

# Salvadorans celebrate new peace agreement

By Christena Colclough  
Catholic News Service

SAN SALVADOR — Emotions ran high in the Civic Plaza in downtown San Salvador Jan. 16 after government and rebel delegates in Mexico signed a peace agreement bringing nearly 12 years of civil war to a definitive end.

An elderly Salvadoran woman with tears in her eyes told Catholic News Service, "I just cannot believe it, the war is over, I am so happy, it is a great day for El Salvador."

When the signing of the peace agreement was announced at 12:30 p.m. local time, thousands of Salvadorans already gathered in the plaza and cheered.

Colorful banners and white flags flew from the National Palace and the cathedral expressing the public desire for peace.

"During the negotiations the government and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front were dating, now El Salvador is celebrating their wedding and waiting to see how the married couple behave," a citizen from the capital attending the peace celebrations said.

Government and rebel delegates signed the formal agreement with former U.N. secretary general Javier Perez de Cuellar, his successor Egyptian Boutros Ghali, Latin American presidents and European representatives looking on.

But doubts remain concerning the implementation of the final accord —

which includes a provision for integrating former rebels in a new police force.

Romero, a rebel who came from the northern province of Chalatenango to attend the peace celebrations, said "the Salvadoran armed forces taught us to hate them, it will be difficult to work together in the new civilian police force."

Fears also exist over post-war violence.

"It is fantastic the war is over but I think life is going to get worse here not better," said 19-year-old student Marcos Aleman. "Crime levels are already rising, when the rebels and armed forces are demobilized unemployment will rise."

A special 621-member United Nations peacekeeping team will monitor demobilization and disarmament rebel and army forces over the next 22 months, as agreed at the peace talks.

A member of the left-wing Convergence Party said "if the United Nations see that peace accords are upheld, then we believe El Salvador can reach true peace."

Ideological differences were put aside on the day of the signing as speakers participating at the celebrations called upon all sectors of society to cooperate in the reconstruction process.

While the public celebrated the arrival of peace throughout the country, Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani assured news reporters in Mexico the war was over for good.



AP/Wide World Photos  
Salvadorans embrace and cheer in San Salvador Jan. 16, after peace accords in Mexico City ended the nation's 12-year-old civil war. Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani and representatives of the rebel Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front signed the accords on Jan. 16.

"The reconstruction process in El Salvador will be costly but the Group of Four (Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico and Spain), the European Economic Community, the United States and Latin America have shown positive reactions and will cooperate in the process," he said. "We are not afraid of democracy in El Salvador," he added, and will not tolerate groups, regardless of ideology, which oppose peace.

He praised the Salvadoran church and the "important role and link it played between the government and rebel delegations during the 22 month peace negotiations." Church mediators were involved in the several on-again,

off-again sessions involved in the drawn-out talks.

Cristiani returned to El Salvador to attend peace celebrations in San Salvador's Plaza de Libertad organized by the ruling National Republican Alliance party.

The civil war claimed over 75,000 lives, including more than 40 journalists.

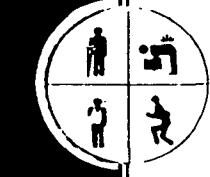
Some 80,000 Salvadorans were displaced from their lands and more than 200,000 nationals live abroad in voluntary exile to escape the violence which prevailed in the small Central American country

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