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Conversations with Two Foes

In an exclusive pair of interviews, El Salvador's President and a rebel leader explain why peace may now be possible

After ten years of a bloody civil war that has claimed some 70,000 lives, there are no eternal optimists left in El Salvador. Blind hope went out of fashion after then President José Napoleón Duarte met with failure in three meetings with the leftist guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front. Since the last talks in 1987, the two sides have dug in with renewed determination. Now, four months after Alfredo Cristiani, 41, succeeded Duarte as President, there is new talk of reconciliation. Representatives of the government and the F.M.L.N. met two weeks ago in Mexico City to develop a framework for future dialogue. The most promising result of the get-together is that the two sides have agreed to resume their discussions in Costa Rica in mid-October.

Cristiani and Joaquín Villalobos, 38, the F.M.L.N.'s top comandante, agreed to talk with TIME separately last week about the prospects for peace. Though they clearly remain divided on important issues, each man spoke without rancor of his enemy and acknowledged that a fight to the end is no longer feasible. "It's time to look for an agreement and forget about [past] accusations," said Cristiani. Villalobos, in turn, conceded that a prolonged war "no longer corresponds to the reality of the world. If a revolutionary asked me today what to do, I would say, 'Conspire to launch a short-term war.'"

Both men displayed a willingness to yield on demands that once seemed immutable. Cristiani abandoned the government's requirement that the guerrillas lay down their arms as a prerequisite to serious negotiations. While insisting that the rebels must eventually surrender their weapons, he said it was "not necessarily a first step." The President, whose rightist Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) has strong links to El Salvador's armed forces, also offered publicly for the first time to consider a drastic reduction in military manpower. If the talks succeed, he said, "there would be a demobilization of the armed forces. We don't believe there's a need for a 55,000-man army if there is peace."

Villalobos also demonstrated a greater flexibility. In what appeared to be a fundamental shift of philosophy, the co-

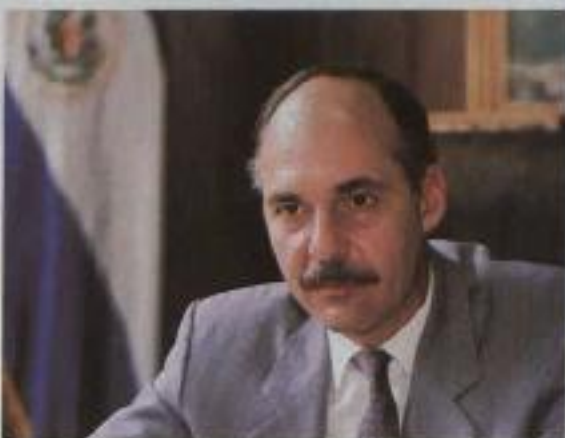


"We can't aspire to an armed revolution that the Soviet Union will subsidize."

Joaquín Villalobos

"There is room for coexistence with everybody."

Alfredo Cristiani



mandante said that given the changes in the international climate, the time for violent struggle has passed. "We can't at this time aspire to an armed revolution that the Soviet Union will subsidize," he said. He suggested that the F.M.L.N. would now be willing to embrace a "multiparty system." Asked if he could coexist with the right, Villalobos responded, "Of course," but went on to say of ARENA, "After you reaffirm your legitimacy in an electoral contest in which we all participate, you have every right to turn back every reform you wish and to do with the country what you will."

Signaling a new candor, Villalobos

said the F.M.L.N. had "made mistakes," including a failure to negotiate a peace agreement in 1980. He also acknowledged that the rebels have received arms from Nicaragua. Although Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said as much to Cristiani last August, it was the first public admission from the F.M.L.N.

Such forthrightness will be essential if the two sides are going to settle their monumental differences. Before there can be an election in which both sides will agree to participate, for instance, there must be a permanent cease-fire. In mid-September the F.M.L.N. announced an eleven-day unilateral truce, but Cristiani claims that the rebels have not honored it. Said he: "They're still attacking our forces and using [land] mines."

Peace talks have been known to founder on far less. As of now, the discussions are scheduled to begin Oct. 16 and to continue on a monthly basis, as proposed in Mexico City. Cristiani is heartened by this timetable. "What happened to Mr. Duarte was that he had isolated meetings with [the F.M.L.N.]," he said. "If one of those meetings failed, that was it." Cristiani expressed a willingness to discuss the F.M.L.N.'s proposals for judicial and electoral reform. At the same time, he shot down key elements of the F.M.L.N.'s nine-point plan put forward in Mexico, most notably the guerrillas' bid to move up legislative and municipal elections scheduled for 1991.

Both men seemed to suggest that once a peace is negotiated, the U.S., which has supplied more than \$3 billion in military and economic assistance over the past decade, will recede to the political sidelines. Cristiani said that after a settlement is achieved, "this military aid should turn into economic aid and keep on flowing into the country while it recovers economically." Villalobos, who called for an end to U.S. military aid, voiced skepticism that the Bush Administration "would choose to continue indefinitely its support for the war." He also hoped for "proper relations" with the U.S. Last week the U.S. Senate voted to boost military aid to El Salvador by \$5 million, to \$90 million.

As for keeping the peace talks on track, Cristiani expressed doubts about the guerrillas' aim of achieving a permanent settlement by the end of January, warning that it could take all five years of his administration to achieve an accord. "If the process that we've agreed to in Mexico keeps going, there's always hope," he said. "But it won't be easy."

—By Jill Smolowe.

Reported by Ricardo Chavira/Mexico City and John Moody/San Salvador