



# REALITY CHECK

DIVERSE VOICES ON INTERNAL CONFLICT

The Fund for Peace

*“Building Peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”*

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*Dr. Eduardo Stein has spent much of his career emphasizing regional approaches to issues and problems in Central America. He spent eleven years as a technical adviser to the Central American peace process, which ultimately resulted in peace agreements in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, and was the regional project coordinator for the International Organization for Migration from 1994 to 1996. He was appointed foreign minister of Guatemala in 1996 and served in this capacity until 2000. Recently, he headed the Organization of American States (OAS) delegation to observe the Peruvian elections in 2000 and 2001, and also served on the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, which issued its report, The Responsibility to Protect, in December 2001.*

**FfP: In your long work on Guatemalan and regional issues, what moment has given you the most personal satisfaction?**

There are two. The first one came about in the early 1980s when we proved that it was possible for Central Americans to agree on such practical issues as food security and health care. At that time, political discussions to end the war had been initiated by the Contadora Group<sup>1</sup>, but had not yet made progress. We felt that, if we could isolate urgent societal and humanitarian needs, we could reach agreement on them while discussions on broader political arrangements in the region were going on through a separate channel. These political agreements led to what came to be known as the Arias Plan that produced specific

peace processes in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. The other related turning point was December 29, 1996, when the peace accords in Guatemala were signed.

**FfP: How do you see the connection between security and economic development?**

I dedicated myself for a good many years to development projects and international aid because I, together with several thousand Central Americans, was convinced that unless we worked to address the formidable inequities in our societies, there would be no improvement in the conditions necessary for a lasting peace.

**FfP: Does the international community see this as clearly as you?**

I would say so. But it is countries that have undergone internal armed conflict that place a high value on economic development issues, because we see that they are at the very root of the problem.

**FfP: Are there lessons from the successful Central American Peace Process that might be used to address conflicts in other regions?**

First, you saw a mix of internal regional problems and elements of Cold War competition. I think this is one lesson. No conflict is ever purely internal. It was important for the negotiators to distinguish between local elements and broader geopolitical forces. We could not address them both in the same manner at the negotiating table.



**Dr. Eduardo Stein**

The Fund for Peace is issuing an occasional series of interviews featuring leading voices on issues related to internal war. The Regional Responses to Internal War program is funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and is being carried out in partnership with the Stanley Foundation.

## **FfP: So solid diagnosis?**

Yes, and careful dissection. We had to identify the external associates of the local actors and, if possible, bring them into the negotiations, whether through a group of friends or outside countries. For example, the Guatemalan guerrillas were financed in part by outside networks of NGOs from Europe, Canada and the United States who were providing a support system not only of information and propaganda, but also of resources. It was indispensable to stop that.

It was also crucial to concentrate on the negotiating process rather than the military options. In this regard, it was important for us in our administration to arrive as quickly as possible at a de facto cease-fire - although a *written* cease-fire agreement did not occur until March 1996 - because it was very hard to negotiate while the actors were shooting at each other on the ground. The moment when the army and the guerrilla commanders agreed to a de facto cease-fire, the negotiating process sped up.

Another important lesson is not to reduce, in a reductionist meaning of the word, a settlement or a peace accord, to solving only the immediate problems of the combatants. The military elements of the agreement must be accompanied by other elements that guarantee a change in the conditions that triggered the conflict. In my country, there were severe political impediments to the participation of groups that had leftist or socialist inclinations. They were outlawed by the constitution and were being physically persecuted. We had to create a more open political climate and new rules of participation to allow anyone to make a bid for an electoral post at all levels, regardless of the candidate's political views. In addition, there was also an effort to address problems of poverty, inequality, and weaknesses in the functions of government (justice, revenue collection, etc.), as well as modernization of the security forces. However, reforms were complicated by the influence of still very strong Cold War sentiments even though the Cold War itself was over.

## **FfP: For example?**

There was still a deep-rooted idea that any public policy designed to address inequality, poverty, and working conditions, or that tried to better the way in which the rural areas organized their labor, was communist and an affront to democratic values.

Another hard-learned lesson, which we are still learning, is that some issues cannot be resolved in a few months

or even in a few years. Unrealistic expectations can be dangerous for democracy. The moment the peace accords were signed, most of the population thought that manna would fall from the sky, and that, just by the sheer act of signing, more jobs would be created and hundreds of millions of investment dollars would pour in. This was just not the case.

You also have a problem when peace negotiators try to address every social issue. In Guatemala, the peace accord on indigenous people's rights is probably one of the most ambitious, complex, and difficult to honor of the agreements. The separation of the races, and racism itself, in my country is extremely complicated and will take many years to resolve.

## **FfP: What prompted the cease-fire?**

I think that, in the case of Guatemala, the guerrilla commanders intuitively read in the behavior of President Alvaro Arzu and his team that we were deeply committed to negotiating a good, solid, and lasting peace accord and that there was an honest intention to honor the agreements. The military shared this sense, and furthermore realized that they had won the battle on the ground twice in the 36 years of war without defeating the guerrillas and had, therefore, lost the political battle. The army also knew well that it had become the focus of strong international criticism. People in North America, Europe and in others places had fixated on fifteen-year old images of gruesome massacres, even though such acts had stopped.

There was another important development. With the help of the king and government of Spain, we were able to promote secret meetings between commanders who were fighting on the ground. Those previously sitting at the negotiating table, the guerrilla top commanders who lived in Mexico and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were not the same as the people on the ground who were still chasing each other, hiding, eating roots, and fighting fearsomely. It is important for people to look into each other's eyes, talk to each other, and see that there are other options to a conflict that is being waged by their superiors.

## **FfP: Do you believe in the concept of conflict ripeness, the idea that diplomatic intervention will not be successful until the parties themselves are ready to stop fighting?**

I do, but it is difficult to devise overarching general guidelines to know precisely when that is. It may be

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when you have reached a point where it can be shown that the internal causes that are fueling the conflict can be addressed differently. And, similarly, it helps if the external actors are looking for a way out of the conflict. Those are elements of ripening, and then you have to show inventiveness to get all of these elements together in a creative way and make them work.

**FfP: Let's talk about the OAS. What is its role?**

The OAS was created during the Cold War and has suffered a lot from some of the conditions underlying its conception. And because of the *fear* - I don't know how else to label it - of many Latin American governments that the United States might impose its muscle within the organization toward purposes that serve more a U.S. than a hemispheric agenda, the OAS has been a theater more of impediments than of progress in the past. Contadora is a good example of that. You had a very strong and stubborn U.S. administration believing that the only way out of the Central American impasse was the military way - President Reagan was very strong about that. But the region wanted to explore other possibilities so they formed this ad hoc group to see if they could work with the Central American governments for a negotiated settlement and counterbalance U.S. policy. Very quickly, right after the founding four nations started to work, a support group of another four countries joined to help and the Rio Group was born.

Since that time, however, I think the OAS has regained some of its clarity of purpose in political terms, and has provided for some intelligent solutions in the face of potential problems or breaches of democratic rule, for example in Peru. I think there is a willingness on the part of most countries to see it evolve, modernize, and become more pertinent to the needs of the region today. But still I think we have a long way to go. And the charter is too stiff on some issues.

**FfP: Can the charter be amended?**

I don't know. Maybe it's time to revisit the charter on some issues. Or maybe what has been going on without changing the charter can lead to better performance and such mechanisms as the Democratic Charter. However, the Democratic Charter was agreed and signed in Lima, on September 11, 2001, and you now have two pending cases that fall directly within its realm: Argentina and Ecuador. Both are interim governments. Part of the responsibility spelled out in the Charter is that elections should be called, but this has not

happened. And no one has reminded these two countries. Maybe it is felt that to force those unstable countries into an electoral process now would cause more harm than good.

I think it is sad that the crises in Argentina, Colombia and Venezuela have not yet been discussed in the OAS.<sup>2</sup> Maybe there is too much of a tradition of seeing things only in black and white with regard to what can be or cannot be brought to the Permanent Council.

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**No conflict is ever purely internal.**

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But there are other ways within the OAS to have fruitful explorations without the formality of the Permanent Council. It is just a matter of examining what is going on and exploring options with the country or countries involved, without necessarily having to decide on something.

Ecuador is a case in point. Ecuadorians are resentful of the fact that when they asked to be discussed within the OAS, several other countries said, "No, no, no. We are not going to discuss individual crises that have not become breaches of democratic rule."

**FfP: Is it because once a problem is discussed, there is a greater obligation to do something about it?**

Yes, and I think it's also because they don't want themselves to become the topic of discussion in a meeting.

The OAS does not have the tradition or practice of discussing problems within a member state. The United Nations has this tradition, and also has mechanisms for militarily enforcing its decisions. But also I think it reflects what the countries want the organization to be. And some countries appoint representatives to the OAS who are not the most experienced or competent people.

You do see in Washington and in capital cities throughout the hemisphere very lively discussions of contemporary problems in Latin America. I think the OAS should allow itself to have spaces for open discussion without necessarily having to force a decision from the Permanent Council.

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**FfP: Has the OAS examined ways in which it could be strengthened?**

Yes, and I think it's an ongoing process. I think that there is still room for constructive performance on a number of things that the Summits [of the Americas] have entrusted the organization to do. For example, the presidents in Quebec included specific mention of the very complex contemporary agenda of migration, and they asked the foreign ministers to address it in the upcoming General Assembly. What did the foreign ministers do in San Jose, Costa Rica in the OAS General Assembly? Decide to entrust the problem to the Permanent Council. And the Permanent Council has done nothing so far. This is an issue of enormous importance, and in countries like mine, it is of grave importance. We do not have a proper place at a hemispheric level to discuss it. This is clearly something the OAS should take up. Some countries see the problem of migration solely as the United States trying to stop the flow of illegal aliens. Migration is a far more complicated issue than just the flow of illegal immigrants.

**FfP: Do you have any suggestions for how the OAS can become a more effective institution?**

I think that the OAS should strive to create standards and indicators of key areas of democratic performance, similar to what the UNDP does with human development reports. How do countries perform in providing prompt and accessible justice, for example? Without interfering in the constitution and the internal rulings of a country, you could have some guidelines. You could try to measure the growth in democratic practices of a country. And there are key government services that could be evaluated, and to which standards could be applied.

We need to learn how to translate the vision and the mandate of our heads of state into operational practices within our countries, and also begin to create mechanisms of political and diplomatic intervention that can effectively prevent serious crises from erupting.

The recent election in Peru provides an extreme case. The foreign ministries of Latin America together with the U.S. and Canada agreed that, at that time, it was better to recognize Fujimori's third term, despite the report of an

observation mission that those elections had not been truly fair. But, for the stability of the region, it was seen as better to allow the elections to stand. And yet, in the end, they devised a mechanism of political intervention that required the Peruvian government to set up a negotiating table with opposition parties.

**FfP: Where do you see the potential trouble spots that might require intervention? What about Cuba, Haiti, or Argentina?**

One of the problems Latin Americans have in dealing with the Cuban situation is that the United States sees Cuba as a domestic problem, so that makes it very difficult for other countries to help out. If the United States could evaluate it as a problem of succession, perhaps a framework could be devised in which the region could all help facilitate a transition. To put it bluntly, there is a sentiment in Latin America that since Cuba has ceased to be a security threat to the United States, U.S. policy towards Cuba is driven by the political or economic aims of certain domestic interest groups or by the fear of massive migration into the United States. We would prefer that the U.S. approach this not as an ex post situation, but *now*, as a preventive measure. It is a very positive sign for Latin America that former President Carter has been allowed by the Bush administration to visit Cuba.

I think that other trouble spots should trigger serious reflection, primarily by the neighboring countries of those who are in trouble. We believe in non-intervention, yes, but up to a point. Collective responsibility is what we are in dire need of.

**-- Washington, DC, April 11, 2002**

<sup>1</sup> Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela came together in 1983 to form the Contadora Group, which pledged to help solve the crisis of ongoing conflict among and within neighboring states in Central America. Shortly thereafter Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Peru established the Contadora Support Group. These eight countries joined with the remaining neighboring countries to create the Rio Group.

<sup>2</sup> This interview took place on the day before a coup occurred in Venezuela. The OAS opposed the coup and the coup was reversed within two days.

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