

World & Nation

# Central America peace plan prompts peace talks in region

By Laurie Hansen

Washington (NC) — Costa Rican President Oscar Arias' Central America peace plan, which won him the Nobel Peace Prize, has also prompted officials in El Salvador and Guatemala to begin talking peace.

In announcing the winner of the peace prize Oct. 13, members of the Nobel committee of the Norwegian Parliament said Arias "made an outstanding contribution to the possible return of stability and peace to a region long torn by strife and civil war."

Less than two weeks earlier, Archbishop Arturo Rivera Damas of San Salvador, El Salvador, served as mediator for negotiations between representatives of the Salvadoran government, headed by President Jose Napoleon Duarte, and Salvadoran rebels.

Although a cease-fire was not negotiated, the Oct. 4-5 peace talks were "the most significant to date," said Archbishop Rivera Damas while in Washington a few days later.

"I say that because of the length of the talks, the profundity and candid quality of the arguments, the fact that participants were high-level, and because of the points of convergence," he said in an Oct. 10 interview with National Catholic News Service.

Also as a result of the Arias plan, Guatemalan rebels and government officials met in Madrid for negotiations.

The Arias plan, signed Aug. 7 in Guatemala, outlined measures to take effect in each Central American country within 90 days. These included a general cease-fire, amnesty for guerrilla forces, internal democratization, and a prohibition against the use of one country's territory as a base for aggression toward another country.

According to the plan, Catholic bishops are to oversee compliance "in matters of amnesty, cease-fire, democratization and free elections" as members of their nations' National Reconciliation Commissions.

After signing the plan, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega took several steps toward reconciliation, including the lifting of bans on Catholic radio broadcasts. U.S. government officials, however, urged further steps, including negotiations with the U.S.-backed contra rebels.

Failure by the two sides in Nicaragua's conflict to meet for negotiations could imperil the peace agreement, House Speaker Jim Wright, D-Texas, said Oct. 15.

In a speech earlier in October, President Reagan said he welcomed the regional peace plan proposed by Arias, but doubted that the Nicaraguan Sandinista government would adhere to it. The president also announced that he would ask Congress for \$270 million in new military aid for the contras.

There is general consensus in El Salvador that Reagan's statement welcoming the regional peace plan was merely "political rhetoric" given his request for more military aid, according to Archbishop Rivera Damas.

In addressing a conference Oct. 10 in Washington, the archbishop said that President Reagan's request for more aid for the Nicaraguan contras casts a shadow on Salvadoran peace negotiations. "Obviously there are regional and geo-political implications," he said. "If there is no solution to the war in Nicaragua, of course there will be repercussions in neighboring nations."

The war in El Salvador began as a result of "interior causes" including extreme poverty and social injustice, said the archbishop. Since then, he said, the struggle has been "ideologized and complicated by North-South and East-West tensions."

In New York, Jesuit Father Cesar Jerez, president of the Central American University in Nicaragua, echoed the Salvadoran archbishop's concerns, saying that Nicaragua



ATTACKS CONTINUE — A Nicaraguan peasant leads his steer past a still-smoldering private bus burned in the early morning hours by contra rebels along a country road 110 miles east of Managua. No injuries were reported. Contras were reported continuing attacks in some areas of Nicaragua at a time when the Sandinista government was attempting to implement the peace plan agreed to by Central American leaders.

sincerely wants to "accomplish peace" under the Arias plan but that it would be difficult "because the U.S. administration is so powerful."

The Oct. 4-5 peace talks in El Salvador were "cordial" although there were tense moments "when pressure mounted," according to Archbishop Rivera Damas. In citing "points of convergence" reached during the talks, he said both government and rebels agreed that the suffering of the Salvadoran people had been "sufficiently long," and that the government had made some positive reforms.

But rebels and government "regrettably remain rigid" on more substantive issues, including the way in which the rebels would be allowed to incorporate themselves into the Salvadoran political scene, he said.

The Central American peace pact shows that weak nations can act on their own, despite a dominating American "empire," said retired Bishop Sergio Mendez Arceo of Cuernavaca, Mexico.

The 80-year-old bishop said at a Cuernavaca press conference that the United States has economic and political dominance throughout the non-socialist world, making it "the greatest empire in history."

"The empire, like all empires, always tries to dominate those who are weak," he said. The peace plan "is the action of the weak who finally found the capacity to resolve their problems together," he added.

But the Central America superior for the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers said the Arias plan does not guarantee long-lasting peace.

Structural changes are necessary "so peo-



PEACE PRIZE WINNER — Costa Rican President Oscar Arias is mobbed by happy employees on his arrival at the Presidential House in San Jose, Costa Rica, after it was announced he had won the Nobel Peace Prize. Arias was selected for the award after drafting and promoting a plan for ending war in Central America.

ple like the Indians in Guatemala can get land," said Father Ronald S. Michels in an Oct. 13 interview.

"Unless that happens, five years from now we're going to be needing to sign another peace accord," he said.

On the other hand, Father Michels pointed to signs that divisions in the Nicaraguan Church appear to be healing as reason for optimism. Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo of

Managua and Sandinista government leaders have stopped criticizing each other as severely as they did in the past, he said, and seemingly have adopted the view that "we have to work this out."

Contributing to this story were Tracy Early in New York and Mike Tangeman in Cuernavaca.

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