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El Salvador: Examining Foreign Relations

Since taking office in June 1989, the Cristiani government has had as the centerpiece of its foreign policy the maintenance of good relations with Washington. While US prodding on human rights has made the road bumpy at times, San Salvador appears to recognize that improved performance in this area is a prerequisite for international respectability and its broader goal of diversifying sources of economic aid. In addition, the Cristiani government has worked to cultivate closer relations with other Central American countries, winning their collective endorsement for a negotiated settlement to El Salvador's 11-year-old civil war. Nevertheless, human rights problems and only partial success in shedding the ruling rightwing ARENA party's reputation for repression have undermined the government's ability to garner credibility, especially in Europe where the government is hoping to obtain additional aid.

Background

Before the election of Jose Napoleon Duarte in 1984, El Salvador's poor human rights record repeatedly hampered relations with Washington, sparking numerous interruptions in the flow of US aid, which had been going to San Salvador since the 1950s. In 1977, the military regime of Gen. Carlos Romero rejected US aid when Washington sought to link disbursements to compliance with human rights rules; assistance was restored when Romero was overthrown in 1979. The murder of four US churchwomen in 1980 prompted Washington to suspend aid pending investigation of the incident, but the launching of a rebel "final offensive" in January 1981 prompted a renewal of assistance. Military aid continued to flow until the partial suspension of 1991 funding—an outgrowth of the government's failure to investigate thoroughly the November 1989 murders of six Jesuit priests.

Duarte's election as the first popularly chosen president in over 50 years stabilized ties to Washington. San Salvador under Duarte increasingly turned to the United States to help prevent a rebel victory as the civil conflict intensified. Well-known and respected in Washington,

the US-educated Duarte successfully attracted support for high levels of aid and a US commitment to guide the development of democracy in El Salvador.

Relations with other countries were given a lower priority during the Duarte years, although El Salvador participated in regional peace efforts and took some measures to improve its international image and secure aid. San Salvador harshly condemned the Sandinistas in Nicaragua for supporting the FMLN guerrillas, but maintained diplomatic relations with Managua. In August 1987, El Salvador and the four other Central American governments signed the Esquipulas II accord, calling for the cessation of external aid to insurgencies and peace talks between governments and rebel forces. Direct talks with Honduras during this time failed to resolve the historical boundary demarcation dispute between the countries. Outside the region, Duarte persuaded the Christian Democratic West German Government to reinstate aid that had been discontinued earlier as a result of Salvador's poor human rights record. In 1988, the government received assistance from Japan for the first time to continue reconstruction efforts after the 1986 earthquake.

Foreign Policy Under Cristiani

The Cristiani administration has worked hard to improve El Salvador's image abroad while weathering a number of setbacks. Initially the President had to deal with perceptions that his policies would closely mirror the ruling ARENA party's poor record on human rights and socioeconomic reform issues. Salvadoran diplomats were just beginning to get a hearing in foreign capitals when the government, in response to the November 1989 guerrilla offensive, began a crackdown on organized churches that the military alleged were helping the rebels. The revelation a few weeks later that the Jesuit murders had been carried out by a military unit struck another blow to Salvadoran credibility abroad from which the Cristiani government has not yet recovered.

Events in El Salvador in 1989 especially clouded relations with Washington, and placed the continuation of US aid into question. The military's slow progress in repelling the FMLN offensive in November 1989, and its role in the Jesuit murders raised concerns about the military's conduct of the war and continued death-squad activity. Disbursement of some \$42.5 million in military aid for 1991 is partially pegged to progress in investigating the Jesuit murders. At the same time, US criticism of the government's handling of the case has aggravated Salvadoran resentment of perceived US intrusion into domestic affairs; some government and military officials reportedly have reservations concerning San Salvador's relations with the United States. Despite these frictions, however, we believe that even professed nationalists such as ARENA founder Roberto D'Aubuisson recognize that scrutiny by Washington is the necessary price for vital US assistance.

Since taking office, Cristiani has tried to cultivate good relations with his Central American neighbors, seeking their support in reaching a political settlement to El Salvador's civil war. Even when Nicaragua's former Sandinista regime sent surface-to-air missiles to the FMLN in late 1989, San Salvador's reaction—suspending diplomatic and commercial relations—was relatively mild. Although the Sandinistas' assistance to the rebels continued after their 1990 electoral defeat, suggests Cristiani has been reluctant to confront the new Nicaraguan administration on the issue. Meanwhile, the longstanding land and maritime dispute with Honduras continues to fester, but has been referred to the International Court of Justice. Hearings on the dispute, centering on islands in the Gulf of Fonseca and the boundary between the two countries, are scheduled to begin in April. Although the boundary question remains a highly emotional issue for both countries, bilateral relations have been cordial and both governments are intent on preventing violent clashes.

San Salvador has begun efforts to end its almost total dependence on Washington—US aid provides almost 50 percent of El Salvador's budget. A successful insurgent public relations effort, which reinforces the impression of a reactionary rightwing government, still receives significant international support and weakens the loss

experienced Salvadoran Government's ability to present its case. Foreign Minister Manuel Pineda Castro has traveled to several West European countries this year to discuss the economic situation, elections, and negotiations. The President and Vice President Merino have visited Taiwan, seeking economic and military support. Japan donated more than \$1 million in construction materials last year to improve conditions for the poor.

Future Directions

Salvadoran leaders, concerned about the changing geopolitical realities, apparently view diversification of aid sources with some urgency. They may believe that even if relations with Washington remain strong, competing demands in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Nicaragua will translate into fewer dollars for El Salvador. San Salvador probably also calculates the demise of Communism will weaken support in Washington as the conflict in El Salvador becomes less of an East-West issue. Regionally, the government will probably continue efforts to use the now institutionalized summits as a collective effort to garner support—especially from Europe. Nonetheless, despite its diplomatic and public relations campaign, in Europe indicates the governments there remain suspicious of the ARENA administration. We believe El Salvador probably will continue to experience difficulties in attracting international support.

San Salvador is working toward establishing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in response to Moscow's overtures, probably calculating that ties to Moscow could boost El Salvador's bid for international legitimacy. Cristiani may believe that official relations with the Soviets—who have criticized the FMLN and, at least publicly, support a negotiated settlement—would serve to delegitimize the insurgents and isolate Cuba, a traditional rebel benefactor. Officials from both countries met for the first time last year, once to discuss Cuban assistance to the rebels and again in San Salvador to show Soviet support for a negotiated settlement.