Implementation of Comprehensive Peace Agreements: Staying the Course in El Salvador

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As the international community navigates the shoals of Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia, it seems almost gauche to say that the jury is still out concerning a UN-sponsored venture, El Salvador, which most observers, and certainly public opinion, have already filed away as a success story. Regrettably, however, proclamation of success is premature, and the nature and scope of the unfinished business of the Salvadoran peace process are cause for serious concern. Nagging problems continue to afflict two parts of the peace accords that are crucial to the success of the entire process: the new National Civil Police (known by its Spanish initials, PNC) and the transfer of land to former combatants on both sides and to supporters of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). This situation merits close attention not only because some of the problems can still be corrected but also because of the lessons El Salvador offers for other points of the globe where the United Nations is, or may become, engaged in efforts to make and consolidate peace, so that conflict will not recur. El Salvador—like Somalia, Mozambique, and Angola—belongs to a new breed of UN operations that are multidisciplinary in nature and seek to address the root causes of conflict in a comprehensive and integrated manner, borrowing from Namibia, the first such operation.

A UN-Negotiated Revolution

The UN-sponsored peace accords negotiated through 1990 and 1991 brought the decade-long war in El Salvador to an end in an impeccably observed cease-fire. In light of their extraordinary breadth and scope, the reforms agreed to in the accords have been aptly described by T. L. Karl as a "negotiated revolution," since they aim at nothing less than eliminating the cause of the conflict: a militarized society, riven by profound economic and social inequalities and a closed political system. The accords have taken that long-suffering nation a great distance. El Salvador is becoming
a democratic society capable of solving its own problems through civilized discourse. Previously unthinkable transformations have taken place, including far-reaching constitutional reforms, attained through constitutional means for the first time in El Salvador’s history. Former guerrillas have been elected in significant numbers to public office. But the accords have yet to deliver fully and irreversibly on the great promise that was held out when the final peace agreement was signed in the magnificent setting of Mexico City’s Chapultepec Castle on 16 January 1992, and some threatening clouds still linger in the Salvadoran sky.

The general elections in El Salvador in the first half of 1994—the first in peacetime in decades—have now come and gone. It was always foreseen that the elections would be an important test of El Salvador’s political maturity following a long war and decades of violence. But they were never expected to represent the end of the peace process. In fact, important portions of the peace accords remain to be implemented before the peace can be deemed relatively permanent.

The elections deflected attention from the peace process and politicized it at the same time. They also induced a false analogy with Cambodia, where, in accordance with the Paris agreement, the holding of elections and the establishment of a new government largely concluded the UN’s peacekeeping involvement. Such a schedule was never intended for El Salvador. Even under the original schedule, the implementation of the El Salvador peace agreements would have lasted through 1994.

Considerable delays have already occurred. With the waning of the Cristiani administration, the second half of 1993 saw a loss of momentum in the implementation of the agreements, on which the reintegration of impatient former combatants and their supporters depends.

The appearance of armed bands, some composed of disgruntled former combatants from both sides, is an ugly portent of the still very real possibility that El Salvador could go the way of postwar Nicaragua. The former guerrillas walk or drive through the streets of San Salvador under guard. The resurgence of death squad-type killings in the first part of 1994 raised the fear that some Salvadorans, few but powerful and well armed, still harbor a sociopathic nostalgia for old-fashioned ways of addressing grievances. They have not quite digested the broadly shared yearning for a negotiated political solution to the fundamental problems that led to the war in the first place. With the pressure of the international community relaxing, there is a small but strident and powerful clamor saying: “Basta!” or “Enough!” They would like to see the ambitious reforms diluted or even rolled back.

El Salvador was one of several cases that UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali had in mind when he devised the concept of “post-conflict peace-building” in his July 1992 report, An Agenda for Peace. He
noted that before the international community leaves a nation to its own devices following a peacekeeping operation, it should be ready to assist that nation in addressing sources of the conflict or crisis, to reduce the likelihood of its recurrence. This often involves, as in El Salvador, the reintegration of former combatants and other groups into productive activities, and institutional reforms such as the creation of police bodies.

The case of El Salvador illustrates the challenges of postconflict peace building, which go beyond the intrinsic difficulties of execution to include a complex international dimension. Neoisolationist reflexes have appeared in the United States and elsewhere, together with widespread hesitation regarding the limits of the UN as the centerpiece of the international security system designed at the close of World War II. In November 1994, the Security Council renewed the mandate of ONUsal, the UN verification mechanism in El Salvador, for five months, until 30 April 1995. No one questioned the principle that every effort should be made to resolve the critical unsettled portions of the peace accords and put them on an irreversible course. What was in question was how long the UN Security Council must remain involved. The council answered this question by stipulating that this would be the final renewal. The issue that arises now is how to move away from a peacekeeping operation strictu sensu—i.e., one involving military and police personnel—to an operation in which the UN can continue discharging its verification and good offices responsibilities, without losing the momentum provided by pressure from the international community through the council, and in doing so how to harness the programs and agencies of the UN system so that they work toward the same goal of peace consolidation.

The problem is not parochial. It offers useful lessons for dealing with the plethora of similar challenges that the UN is currently facing in the Third World—as close as Guatemala and Haiti, and as distant as Rwanda. It could be germane to the former Yugoslavia, some of the new republics of the former Soviet Union, and Gaza and Jericho, as the UN considers when and where to become engaged, the form and depth of engagement, and when to withdraw. The problems raised here go to the very heart of the international community’s responsibility, indeed its interest, in the maintenance of peace and security in the broadest sense. Not surprisingly, Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali has highlighted this topic in his January 1995 report to the member states, Supplement to An Agenda for Peace Revisited.

A Synopsis of the Peace Agreements

After a decade of civil war in which an estimated seventy-five thousand people died from armed conflict and massacres of civilians, one-fourth of
the population was displaced, and huge numbers of Salvadorans flocked to countries near and far, the parties agreed to negotiate under UN auspices and set themselves a fourfold goal: to end the armed conflict by political means as speedily as possible; to promote democratization; to guarantee unrestricted respect for human rights; and to reunify Salvadoran society. A key aim of the UN-led peace negotiations was "the establishment of the necessary guarantees and conditions for reintegrating the members of the FMLN, within a framework of full legality, into the civil, institutional and political life of the country." The reintegration of the FMLN would take place through three main channels: agricultural production, the new PNC, and political activities.

The Chapultepec agreement was the culmination of a series of accords encompassing a wide-ranging agenda—the armed forces, human rights, the judicial system, the electoral system, economic and social questions, and constitutional reform. The first substantive agreement, signed in Costa Rica on 21 July 1990, was on human rights. On 27 April 1991, in Mexico, the parties agreed to a number of constitutional reforms. The most radical reforms dealt with the armed forces by strengthening civilian authority and circumscribing the army's defense role, almost completely eliminating their responsibility for the maintenance of public order. The constitutional reform provided for the disbanding of several military-dominated police bodies, replacing them with a single, nationwide corps that is strictly civilian in character, structure, management, and doctrine.

In Mexico, the parties also agreed to overhaul the judiciary, making it more independent; to liberalize the electoral system to include a broader spectrum of political parties; and to create a national human rights prosecutor and establish the Commission on the Truth, composed of three eminent persons appointed by the secretary-general, all non-Salvadoran, to examine the most notorious cases of violence from the decade-long war and to make recommendations to ensure that such actions would not recur. The final agreement signed at Chapultepec provided for broad reforms in the armed forces, including a "purification" of the officer corps based on recommendations of an independent civilian panel, known as the Ad Hoc Commission. Another feature of the agreement was an intricate calendar to synchronize the dismantling of the FMLN military structure with the implementation of the reforms agreed to by the government. The agreement also included detailed provisions for a cease-fire and separation of forces. Except for the human rights agreement, which entered into force before the completion of the negotiations, these provisions would trigger the implementation of the whole package of agreements as well as economic and social measures to facilitate the reintegration of former combatants into productive life.

Two of the most prominent measures were the creation of the new PNC and the transfer of land to former combatants and their supporters. There
are several reasons for their prominence. First, these programs are among
the most innovative features of a pioneering foray into a new generation of
UN peace ventures. Second, on their success rests the entire peace process
in El Salvador and its sustainability in the long term. Third, both programs
have encountered serious difficulties and, particularly in the case of the
PNC, distortions. Special attention must be given to them, since their im-
plementation will last at least through 1995 and probably well beyond, in
the case of the land transfer.

Ensuring a Framework for the Respect of Human Rights

Under the peace accords, creating the PNC was central to providing a legal
and institutional framework for the protection of human rights. It was an
unprecedented endeavor, which is likely to be repeated in Guatemala and
which is starting up in Haiti.

In the negotiation following the April 1991 agreement on constituc-
tional reform, the principles were fleshed out so that the portion of the
Chapultepec agreement on the PNC was one of the most detailed, covering
not only the new police but also the new National Public Security Academy
(ANSP) as well as a new doctrine for the police. According to the latter, the
police was to be placed at the service of the community and integrated
with it, lightly armed, providing security and defending citizens’ rights—
rather than instilling fear in them. The exceptional use of the army for
public security was carefully regulated and circumscribed to situations
where the PNC finds itself overwhelmed.

If faithfully implemented, the design for the police could address
some of the enduring problems that have polarized Salvadoran society. It
could also serve as a model for other developing countries, which like El
Salvador have oversized, overbearing armed forces. In the selection of per-
sonnel, the parties agreed to emphasize the recruitment of new officers,
untainted by prior associations with either of the belligerent sides. How-
ever, the possibility of admission to the PNC of a limited number of former
FMLN combatants was allowed as one of the channels for their reintegration
into society. Their number was not to exceed that of former members of
the Salvadoran army, and in any case they were to be kept to a maximum
of 20 percent each overall.

Even this cursory outline makes obvious both the importance of this
particular component of the peace agreements and the need to implement
it without stumbling. This is easier said than done. The PNC was to be
trained over twenty-four months, gradually taking over from various sep-
arate bodies that had had discrete rural and urban responsibilities, until it
was deployed throughout the entire country. During the transition to the
PNC, the National Police (PN) would be the only body of three principal
preexisting ones to remain provisionally in operation. The process was to be overseen by UN police monitors—another key component of the set of guarantees established in the peace accords—which itself was an expensive endeavor, requiring police personnel from carefully selected contributing countries.

Regrettably, serious delays and distortions occurred in the implementation of the agreements on the new PNC. There was a slow start due to initial reluctance to lay the groundwork for this challenging project before the formal signature of the peace accords, as had been agreed. Nonetheless, when it finally got under way, the ANSP did a remarkable job in preparing candidates, and the integration of these new recruits with former combatants from the armed forces and from the FMLN in a limited percentage has been by and large successful. A new body with a fresh esprit de corps distinct from that of its components and thus transcending recent antagonisms is emerging from the ANSP. Where these recruits have been deployed by the PNC, starting in former conflict areas, they have been well received by the people and are going about their business efficiently and with an approach altogether different from their ill-famed predecessors.

While the ANSP has been a success so far, the PNC taken as a whole has yet to match expectations. The old National Police was kept in existence far longer than could be reasonably warranted, and the government continued to induct recruits far longer than could be reasonably justified. The sluggish phasing-out betrayed a lingering reluctance to see it disappear. The government showed inexplicable unwillingness to produce lists of the discharged members of security bodies, which would be essential to verify that they are not clandestinely joining the PNC, from which they are barred except within the specific limits set in the peace accords. A number of senior-level former members of the old police bodies were brought into the PNC in key positions. Units of preexisting bodies were transferred into the PNC and given a privileged status and responsibilities in areas beyond their purview. The FMLN initially accepted the designation of a career military man—as it happens, the former head of the antidrug body—as the deputy director of the PNC. The FMLN later regretted its acceptance, when the deputy director became associated with the surreptitious militarization of the PNC. He finally resigned as the Cristiani administration drew to a close.

A related problem, which stemmed from the Cristiani government's judgment that extraordinary measures were required to confront the crime wave, was the deployment of armed forces to carry out exercises and ostensibly to deter crime in locations of rising delinquency. Predictably, this issue caused considerable alarm in the FMLN as well as much controversy. Both the secretary-general, in his reports to the Security Council, and ONUSAL singled it out for criticism. A more recent incident under the Calderón-Sol administration shows that the problem is not easily solved.
Whether or not this is in conformity with the 1991 constitutional reforms—and the UN believes it is not—it undoubtedly goes against their spirit, which was to separate the military from police duties. While no one seems to dispute the rise in crime, other ways could have been found to combat it, such as avoiding delays from the beginning in the creation of the PNC, giving it enough resources to discharge its duties, and addressing the root causes of the crime, including the disaffection among potential beneficiaries of the peace accords who have seen their hopes dashed and have resorted to banditry and, in the case of cashiered army personnel, violent takeovers of the legislature.

Reintegration of Former Combatants into Civilian Life

One of the most difficult and challenging tasks of postconflict peace building is the reintegration into civilian life of former combatants, refugees, displaced persons, the war-disabled, and other groups marginalized during the often long years of conflict. Equally important is the need that it be done rapidly and efficiently; neglect of this problem in El Salvador’s neighbor, Nicaragua, set back efforts at reconciliation and rehabilitation following the end of the Sandinista regime, demonstrating the fragility of postwar processes.

Although the main body of the peace agreements consisted of legal and institutional reforms, by addressing land the Chapultepec agreement took on an issue that had been at the core of Salvadoran tensions since colonial times. The agreement provided for the transfer of land to former combatants of both the FMLN and the armed forces as well as to the squatters, or land occupants (*tenedores* in Salvadoran parlance), who had taken over and worked the land in conflict areas throughout the war years. The program, which has been labeled an “arms-for-land” deal, was certainly not an attempt at land reform or a mechanism for income redistribution as such, but rather the main venue in the agreement through which former combatants and supporters of the FMLN would be reintegrated into the productive life of the country. This program highlighted deeply rooted land tenure problems that had been unsuccessfully addressed in the past. It created hopes and expectations, attempting to cut through red tape and institutional gridlock to provide potential beneficiaries with a modest but tangible stake in this densely populated country’s natural wealth as well as a productive, life-sustaining activity. It sought to eschew the pattern of unkept promises that has bedeviled neighboring Nicaragua and impeded its breaking out of the cycle of alternating strife and violence with failed reforms.

It is no exaggeration to say that the problem of land was as much a root cause of the armed conflict that raged throughout the 1980s as was
the overbearing power of the armed forces. The two problems were not unrelated: scholars of El Salvador point to the armed forces as an instrument created and nurtured by the landed class to protect and preserve its position.

The vagueness of the Chapultepec agreement on these issues gave rise to differing expectations on the part of the many players. By the end of September 1992, this difference was so acute that land transfer had become one of the most contentious issues in the implementation of the agreement and had actually led the FMLN to suspend its military demobilization. The negotiating position of the FMLN in resolving this controversy was quite strong, since its supporters occupied the land in question. Moreover, under the agreement they could not be evicted until the issue was legally settled.

The position taken by the FMLN put the whole peace process in jeopardy, since the reduction and purification of the armed forces and the disbanding of strategic military units were contingent on the FMLN’s demobilization. Removing the obstacles to the transfer of land therefore took on great urgency with the belligerents cantoned, fully armed, and in numerous concentration areas scattered throughout the tiny country. After intensive consultations with the two parties, the secretary-general drafted a program that—though he was aware that it was not fully satisfactory to either party—he asked them to accept, as a package and without amendment, as a fair and reasonable compromise. With its acceptance by the parties a few days later, the so-called 13 October 1992 program\(^2\) became, in effect, a supplement to the Chapultepec agreement, thus removing a major roadblock to the demobilization of the FMLN and hence to the reform of the armed forces and the implementation of the agreements as a whole.

Serious delays have occurred with regard to the transfer of land and other reintegration programs. Both the government and the FMLN have been responsible for the delays. Many of these relate to administrative, bureaucratic, and technical difficulties, but others have simply been due to a lack of political will among lower-level government officials. Delays in the transfer of land have created much tension. For many potential beneficiaries, the lack of land titles has precluded access to credit for housing and agricultural production, thus impeding their reintegration into productive activities. Because of the slowness in the implementation of the land program, several successive planting seasons have been missed. Much remains to be done, and done rapidly, if a growing source of friction and instability is to be defused. As the secretary-general has pointed out, the situation of Nicaragua is illustrative in this regard, as rearming by the contras was largely the result of unfulfilled expectations about the transfer of land.
Domestic and International Factors Affecting the Peace Process

As expected, both domestic and international factors have affected the implementation of the peace agreements and the road to national reconciliation in many and complex ways. In addition to all the normal difficult tasks of development, countries coming out of a conflict face the challenge of economic reconstruction and peace consolidation. In the case of El Salvador, reconstruction meant the rehabilitation of major services and of physical infrastructure destroyed during twelve years of war. At the same time, national reconciliation and the consolidation of peace could take place only if critical programs arising from the peace agreements were complied with and successfully implemented. Some of them, such as the land program and the FNC, had serious financial implications above and beyond the normal financial needs of developing countries, imposing a heavy burden on government finances. Of course, the political will of the parties to comply with the peace agreements is the basic requirement for their successful implementation. However, the domestic economy also must be stable and growing if peace is to be consolidated.

After growing rapidly during the 1960s and 1970s, the Salvadoran economy fell into recession and stagnation as the Central American Common Market collapsed and the country slid into civil war. As a result, investment dropped, capital fled the country, and the national economy became increasingly protected and isolated from the world economy. The Cristiani administration enjoyed remarkable success in stabilizing the economy and putting it back on a path of growth. This success was especially notable given the negative external economic shocks experienced by the country during this period. The most serious of these was the dramatic fall in the price of coffee starting with the breakdown of the International Coffee Agreement in June 1989. This resulted in a fall in government revenue from $615 million in 1980 to $220 million in 1991.

The Salvadoran case clearly illustrates the dilemma of postconflict peace building. On the one hand, a stable and vibrant economy is essential for the successful reintegration of large numbers of people into the productive life of the country—an insurmountable task in a stagnant economy. On the other hand, sticking to a rigorous economic program imposes major constraints on the implementation—particularly the financing—of many programs that are crucial to national reconciliation and the consolidation of peace.\(^3\)

The constraints imposed by the stabilization program meant that if peace-related programs were to be carried out as scheduled, fresh external financing would be necessary, over and above what was required to satisfy
the normal socioeconomic needs of the country. Thus foreign financing became a critical factor affecting the implementation of the peace agreements.

In addition to its financial contribution, the international community played and continues to play a crucial role not only in focusing world attention on the problems of El Salvador but also in the negotiation, implementation, and verification of the peace agreements. Much attention was paid to El Salvador by the rest of the world during the war years. A lot of the publicity was negative, related to acts of violence. Names of places where massacres occurred and those of some of the victims or their place in society punctuate the history of the conflict: El Mozote, Las Hojas, Archbishop Romero, the four U.S. nuns, the attorney general, the minister of the presidency, the Jesuits of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA).

In particular, the murder of the Jesuits by army elements during the November 1989 FMLN offensive focused the attention of the U.S. Congress on the lackluster investigations by the Salvadoran authorities of killings and human rights violations. The Congress severely restricted military aid to the Salvadoran armed forces, and the United States put pressure on the Salvadoran government to continue negotiating constructively toward a final peace agreement. Further external pressure on El Salvador resulted from UN verification beginning in 1991.

The unfolding of the negotiations, with their cliffhangers, lulls, setbacks, and triumphs, also attracted considerable attention. The photo finish at the stroke of midnight on 31 December 1991 provided first-page material around the world. The result of the negotiations as spelled out in the Chapultepec agreement, whether intended at the time or not, was a very innovative and intrusive verification system set up by the Security Council. Such UN omnipresence in a target country has been matched only in Namibia and Cambodia.

Starting in 1991, the secretary-general enlisted the help of a small group of governments, as “friends of the Secretary-General,” in prodding, cajoling, or soothing the sometimes recalcitrant negotiators. Reports of the secretary-general on the human rights situation as well as progress reports on the negotiations kept the Security Council’s attention focused on El Salvador. A true constituency for the negotiating effort developed and maintained international attention, as was demonstrated when no less than ten heads of government turned up for the signature ceremony of the final peace agreement in January 1992. It seemed then that the parties to the agreements could not escape the spotlight and would have to answer to the international community for any flagging in the discharge of their solemn undertakings.

During the negotiations and later during the implementation of the agreements, at least one, sometimes two, of the friends was sitting on the Security Council at a given time. The secretary-general took the lead
in reports to the council based on recommendations from ONUSAL. The
council in its deliberations tended naturally to look to the “friends” for
guidance in the formulation of its decisions, which ensured follow-up to
the secretary-general’s lead.

Still Not a Success Story

In this period of post–Cold War turmoil—seen against setbacks in Bosnia,
Rwanda, and Somalia and against problems only recently resolved in An-
gola and Haiti—the UN’s experiences in El Salvador and recently in other
countries such as Cambodia, Mozambique, and Namibia stand out by com-
parison as success stories. There have been many positive, even remark-
able, achievements in El Salvador. However, one must stand back and re-
alize that these achievements are not yet irreversible. Indeed, there are still
disquieting portents.

It would be premature to label El Salvador a success story, as long as
pending problems concerning reintegration programs and the police are
not addressed and corrected. Implementation of reintegration programs re-
mains excruciatingly slow, and bureaucratic and other roadblocks persist.
The distortions that still mar the PNC reflect a reluctance in certain circles
to the concept of demilitarization of public security. El Diario de Hoy, a
newspaper that consistently opposed the negotiation and the peace agree-
ments, went so far as to point to the rise in crime as proof that the Cha-
pultepec accord on the police had been a politically expedient arrangement
rather than a new and different approach to public order in El Salvador.
The very philosophy behind the PNC was being questioned, and there are
forces that increasingly advocate a return to the militaristic, repressive
model of before. For this reversal to occur would be a devastating blow to
the peace accords, seriously undermining their single most innovative
feature.

Although the separation of forces and the cease-fire in El Salvador
since their entry into force were respected in an exemplary manner, reлу-
cance on the part of the government to put in effect the obligatory recom-
endations of the Ad Hoc Commission on the purification of the armed
forces, and subsequent delays, added to the mistrust and irritation that lin-
gered between the parties. The discovery of large arms caches of the FMLN,
after they were deemed to have complied with the agreement to disarm
completely, was a very harmful blow to the process. It revealed a root fear
that the undertakings of the government coupled with international verifi-
cation were insufficient to ensure compliance. Late in 1993, a perceptible
loss of momentum appeared, due partly to a certain fatigue in government
circles but also to the gradual weakening of the administration as the end
of Cristiani’s term in office approached and the electoral process began. Beyond the central issues of the police, reintegration in general, and the transfer of land in particular, other aspects of the peace agreements have yet to be properly implemented. The most important are those that would round out the institutional framework designed to guarantee respect for human rights, particularly reforms in the judiciary, which have encountered obstacles.

The importance of these reforms was highlighted by the reappearance of death squad-type killings in late 1993. Already in the middle of the year, ONUSAL’s Human Rights Division had tracked a number of killings apparently due to conventional crime, but that, in a suspicious coincidence, had as their victims an abnormally high number of political figures, most of them linked to the FMLN or to the political left. Since then, members of the armed forces and politicians from Arena, the political party in power, have also been murdered. These developments led to the revival of the dormant recommendation by the Commission on the Truth—mandatory under the peace agreements—that the government should conduct an in-depth inquiry into illegal armed groups. This recommendation had been effectively ignored by the government since the commission’s report was issued on 15 March 1993. Steps were taken somewhat grudgingly and belatedly to repair this omission by creating an investigative body; but, notwithstanding a useful and courageous report, it proved unable to get to the bottom of this ugly phenomenon.

It was particularly unfortunate that disagreements over the implementation of the agreements spilled into the campaign period, when positions tended to polarize and the lame duck government found it difficult to maintain pressure on reluctant officials. As the Commission of Human Rights’s independent expert has pointed out, peace consolidation, an uphill process, either goes forward or retreats; maintaining momentum is essential, and such momentum was in effect lost when the electoral campaign began in November 1993. Shortly before his successor’s inauguration, President Cristiani agreed with the FMLN on a new calendar for the implementation of the agreements, the last in a series of rescheduling exercises made necessary by delays in compliance. But a calendar is only that: a chronological instrument against which to verify compliance. It is not a substantive accomplishment in itself. Verifiable compliance is the real yardstick, rather than a promise to comply and the setting of new target dates. President Calderón-Sol, who was inaugurated on 1 June 1994, has repeatedly vowed to implement the peace accords. In the months that he has been in office, both his actions and his public leadership have lent some impulse to a somewhat stagnated process. The calendar of implementation has been adjusted anew, and public manifestations of political will have been issued by the parties. The government and the FMLN even
took the unprecedented step of jointly requesting the renewal of ONUSAL, when its mandate was to expire in November 1994. A new supreme court is in place. The PN was dismantled at the end of 1994. The PNC is scheduled to be fully deployed and operational by April 1995. These are encouraging signs, but are they sufficient to ensure the rectification of distortions and continued implementation, particularly in the transfer of land and other reintegration programs, which are seriously delayed, as well as in the public security sector and in the still nascent judicial reform?

The fact that elections were held both on schedule and peacefully led to complacency in the international community about the state of affairs in El Salvador, and discussion began about establishing a sunset clause for ONUSAL. The council wisely opted against this course when it renewed the mandate of ONUSAL for six months in May 1994, choosing instead to maintain the spotlight and thus its pressure for the full implementation of the peace programs trained on El Salvador. The sunset clause is now in place, and ONUSAL will have left El Salvador by the end of April 1995. But there the responsibility of the United Nations did not end, since both the secretary-general and the Security Council, in endorsing the successive peace accords, accepted the request of the parties to verify compliance with all agreements. The Security Council has reaffirmed this commitment in expectation of the secretary-general’s stated intention to put before it proposals concerning the United Nations’ continuing verification responsibilities after ONUSAL. Here the secretary-general favored a halfway house, short of maintaining a peacekeeping operation as such but still sufficiently substantive in political and technical terms to ensure that it is able to discharge these duties and to lend good offices to assist implementation.

Nothing can compare with the political pressure the Security Council can bring to bear on a peace process that it is supervising. Indeed, even this authority is insufficient in cases of extreme obduracy. Still, no organ or body of the UN has the council’s clout. At the same time, one cannot lose sight of the growing reluctance to take on or renew open-ended commitments financed through assessed contributions rather than left to voluntary ones. One has to reckon with this reality as well as with the growing pressure to set time limits on peacekeeping operations that goes with it.

Scarc financial resources are only part of the problem; there is a broader concern about overextension in general. This concern leads to closing operations very shortly after the mandate as originally conceived has been discharged. It worked well in Namibia. The secretary-general has kept a representative in Cambodia with the Security Council’s blessing. The operation in Mozambique was closed down early in 1995, following the successful October 1994 elections.

Given the UN’s commitment to the parties to verify implementation of all agreements, without making any distinction between the military and
police portions of the accords and the other portions, its task is manifestly not yet complete. It is therefore established that the situation is conceptually and practically different from Namibia, Cambodia, or Mozambique.

It is axiomatic that so long as there are peace accords awaiting completion there remains a mission for the UN that is inherently political. Some might think that responsibilities of this nature could be transferred to field missions of development agencies. But this would be contrary to the specific wishes of member states, as expressed by the General Assembly concerning the activities of these missions. Furthermore, it may be difficult to reconcile the impartiality required to verify compliance by signatories to peace agreements with the requirement that development agencies work in close partnership with one of the parties, namely the government concerned. This requirement would invite a conflict of interest.

There is much to be said for the Security Council, in a postpeacekeeping phase, to maintain its grip on the process of implementation of such a peace accord. The challenge facing the secretary-general became finding a mechanism that can continue to fulfill its verification responsibilities, while, at the same time, acting as the eyes and ears of the international community to ensure by its presence and advice that the resources of the UN system are well integrated for the purpose of consolidating peace. Such a mechanism can be a sui generis halfway house between a peacekeeping operation that is no longer needed and a pure and simple transfer of responsibilities to development agencies, which is inappropriate and insufficient. The secretary-general therefore informed the Security Council in February that he proposed to establish in El Salvador, following the expiry of ONUSAL, a small political office equipped with the proper expertise, which would enable him to alert the Security Council if problems should arise, and also provide precious guidance to field representatives of development agencies and programs, thus complementing their efforts. As he recently said in the Supplement to An Agenda for Peace, “the United Nations, having invested much effort in helping to end the conflict, can legitimately express views and offer advice about actions which the Government could take to reduce the danger of losing what has been achieved.”

The case of El Salvador has allowed us to build up a body of evidence and experience on postconflict peace building on which we can draw in the future. One lesson is that deciding how and when to end a peacekeeping operation, while honoring the commitment to see things through, may well be as difficult and as important as deciding to begin the operation. The test of an “exit scenario” in a case such as El Salvador, where the UN has a clear mandate to verify compliance with peace agreements and to exercise good offices to promote compliance, should not be whether things seem quiet or elections have taken place, but whether peace-related reforms have advanced enough to make the process durable, indeed irreversible—
that is, whether the structures and institutions put in place ensure that potential conflicts will be resolved by peaceful means rather than by resorting to arms, and that potentially explosive problems, such as threats posed by disgruntled former combatants, have been defused. This is a difficult judgment that will have to be made in April 1995. We can hope that the new approach taken in El Salvador can develop a doctrine applicable to that definable moment when traditional peacekeeping responsibilities end but a political commitment remains: no blue helmets or berets, no police monitors, but rather political observers and good officers with sufficient technical capability—economic, legal, and otherwise—to follow and encourage implementation of complex accords and, above all, to enable the United Nations to keep a watchful eye trained on the process of consolidation of peace and prevention of future conflict.

The cost of seeing postconflict peace building through is likely to be a pittance compared to what recurrent peacekeeping (or peace enforcement) operations might cost, and certainly compared to the cost of reverting to war. When the international community embarks on major, multidisciplinary, costly peacemaking and peacekeeping operations, it should stay the course and make sure that the job is done—or it might later regret not having done so. ☞

Notes

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3. See de Soto and del Castillo, “Obstacles to Peace-Building.”

4. Ibid., par. 52, p. 12.