

United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL)

El Salvador (1991-4)

Despite serious impediments, including a long and vicious civil war between the government and *Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional* (FMLN) that claimed the lives of 75,000 people, a complicated and not altogether favourable regional context, and considerable opposition from influential Salvadoran actors, the UN's efforts to assist the transformation of El Salvador from war to peaceful democracy rank among the organisation's most unequivocal successes. According to Boutros Boutros-Ghali, ONUSAL represented 'a pioneering experience ... the first in a new generation of United Nations operations whose purpose is post-conflict peacebuilding (1992b: annex 1). Writing in 1995, the Secretary-General stressed the significance of ONUSAL for future operations hoping to accomplish similar tasks, dwelling in particular on the way that the mission combined peacemaking, peacekeeping and post-conflict peacebuilding tasks (1995b: 4).

By 1991, the civil war in El Salvador had raged for over twelve years (Torres-Rivas 1997: 209-16). It had five principal causes: El Salvador's high levels of poverty and inequality (50 percent of the urban population lived below the poverty line); little political space for dissent; significant problems with land ownership; systematic human rights abuse by the government; and international patronage and support for both sides (the US supported the government and Cuba supported the rebels) (Orr 2001: 155-8). However, by the late 1980s it was becoming increasingly obvious to both the Salvadoran government and FMLN that they had reached a military stalemate. In addition, the ending of the Cold War removed all-important sources of foreign patronage from both sides. Coupled with the terrible human and material costs of the war (GDP per capita decreased to 1960s levels; 50 percent of government

spending went to the war effort), themselves compounded by a major earthquake in 1986, and the positive encouragement of the US and Soviet Union, these factors led both sides to separately approach the UN in 1989 (Hampson 1996b: 70; Pastor and Boyce 2000: 367-78; Stanley and Holiday 1997: 26).

Prior to the 1987 Esquipulas II Agreement in which the region's leaders pledged to work towards peace, the UN's engagement in attempts to resolve the multiple conflicts plaguing Central America had been limited, with the OAS and concerned neighbours such as Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Costa Rica leading efforts to negotiate an end to the violence (see Karl 1992: 149). After 1987, however, the UN became actively involved in assisting the region's peace processes. To this end, three related operations, ONUVEN, ONUCA and ONUSAL were created between 1989 and 1991. ONUVEN and ONUCA were closely linked: the former dealt with monitoring the 1989 elections in Nicaragua while the latter was created to facilitate those elections and verify the compliance of all five Latin American states with the military protocols of the Esquipulas II accords.

Two years of negotiations followed the Salvadoran government and FMLN's approach to the UN and after a series of limited agreements, a peace settlement known as the Chapultepec Accords was signed on 16 January 1992 (LeVine 1997: 227-54). The various agreements established a comprehensive peace plan that contained a timetable for demilitarization, the demobilization of the FMLN and its establishment as a legitimate political party, extensive reform of the armed forces, police and judiciary (including the incorporation of FMLN members into all three institutions), a program of national reconciliation and economic reconstruction, and a commitment to human rights (Wilkins 1997: 257-8). A wide-ranging role for the UN was also written into the agreement (see box 1).

Box 1: UN responsibilities under the Chapultepec Accords

- Verify that the parties are complying with their obligations.
- Regulate military movements.
- Monitor the Salvadoran police force prior to transfer of authority to new national service.
- Assist in the provision of security in unstable areas.
- Assess national military doctrine and education.
- Investigate reports of human rights abuse.
- Verify implementation of the Truth Commission's recommendations.

Source: Stanley and Holiday 1997: 26-7.

ONUSAL was established on 20 May 1991 (Security Council Resolution 693) and began its deployment on 26 July. The mission was tasked with verifying and assisting in the implementation of past and future agreements concluded by the Salvadoran government and FMLN. As such, its tasks expanded from mainly human rights monitoring in 1991, to verifying the military aspects of the agreement and reform of the police and security services in 1992, to election monitoring in 1993. To oversee the human rights component, the mission included a designated Human Rights Division with a broad mandate to investigate and report on human rights abuse. This was the first time that the UN had deployed a human rights mission with broad powers for a protracted period (Berdal 2008: 190; Antonini 2004: 431).

As with West New Guinea and Namibia, ONUSAL's military component would not have been able to complete its mandate in the face of sustained intransigence from the local belligerents and was therefore dependent on the consent

of both major parties. Although El Salvador is a small country, its geography includes inaccessible mountain regions that are ideal for concealing weapons and soldiers. As a result, ONUSAL's 373 military observers were unable to fully monitor and verify the disarmament process (see Vickers and Spence 1992). Verification of FMLN demobilization and disarmament therefore proved problematic, and the UN Secretary-General made creative use of diplomacy to keep the process on track. Most notably, in October 1992 the Secretary-General despatched the head of UN peacekeeping, Marrack Goulding and senior political adviser Alvaro de Soto to negotiate a new disarmament agreement that made progress by one side dependent on verified progress by the other (Hampson 1996b: 85). Although throughout 1992 ONUSAL consistently challenged the FMLN's declarations about the number of weapons it possessed, it publicly accepted the former rebels' final assurances and declared that they had complied with their disarmament obligations on schedule (14 December 1992). ONUSAL did this despite government criticism that it was not acting impartially (McCormick 1997: 285). A crisis point was reached in May 1993 when an explosion in Managua, Nicaragua, revealed a large FMLN arms cache, including high-value weaponry such as surface-to-air missiles.

Like the SWAPO incursion into Namibia, the Managua explosion was a critical point for the peace process. However, it gave the UN an opportunity to criticise the FMLN, giving ONUSAL the appearance of impartiality. Up until that point, the UN's main criticisms had been aimed at the government's reluctance to reduce the size of the army, incorporate FMLN members into the security services and abolish the notorious paramilitary organisations that were responsible for the death of around 30,000 Salvadorans between 1979 and 1981 (Grenier and Daudelin

1995: 353-4). The bombing allowed the UN to criticise the FMLN and both sides remained committed to the peace process (McCormick 1997: 287-8).

Only political pressure from the UN and influential states such as the 'Four Friends of the Secretary-General' (Colombia, Mexico, Spain, and Venezuela) and the US prompted the eventual reduction of the armed forces by over 50% (down to approximately 30,000). They were also brought under civilian and democratic control. However, it took considerably longer than anticipated to remove senior officers from positions of political power. Moreover, no FMLN members were incorporated into the new national army and efforts to bring military officers to justice for alleged human rights abuse were largely unsuccessful (Grenier and Daudelin 1995: 354).

ONUSAL's human rights and police components faced similar problems. Insufficient numbers and variable levels of cooperation meant that ONUSAL's Human Rights Division struggled to bring past human rights violators to justice (Hampson 1996b: 82). The Division was also criticized for not trying to raise awareness of basic human rights within El Salvador (Stanley and Holiday 1997: 34). The first of ONUSAL's 631 police observers began arriving in February 1992. They were mandated to assist in maintaining security and public order, monitor the activities of the police force, and facilitate the establishment of a new National Civilian Police (PNC). With ONUSAL's support, El Salvador built a police service that inspired confidence and security rather than fear in the general public (Costa 1995: 368). In September 1992, a new National Academy for Public Security (ANSP) was established to train new recruits and re-train higher-ranking officers. The PNC recruited nearly 8,000 new police officers, which allowed it to fully replace its predecessor within the space of two years (Costa 1995: 367). It should be noted, however, that ONUSAL was not directly involved in training at the ANSP. This was

organised by an International Technical Team in partnership with the Salvadoran government, and actually hindered the UN's verification work (Costa 1995: 382-5).

ONUSAL's Electoral Division enjoyed considerable success, playing a vital part in verifying the validity of the March 1994 election result and ensuring that the FMLN in particular would accept the outcome. Emulating the decentralised approach taken by UNTAG, the division's 36 full-time staff operated through six regional offices and coordinated the activities of 900 observers during the election. The division closely monitored the work of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, which helped maintain a free and fair election. This was augmented by close cooperation with ONUSAL's military and police components during the tense run-up to the election (Hampson 1996b: 89-92). ONUSAL directly influenced the registration process, which was heavily delayed in FMLN strongholds and threatened to undermine the validity of the vote. It also supervised voting in all the country's polling stations. By employing the same 'quick count' polling developed by ONUVEN in Nicaragua, the electoral division was able to accurately predict the election result and prevent an early declaration of victory by the governing ARENA party which could have aroused claims of fraud by the FMLN. This was especially important in the closely contested presidential election, which required a second round of voting before Armando Calderon Sol of ARENA was elected.

In 1995, ONUSAL handed over to a small successor mission, MINUSAL, which was tasked with assisting El Salvador with the transition from peace to self-sustaining stable peace. Aside from completing most of its major tasks, ONUSAL had also played a more general role in assisting El Salvador's Commission for the Consolidation of Peace and the UNDP in long-term peacebuilding. The prosecution of accused human rights violators, however, progressed more slowly than expected

however and although the Truth Commission did much to detail the scope of human rights abuse and identify the perpetrators many of its key recommendations were simply ignored (Hampson 1996b: 87-8). For instance, the government granted amnesties to individuals accused of extra-judicial killings despite the Commission recommending that such people be prosecuted. It also chose not to dismiss or request the resignation of Supreme Court Justices even though the Commission found that an impartial legal system required new judges. The government also stalled on the implementation of recommendations to dismiss army officers accused of crimes and civilian officials accused of covering them up, though relented several months later under intense pressure (Hampson 1996b: 88). Finally, the thorny question of land redistribution remained unresolved (Pastor and Boyce 2000: 388).

These concerns notwithstanding, El Salvador was dramatically and positively transformed in a relatively short space of time. There were four principal reasons for success, which closely mirror those of UNTAG:

First, the peace process was based on a series of agreements concluded by the local parties. Crucially, they recognised that they could not prevail through force of arms and that the costs of violent conflict outweighed the potential benefits. As such, they remained committed to the peace process. This allowed the process to progress through individual crises and granted ONUSAL a relatively high level of consent.

Second, the peace process enjoyed broad international support. The US and the UN Secretary-General's 'Group of Friends' provided diplomatic support when it was needed, particularly in relation to reform of the military and dismissal of officers and officials named by the Truth Commission.

Third, ONUSAL's mandate and composition changed over time in response to the changing demands of the peace process. A large police contingent was added in

1992 in response to demands for the UN to properly oversee the transition to the PNC and assist the maintenance of public order in the interim.

Fourth, the mission was well organised and took an activist approach. In particular, ONUSAL interpreted its mandate broadly and developed what it called 'active verification,' intended to put pressure on the parties by making specific recommendations for action to them. This went well beyond the role that the parties expected the UN to play (Johnstone 1995: 19; Montgomery 1998: 122; though c.f. Acuna 1995: 39). As in Namibia, the UN was able to do this because of the parties' commitment to the process and the high level external support enjoyed by ONUSAL.

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