

Central American Peace Process

The Search for Peace

Events in the 1990s have prompted some optimism: free and fair elections have taken place in Nicaragua; peace negotiations have resumed in El Salvador; and there is agreement between the superpowers to support the peace process.

The 1980s, however, saw varying degrees of civil conflict in three Central American countries – El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala. Although these conflicts had their roots in socio-economic factors, an East-West dimension was superimposed in the form of U.S. intervention in the contra war in Nicaragua, and by Soviet and Cuban aid to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and to Salvadoran and Guatemalan guerrillas.

In 1983, at Contadora, Panama, the foreign ministers of Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela (known as the Contadora Group) initiated a series of exchanges with the leaders of all five Central American countries (i.e., the three nations in conflict, and Honduras and Costa Rica). This resulted in a draft act for peace.

In August 1987, based on a proposal by Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias, all five Central American presidents agreed to an indigenous Central American peace plan known as Esquipulas II. The plan proposed that popular participation in political processes be guaranteed, and that governments commit themselves to human rights and to the rights of all countries to determine, without outside influence, their economic, political and social systems.

There emerged a regional consensus on the need for ceasefires, amnesty to armed insurgents, and dialogue with unarmed opposition groups. While planned deadlines have never been met, real progress has been made.

The presidents have met a number of times since Esquipulas II, transforming the summit process itself into a valuable regional institution. In August 1989 at Tela, Honduras, they agreed to a plan to demobilize the Nicaraguan resistance and to set in place a UN-sponsored security verification mechanism. In December 1989 at San Isidro de Coronado, Costa Rica, the presidents established the principle that all insurgent movements be dismantled under international supervision.

At their most recent meeting in December 1990 at Puntarenas, Costa Rica, the presidents addressed a range of issues from regional disarmament to boosting intraregional trade to initiating co-operation in protecting the environment. They also emphasized the importance of ending the remaining civil conflicts in the region, in Guatemala and El Salvador.

Canada's Support for the Peace Process

In 1985 Canada expressed to the Contadora Group its willingness to help design peacekeeping mechanisms, drawing on three decades of Canadian experience. Following the Esquipulas II agreement in 1987, Secretary of State for External Affairs Joe Clark dispatched officials to deliver an offer of Canadian support. Mr. Clark travelled to all five countries of Central America in November 1987 to underscore that willingness to help, and a special House of Commons committee was established early in 1988 to review and monitor the process.