

# Fighting, politics dim prospects for peace

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's offensive against the contra guerrillas and the Salvadoran guerrillas' decision to pull out of negotiations dimmed prospects for peace in Central America.

Nicaraguan guerrilla and government leaders, however, agreed to meet at the United Nations Nov. 10 and 11 for new peace talks, and Nicaraguan Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo was to be an observer.

In El Salvador, Archbishop Arturo Rivera Damas of San Salvador said it was understandable that the rebel Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, or FMLN, did not want to participate in talks after the Oct. 31 bombing of a crowded union hall. At least nine people died and 30 others were injured in the incident.

"Faced with this setback, it is necessary to ask both sides to show signs of good will that will be visible to the people," Archbishop Rivera Damas said in a homily Nov. 5.

Archbishop Rivera Damas was among religious leaders who gathered earlier in the week at the gutted offices of the National Salvadoran Union Workers' Federation to commemorate the victims of the latest bombing in a wave of violence in the Salvadoran capital.

In his Nov. 5 homily, the archbishop also said that Tutela Legal, the archdiocesan human rights agency, believed "death squads" were responsible for the bombing. He called for an "in-depth investigation to put an end, once and for all, to these massacres that bring us back to the law of the jungle."

Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani admitted that right-wing death squads might have been responsible for the bombing, but he denied the government was behind it.

Cristiani's ARENA coalition was linked to death squads of the early 1980s, when human rights and church groups said 800 bodies of suspected leftists surfaced each month in gutters and hills outside the capital.

Jesuit Father Segundo Montes, director of the Institute for Human Rights at Central American University in San Salvador, told Catholic News Service Nov. 1 that while Cristiani could not be blamed directly, "as president, he should be able to stop human rights violations."

In a Washington interview, Father Montes also said that "this year, there has been a large increase in human rights violations compared to last year."

The priest said the number of kidnappings had increased to more than 1,300 in 1989 from 800 in 1988, and the number of murders also increased.

He noted that death-squad activity had decreased, because Cristiani has been able to control the squads better than former President Jose Napoleon Duarte.

Father Montes said it was disturbing that the government had increased harassment of clergy, human rights advocates and labor leaders.

"They are trying to weaken the Catholic Church," he said.

Another Salvadoran churchman, Auxiliary Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chavez of San Salvador, said he was concerned that "fanatics" within the government and guerrilla movements would endanger further peace talks.

"Violence from either side could serve as a pretext to stop the process," Bishop Rosa Chavez told Catholic News Service in a Washington interview Nov. 2.

The bishop also said that U.S. groups accompanying Salvadorans who are returning to their country from Honduran refugee camps "come with big hearts" but sometimes unknowingly become enmeshed in rebel tactics.

U.S. church members have accompanied Salvadoran refugees based on the premise that if foreigners are present, the Salvadoran military will be less likely to harm

them. But in many cases, those leading the repatriation are guerrillas, and "they're resettling in locations selected by the FMLN."

However, accompanying Salvadorans to war-torn areas that are not their homes becomes a political rather than a pastoral act, the bishop added.

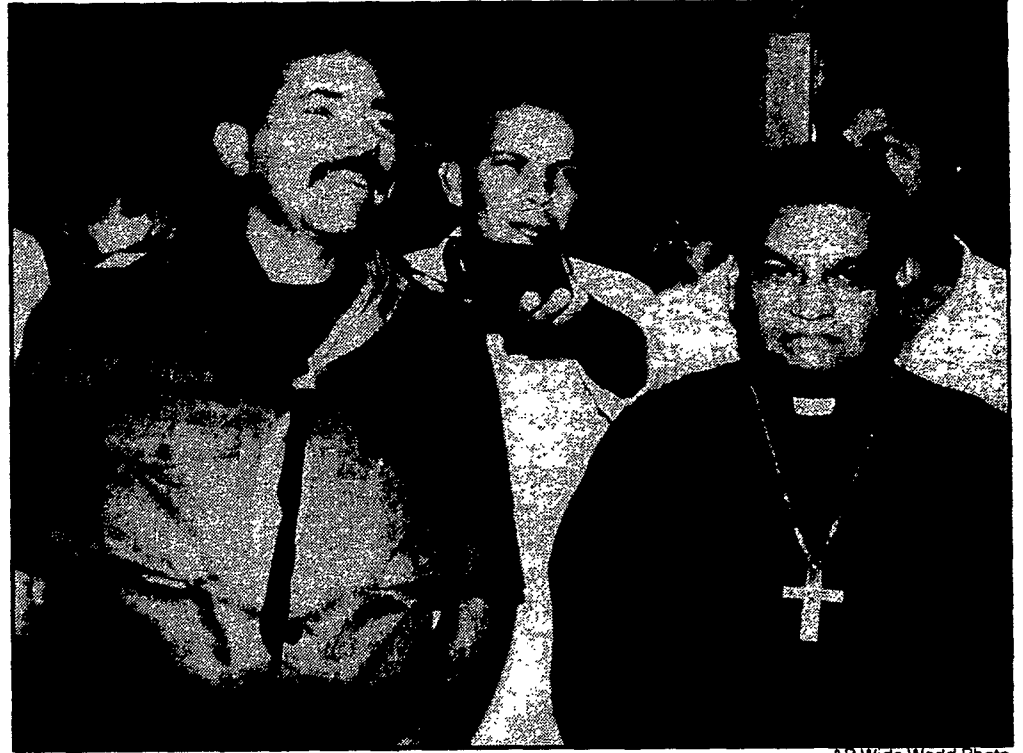
In neighboring Nicaragua, Ortega's decision not to renew the 19-month-old cease-fire with U.S.-backed guerrillas disregarded requests from Cardinal Obando Bravo and Latin American leaders.

The cardinal was quoted by the opposition newspaper, *La Prensa*, as appealing to both sides in the conflict to abstain from new hostilities "that will continue spilling the blood of Nicaraguans."

In the United States, Archbishop Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles wrote Leonor de Huper, interim charge d'affaires at the Nicaraguan Embassy, urging withdrawal of "this most unwise proposal."

The archbishop, head of the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Policy, urged that "your government and its opponents continue along the road of dialogue and compromise."

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AP Wide World Photo  
Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega (left) tells the media in Managua Thursday, Nov. 2, that he is inviting Cardinal Obando y Bravo (right) to the proposed Nov. 6 United Nations peace talks between the Sandinista government and the rebel forces. Obando y Bravo accepted the invitation.

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