de Costa Rica, acerca de la iniciativa de paz que habíamos apoyado desde sus orígenes; unos días después Arias era galardonado con el Premio Nobel.

* También adelantamos que en el Uruguay se iban a reunir las firmas para el referéndum, el fracaso del Plan Austral argentino, la inviabilidad de la Simpson-Rodino, el resurgir de la violencia en Colombia y Haití y el proceso de unidad del socialismo chileno. Además propiciamos un encuentro de representantes de la sociedad civil latinoamericana, previo a la reunión de los presidentes del Grupo de los 8, iniciativa que fue adoptada por las cancillerías de los países participantes.

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José Napoleon Duarte, President of El Salvador.
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Central American countries, with the participation of the Contadora Group, began negotiations with the aim of reaching agreements and adopting the necessary mechanisms to formalize and develop the objectives contained in the present document, and secure the establishment of adequate systems of verification and control.

Formulae for the accomplishment of these aims

As the Document of Objectives was passed by the five governments in the region, the negotiating process was directed towards a necessary agreement on the practical measures in order to achieve the aims stated in the document. This new agreement was published on January 8 1984. The text is in three parts and the outstanding points are as follows:

Formulae to be immediately accomplished

1. Security aspects

— The creation of a register or detailed inventory of the military installations, arms and forces of each one of the Central American states, with the aim of establishing a policy of control and reduction of these, imposing maximum limits and allowing for a reasonable balance of power in the region.

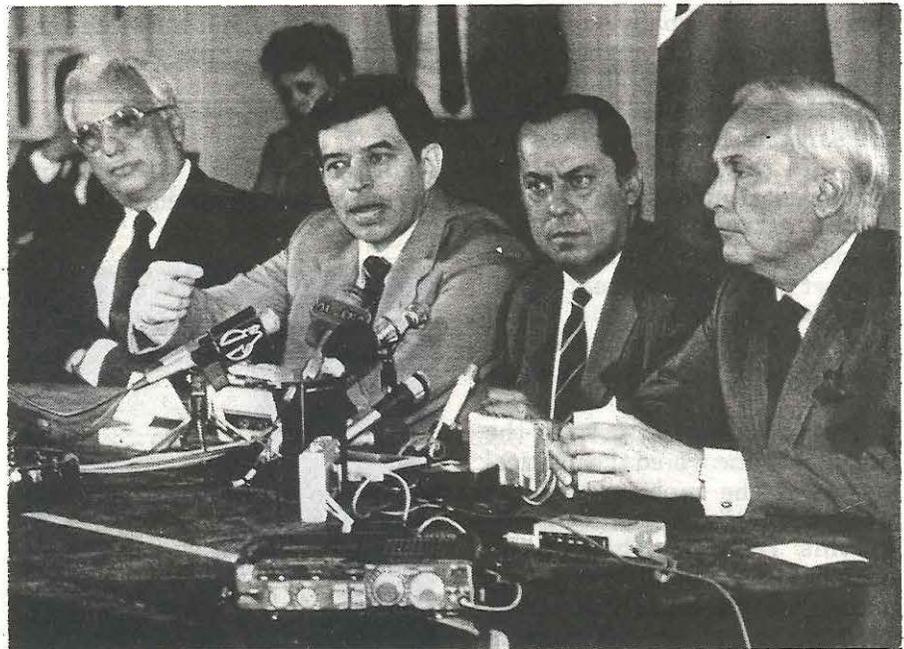
— The preparation of a census in each country and adoption of a calendar for the reduction, and eventual elimination, of foreign military intervention and other foreign elements participating in military or security related activities.

— The establishment of direct communication mechanisms with the aim of forestalling and resolving incidents between States.

2. Political Aspects

— To promote national reconciliation on the basis of justice, liberty and democracy and, to this end, create mechanisms allowing for dialog among the countries of the region.

— To guarantee full respect for human rights and, to this end, comply with the obligations contained in the international judicial



Central American Ministers. (Photo from Novedades archive)

instruments and the constitutional dispositions on this.

— To authorize or, in some cases, bring up to date, the formulae guaranteeing the existence and participation of political parties representing various currents of opinion.

3. Economic and Social Questions

— To authorize the full cooperation of the Central American Bank of Integration, the Economic Commission for Latin America, the Action Committee for Support of Central American Economic and Social Development and the SIECA.

Certain attitudes and situations still persist, making it more difficult to reach an agreement

— The Technical Group, assessing organ of the Joint Reunion of Foreign Ministers of Central America and of the Contadora Group, was authorized to follow through the previously mentioned actions.

— Three Work Committees were created within the Contadora Group and made responsible for preparing studies, judicial projects

and recommendations for the development of the areas of security, political, economic and social questions and proposals for the verification and control of the execution of the agreed measures.

Contadora Act for Peace and Cooperation

Since the establishment of the "Formulae for the accomplishment of the aims outlined in the Document of Objectives" the principal efforts of the Contadora Group have been directed towards reaching an agreement between the governments of the area, with special emphasis on security problems. This led to the creation of the "Contadora Act for Peace and Cooperation in Central America" on September 7 1984, a document that provoked objections on the eve of its being signed by some governments of the region, and had to be modified. A revised version of the Act was submitted to the consideration of the Central American governments in 1985, but this was equally unsuccessful. It is not, at the moment, our intention to dig deeply into the external factors preventing the Act from being signed, but we should like to affirm that one of the principal obstacles to the signing has been the lack of good will on the part of the United States govern-

ment that has verbally supported the Group, but in practice has committed actions prejudicial to the dialog and negotiations in Central America. Preventing the signing of the Act became a fundamental point in the United States external policy in the region, where they have had the support of the governments of El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica, what has been called the Tegucigalpa, or San Salvador, group.

The difficulties in getting the Act signed uncovered the political nature of the problem and the weakness of the Contadura Group in this respect. The foreign ministers of the Contadura Group, in their meeting on July 21 and 22 1985, made a statement concerning this: "The solution to the conflicts depends on the will and decision of the Central American governments, whose responsibility it is to reach an agreement allowing for political stability, economic and social development,

and ordered, pacific and secure co-existence in the area".

The Support Group

On August 25 1985, the Support Group of the Contadura Group,



Vinicio Cerezo, President of Guatemala.
(Photo from Novedades archive)

comprising Argentina, Brazil, Peru and Uruguay, was created. The most important functions of this support mechanism are as follows:

- consultation, with the aim of facilitating the coordination of diplomatic actions for the Contadura negotiation process.

- to give impetus to a rapid conclusion and the signing of the Contadura Act for Peace and Cooperation in Central America.

The Message of Caraballeda

As a result of the opposition of some governments in the region to the signing of the Contadura Act, the foreign ministers of the Contadura Group and the Support Group sent out the "Message of Caraballeda" on January 12 1986.

This stated: The negotiating process should lead as soon as possible to the signing of the Contadura Act for Peace and Cooperation in Central America,

DIALOG IN EL SALVADOR: DEMAND FROM A WAR-WEARY PEOPLE

After an interruption of almost two years the official dialog was renewed between the Demochristian government of El Salvador and the opposition, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), on October 4 and 5 1987.

Although external factors—the Agreement of Esquipulas II and the active mediation of the Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sánchez—were what overcame the obstacles to the dialog, started in 1984, no one was unaware of the fundamental role played by the existence of an overwhelming national majority in favor of this third encounter.

According to a poll made by researchers of the Central American José Simón Canas University (UCA) and of the University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP), 82.1 percent of those consulted pronounced themselves in favor of a dialog and 87.6 percent stated their support for a ceasefire.

Another poll, this time by Gallup, and the results of which were issued October 19, confirmed that 74 percent of the population supported a negotiated end to the civil war that has lasted for

seven years.

It is not strange, therefore, that the main political theme in El Salvador at the moment is the dialog. There is not an important force or sector of the country which has not pronounced itself in its favor, including the parties of the extreme right, such as the National Republican Alliance (Arena), whose leader, Roberto D'Aubuisson, is connected with the foundation and the activating of the Death Squads.

In spite of the importance of this national call for a negotiated solution, we can scarcely be optimistic about the possibility that negotiations will lead to internal peace in the near future. The complicated actions necessary to get both sides to sit once again and converse, speak of a very fragile and uncertain process.

The very results of this third round did not respond to the national or international expectations nor to the overflowing popular enthusiasm that led the National United Salvadorean Workers (UNTS) to organize a multitudinous concentration of support in the immediate neighborhood of the Apostolic Nuncio in San Salvador—where the reunion last-

ed for four days and nights.

The constitution of two commissions to form proposals for a ceasefire and other aspects of the Guatemala agreement—amnesty, national reconciliation, return of the refugees and incorporation of the armed opposition to legal political life—is a small step, considered significant by some, but in fact it does not avoid the possibility of a future invalidation of these achievements by the reopening of talks.

And, in the same way that external and internal factors led to the third encounter, others of a similar nature press in the opposite direction. As regards the external, the close ties that Duarte's government has with Ronald Reagan's—measured by an economic and military aid of a million and a half dollars daily—places in doubt the sincerity of the governmental commitment to the Esquipulas II agreement.

Internally, the predominance of military leaders who still consider the possibility of a military victory over the FMLN guerrillas, contributes to the doubt as to what point Duarte is able to carry the possibility of an agreement to a conclusion.

From this point of view, the third meeting basically introduced nothing new: Duarte insists that the FMLN should lay down their arms, while the FMLN-FDR coalition demands the establishment of a government with full national participation and the fusion of the two military forces operating in the country: the official and the guerrillas.

There is no suggestion yet of the possibility of the two parties making any concessions. On the contrary, the October conversations occurred within the framework of a worsening situation. It would appear that each side is attempting to debilitate its opponent in order to emphasize its position at the negotiating table.

Meanwhile the country continues to bleed profusely and the hope of "humanizing" the conflict still seems very distant. The non-combatant population continues to pay a high price in lives and injuries. To sum up, the situation in El Salvador is probably the toughest test on the Esquipulas II agreements.

E.C.

THE ARIAS PLAN WINS THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

The Arias Plan arrived silently, when many were asking themselves what mechanisms would Contadora use to unblock their peace negotiations in Central America. At first, practically everyone was skeptical. More than one person insisted that it was a plan made with Washington's approval, but soon those responsible for Central American policies in the U.S. also indicated their disagreement, among other things for the protection that the Plan received from the Democratic leaders.

There is a contrast between the reserve with which the Plan was received, in February 1987, and its unexpected adoption in Guatemala August 7. Such a surprising change is not comprehensible unless some propitious factors are taken into account.

The plan of President Oscar Arias Sánchez was negotiated when some compromising details of the Iran Contrás scandal were made public. Some of these involved his predecessor, Luis Alberto Monge, as an accomplice in secret activities against Nicaragua, in open violation of the self-proclaimed "active and perpetual neutrality". Arias had to disengage himself in some way from this embarrassing past.

It was also helped along by a fall in Ronald Reagan's popularity and the emergence of the Democratic Party as winner of the legislative elections of the previous year. Although the Democrats did not formally decline the bipartite agreement on Central America, one of the favorite themes of the new Congress leaders was criticism of Reagan's policies in the region.

On their part, the Latin American efforts to revitalize the negotiating option, through Contadora and the Sup-

port Group, seemed to have come to a stop: the effect of the incorporation into their negotiations of the General Secretaries of the U.N. and the O.A.S. had soon faded away. So, when it was presented, the Arias Plan did not receive a warm welcome—it even prompted suspicion on the part of some—but survived as a benefit of the doubt.

A few weeks were sufficient time for the ministers of Contadora and the Support Group to discover that the Plan was an affirmation of their frustrated peace plans. In reality—and this is one of the Arias merits—the new plan dispensed with all of those themes that had been most controversial throughout the long years of the Contadora struggle.

So, for example, the question of the withdrawal of the bases and the extra-regional military advisors did not appear in the Arias plan. Instead, special emphasis is placed on the democratization process and reconciliation in each country, particularly in Nicaragua.

The plan represented a breathing space for Contadora, in spite of the fact that, in some of the formulae, it was far removed from that contained in the Peace Act and the Message of Caraballeda. The main thing, at the moment, was that the initiative was put in the hands of the Central American governments and allowed for the possibility of Contadora and the Support Group making their contributions to the negotiations.

And in fact that's the way it was. The summit of Central American Presidents would scarcely have been able to take place and reach such surprising conclusions without the decisive participation of the eight ministers

of these two Groups.

Meanwhile Washington's Central American policies suffered a serious blow and seemed to lag behind. Reagan's desperate effort to put obstacles in the way of the Arias plan, by the mention of another Peace Plan on the eve of the Central American summit, only confirmed how out of step he was. Then, neither the abandonment of Philip Habib, nor the urgent meeting of the heads of the diplomatic missions in the region's capitals, enabled him to swim against the tide of facts: the signing of the Agreement of Esquipulas II by the five leaders.

But American diplomacy still had to receive two more blows. One was the audacity and vivacity with which Managua began to apply the Guatemalan agreements, discarding, one by one, the arguments put forward by Washington and its allies: the re-opening of the newspaper *La Prensa*; the re-establishment of communication with the Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo; the establishment of the National Reconciliation Commission, with the Catholic prelate as president; acceptance of the amnesty by involved counterrevolutionary leaders, were some of the intelligent initiatives on the part of the Sandinists.

And if that were not enough, Oscar Arias, author of the plan that released the negotiations from deadlock, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

A just prize for an opportune initiative, however the future of the Arias Plan may be marked by the sign of uncertainty.

Edgar Celada

the only way of assuring a general political understanding allowing for respectful, peaceful and productive co-existence among all the countries in the region.

The chancellors can confirm that, after 36 months of negotiations there persist attitudes and situations that hinder a general and comprehensive agreement to overcome the climate of hostility and halt the arms race, foreign intervention and the politics of force.

Declaration of Esquipulas

On May 25 1986, as an outcome of the meeting of Central American presidents, the Declaration of Esquipulas was published.

In this, in relation to the negotiating process of the Contadora Group, they declare "their wish to sign the Contadora Act for Peace and Cooperation in Central America, assuming the complete fulfillment of the aims and procedures contained in this. They recognise that there are aspects to be solved, as, for example, the mili-

tary manoeuvres, arms control and the verification of the fulfillment of the agreements."

Another Version of the Contadora Act

On June 7 1986, the delegates of the Contadora Group submitted a new version of the Contadora Act to the Central American governments. This was the third version to be submitted for their consideration. Once again it became obvious that there was a lack of real political will to sign the agreement.

The Arias Plan

On February 15 1987, another peace-negotiating process, parallel to Contadora's, was opened in the region. President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica called a meeting of the Presidents of the region and presented his proposals, "The Procedures for the Establishment of a firm and lasting peace in Central America". The document was

not passed on this occasion, but it allowed for the opening of a process of negotiation that led to its signing during the second meeting of the Central American Presidents in Esquipulas, Guatemala, August 7 1987.

The Foreign Ministers of the Contadora Group and of the Central American countries met on August 1 in Tegucigalpa to prepare a rough draft of an agreement, which was used as a basis for the discussions in the presidential meeting.

The purpose of the Arias Plan is much less ambitious, more pragmatic and starts off from the point that the governments "initiate the dialog with all the unarmed groups of internal political opposition and with those who have welcomed friendship". Equally, they agreed on other procedures to promote the establishment of peace. The great political activity for peace in the region has as its objective the accomplishment of this starting point passed in the reunion of August 7. □

GUATEMALAN GOVERNMENT AND GUERRILLAS MEET FOR FIRST TIME

At the beginning of the 60s, an attempt, with controversial results, was made in Concú, Baja Verapaz, in the north of Guatemala, which marked the beginning of guerrilla war.

A short while after, in the east, there was the first gathering of young rebellious soldiers, students, peasants and some workers, to consolidate the first guerrilla front, whose development would seriously threaten the regime of Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes, overthrown in 1963 by Colonel Enrique Peralta Azurdia.

With this there began a process of militarization of power, the answer of the establishment to the uprising resulting from the great social imbalance produced over the centuries.

Twenty seven years later, the imbalance is even larger. Twenty seven years later, the war continues.

The involvement of the indigenous population in it give it a specifically national character, in a situation where its so far unforeseeable outcome also seems determined by events in the region.

So, the agreements reached in Esquipulas II have established guidelines

in the contender's political diplomatic behavior. Bound by these conditions, a meeting between the government and the politically-armed opposition took place for the first time in twenty seven years.

The failure of the government to comply with some previous agreements, such as the ceasefire during the meeting, endangered its existence.

The content of the stipulated agenda circled around the question of the country's democratization. Nevertheless, the governmental delegates, advised by army officials, went to Madrid, last October, to repeat their demand that the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (URNG), lay down their arms and take refuge in an amnesty published for this effect.

The URNG, in its turn, insisted that a global solution to the conflict should be sought and demanded that demonstrable measures should be taken to produce a national dialog between all the social sectors.

This dialog, according to the Guatemalan revolutionaries, is only pos-

sible in conjunction with an effective demilitarization program in the rural areas, respect for the right of organization, and a clarification of the thousands of assassinations and disappearances in recent years and a legal trial of those responsible.

The day that the meeting began, the Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial and Financial Associations (CACIF), declared a stoppage against a tributary package which, months before and with the Army's approval, the President Vinicio Cerezo had promoted, arguing that he himself would contribute to redeem the "social debt" whose expansion threatened the country's stability.

Knowing the military's determination to neutralize the political dividends yielded to the URNG from the meeting, it is not a wild guess that they "inspired" the strike in order to divert public attention to another conflict. The press even reported the detonation of some explosives in the capital.

At the end of the dialog, the two sides declared that, although a date was

not fixed for their next meeting, they could count on a "discreet channel" of communication.

In spite of the fact that they did not come to any substantial agreements, it is worth pointing out that the Madrid meeting added political shades of importance to the internal and external understanding of the Guatemala conflict.

Particularly in a country where there is a such a great authoritarian tradition, a national dialog implies the insistence on citizen participation denied legitimacy by institutionalized violence which attempts to deprive the population of its own political space in popular or trade union organization.

On the other hand, it is obvious that the inoperable economic model applied in Guatemala, has provoked discrepancies and polarization that, if it is not solved with the participation of every sector, will worsen and prolong the war that no one wants.

Otoniel Martínez