

# Preface

## The Accord Programme

*Accord - An International Review of Peace Initiatives* is published by Conciliation Resources (CR), a London-based service and support organisation for national or community-based peace and conflict prevention initiatives. CR seeks to provide flexible and appropriate resources – financial, human or technical – to partner organisations in Africa, the South Pacific and around the world. While the main aim of *Accord* is to offer accurate descriptions and cogent analysis of specific peace initiatives, it also seeks to make this information available to all those actively engaged in responding to violent conflicts. It is intended as a practical and accessible tool for ‘peace building’ from which comparative lessons may be drawn.

‘Peace building’ came into vogue with the publication in 1992 of Boutros Boutros Ghali’s *An Agenda for Peace*. Since then, it has become a catch-all phrase, covering a wide range of policy orientations and practices. To CR and its partners, however, the original peace building agenda is paramount. Simply stated, this agenda looks beyond the short-term imperative of achieving a negotiated settlement and aims to address the specific societal conditions which have led or which might lead to violence. In the search for sustainable conflict resolution, peace building promotes awareness of the links between emergency relief, socio-economic development, democratisation, peace and justice.

## Guatemala 1983-1997 — The Fragile Transition

In Guatemala, a comprehensive peace agreement was signed in December 1996 which formally ended 36 years of civil war. Underpinning this war were deep-seated historical grievances around highly skewed land distribution, tight controls on political organisation and a lack of effective checks on state violence. These conditions relate to the long-standing concentration of power in the hands of unaccountable military and private sector elites. The story of how they emerged, and of how they were strengthened and transformed through the war and peace process, is outlined in this issue in the historical background piece by Patrick Costello.

The negotiated settlement in Guatemala is barely a year old and it is far too early for a definitive assessment of its successes and failures. Nevertheless, at the signing of the final accords, the underlying peace process had been in train for around a decade. In this preface, a number of preliminary observations will be made concerning the achievements and shortcomings of this process.

### Political Liberalisation

It is clear that the formal end to the war has reflected and reinforced a remarkable transformation of Guatemalan political society. Evidence of this can be found in the sharp reduction in political violence and in the growing confidence of civic groups in promoting broadly-conceived human rights issues. It can also be seen in the unarmed

“Our principle aim is to provide sustained support to the practical activities of those working at the community or national levels to prevent or transform violent conflict into opportunities for social, political and economic development based on more just relationships”

*Conciliation Resources, 1997*

Campesinos on the day of the final peace accord signing; Guatemala City, 29 December 1996.



Lin Knapp/CAFOD

political groupings with centre-left agendas now engaging in the struggles of mainstream coalition-building with a freedom not experienced for over 40 years. New organisations representing Guatemala's majority indigenous population are also coming to terms with an unprecedented formal recognition of their rights, while proposals for political decentralisation and municipal reform are being developed. This dramatic increase in opportunities for Guatemalans to reflect on their circumstances and voice their political aspirations without fearing or employing physical violence is probably the greatest single achievement of the past ten years.

With hindsight, it is possible to identify three broad phases in this complex transfor-

mation, each providing its own lessons for the developing practice of peace building. The important elements in each of these phases are outlined towards the end of the historical background piece and in the chronology and key actors sections to the back of this issue.

The first phase covers 1983-87 when civil wars continued to destabilise the entire Central American sub-region. In this period, international powers were generally partisan or indifferent to the travails of Central America. In Guatemala itself, the government was closely controlled by military hardliners who had brutally fragmented both the armed and civil opposition.

Working within these desperate circumstances, sub-regional initiatives, spear-headed by the Mexican and Costa Rican governments, sharply reduced cross-border destabilisation. Culminating in the 1987 Procedure for Establishing a Firm and Lasting Peace for Central America (the 'Esquipulas II' accord), they also provided a preliminary framework through which Guatemalans and their neighbours could explore and promote constitutional methods for pursuing their interests. The lesson here is that, even in the face of super-power opposition, it is possible for co-ordinated action by concerned state actors to achieve a minimal agenda for conflict transformation.

The second phase covers the period 1988-1993. In these years, the end of the Cold War, the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the signing of a general peace agreement in El Salvador heralded a period of major strategic uncertainty for the powerful national and international interests opposed to social and political change in Guatemala.

While challenges to private sector, state and military authority continued to be met with repressive tactics, this uncertainty created a slim breach for the civic opposition. Co-ordinated by the Catholic Church from within the Esquipulas-inspired National Reconciliation Commission (CNR), and receiving crucial support from the governments of Mexico and Norway, unarmed

popular organisations quickly exploited this opening. By 1993, they had consolidated their own position, vocal and increasingly independent of the guerrillas. They had also helped shape the agenda for a negotiated settlement and established their representative, Msgr Rodolfo Quezada Toruño, as official 'conciliator' in the nascent talks between the government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). In short, they had illustrated how, given sufficient political space and external support, civic associations operating in hostile conditions can promote the path of negotiation and pluralism with great courage and effectiveness.

The final stage of the pluralist transformation began in 1993-94 when the strategies of the international community and the primary antagonists in the Guatemalan war shifted decisively towards a political settlement.

This shift became patently apparent when key figures in the US government, international financial institutions, the Guatemalan army and the private sector joined with popular organisations in condemning and reversing the executive 'autocoup' of May 1993, in which President Jorge Serrano Elías had dismissed the judiciary and Congress. It was strengthened further in July when army negotiators were reshuffled within a new Government Peace Commission (COPAZ), and further still after November 1994, when a United Nations Mission (MINUGUA) arrived to monitor human rights abuses and verify the implementation of peace accords. Simultaneous to these developments, the high command of the URNG was also embracing negotiations afresh, persuaded by their own military weakness and the political independence of popular organisations that peace provided the best guarantee of a viable political future. Mediating between these groups was UN 'moderator' Jean Arnault, himself working to rehabilitate the reputation of his organisation, battered by its failures in Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia and elsewhere.

The transformation was effectively sealed when the Mayor of Guatemala City, Alvaro Arzú Irigoyen, was victorious in the close-run presidential elections of January 1996.

Arzú immediately appointed prominent business leaders to key government posts, finally securing private sector commitment to the peace process. By the end of 1996, this powerful constellation of interests had secured a definitive ceasefire and a comprehensive general peace agreement. Soon after, the rebels disarmed.

One lesson of this final stage is that once there is sufficient motivation and a measure of political will on the part of national antagonists to move towards peace, there is clearly a facilitatory role for the international community in bringing civil wars to an end, and nurturing the conditions for increased political tolerance and diversity.

### Outstanding Challenges

While the liberalisation of Guatemalan national politics has been remarkable, there is no guarantee that political openings will be sustained and extended. Already, Arzú's National Advancement Party (PAN) has ceded little to other interests in peace accord implementation commissions, provoking almost all civil groups and political parties to walk out of consultative meetings in July 1997. With a fragmented opposition, the government seems to be consolidating exclusionary modes of operation, subordinating the pluralistic spirit of earlier peace talks to its neo-liberal economic agenda and its 1999 election strategy. Pursuing these goals, PAN has done little to address other tensions emerging from the war. It is not surprising, therefore, that violence, though more often socio-criminal than political, remains endemic in Guatemalan society.

In addition to these worrying trends, many of the frameworks and processes established through the negotiations have their own crucial internal weaknesses which constrain the sustainability of peace. The thematic articles contained in this issue seek to document and assess some of these weaknesses and opportunities, while the relevant accords are reproduced in the centre pages.

- In *Violent Truths*, Richard Wilson evaluates the 1994 accord which established the Commission of Historical Clarification,

Guatemala's 'truth commission'. He also examines other initiatives within civil society and the national and international justice systems, exploring how they might complement the deeply flawed Commission in challenging the silence and impunity which has undermined human rights and the rule of law in Guatemala.

● In *Advocates and Guarantors*, Tania Palencia Prado presents the peace process as an elite pact to ensure governability rather than a genuine effort to reach a truly national political consensus. While acknowledging that part of the historic gap between state and society has been bridged, she highlights the lack of effective mechanisms for civic participation in the negotiation and implementation of the accords. The failure to strengthen civil society and state accountability, she argues, may undermine the unprecedented possibilities opened up by the peace settlement.

● In *Reframing Citizenship*, Rachel Sieder describes the role of indigenous civic groups in shaping the 1995 Agreement on Indigenous Rights and Identity, arguing that the accord represents an important advance in the struggle for indigenous rights, participation and culturally sensitive governance. Important indigenous demands were not met in the negotiating process, however, while structures for implementation contain crucial weaknesses. In conclusion, she sounds a cautionary note, warning that the failure to implement the accord successfully could stimulate the development of a more radical and separatist indigenous agenda.

● In *Promised the Earth*, Gustavo Palma Murga outlines key features of the 'land problem' in Guatemala, and introduces some conflicting popular and business perspectives which fed into the negotiations for the Agreement on Socio-Economic

Aspects and the Agrarian Situation. It highlights the failure of the Accord to satisfy the aspirations of the civic opposition and its support base among the Mayan rural majority and provides preliminary analysis of the causes and consequences of this failure.

Clearly, through their peace process, Guatemalans have gained important rights and freedoms denied them for centuries. Above all, the relatively participatory nature of the process and the liberal spirit of the accords themselves have brought up for negotiation a whole range of previously repressed aspirations. Unsurprisingly, however, this issue identifies a range of deep concerns which still must be addressed if peace building in Guatemala is to be sustained and extended in the medium-term.

Among these concerns, perhaps none is so crucial as extending the rule of law and establishing just and peaceful means for adjudicating remaining conflicts, issues interlinked in all the thematic areas explored in this issue. If truths about past crimes are revealed openly; if stipulations in the 'indigenous accord' lead to legitimate local adjudication frameworks; if such mechanisms link up with wider processes encouraging social participation in governance; and if the 'socio-economic accord' creates avenues for the resolution of violent land conflicts; then the momentum for sustainable peace might yet become unstoppable. Whatever the case, it is clear that the national, regional and international actors who have achieved so much in the past 14 years will need to renew their commitment to the country if the ultimate step is to be taken from negotiating to realising rights.

Jeremy Armon, Rachel Sieder  
and Richard Wilson,  
London,  
November 1997. ■