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Yale-UN Oral History Project

Manuel Tello and Gustavo Albin
Jean Krasno, Interviewer
6 August 1997

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and
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Interviewer by Jean Krasno
August 6, 1997

Jean Krasno (JK): This is an interview with Ambassador Manuel Tello and Ambassador Gustavo Albin in the Mission of Mexico to the United Nations on August 6, 1997.

To begin, I will direct questions first to Ambassador Tello, and Ambassador Albin, you can enter whenever you want. For the record, Ambassador Tello, would you please explain how long you have been Ambassador to the UN and what other positions you have held in the international diplomatic field?

Ambassador Tello: Well, I am a career foreign service officer in the Mexican Foreign Service, a service that I joined in 1957. I have been in New York since January 1995 and before that I was commissioned to another post.

JK: As I had been saying to you earlier, Mexico has played a very important role, a key role, in the Central American peace process and has been a key member of the Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on El Salvador. Can you explain when Mexico first began its role the peace process in Central America and in what capacity have you personally been involved?

Tello: As you said, Mexico, because of its proximity to the Central American region and because of the links that it has with the countries of that area, has been, and would always be, interested in what goes on in those countries. In the 1970s, when the crisis occurred in Nicaragua with the change in government that took place in that country, when President Somoza was ousted by the Sandinista Movement, since the beginning of that crisis, Mexico maintained that it was an internal issue that had to be solved internally by the Nicaraguan people. There were countries that thought that the change in government in Nicaragua was a possible threat to the peace and security of the region and that something more had to be done.

Mexico always sustained that this was an internal affair that should be resolved by the Nicaraguan people according to the will of that people. The change came and with the change, things did not necessarily quiet down in the region. It became one of the most controversial of the Central American issues because of the character of the Sandinista government. As a result of that situation, Mexico took the initiative to set up what became known as the Contadora Group to deal with the specific problem of Nicaragua and to try to find a political solution to the crisis. We never believed, nor did the other countries involved in the Contadora Process, that the issue should be resolved militarily. We always maintained that the issue was political and had to be solved in a political way.

JK: When you say that Mexico initiated it, how did that take place?

Tello: There was a meeting of foreign ministers that took place on the island of Contadora off the coast of Panama. And in that, the mechanism was set up to deal with the Nicaraguan crisis. That

was the first -- and we are talking about the last 20-30 years -- that was the first crisis that had occurred in Central America (the Nicaraguan crisis) and it was due to the arrival in Managua of the Sandinistas and the ouster of Anastasio Somoza. There were two very defined currents, those countries that thought that the solution had to be of a military kind and those countries, among them Mexico, that thought that the crisis in Nicaragua had to be solved through political and diplomatic means, i.e., negotiations. Fortunately, that thesis prevailed and the Nicaraguan crisis was solved through political and diplomatic means. And no foreign intervention was allowed to try to solve the internal Nicaraguan crisis.

JK: When you called the meeting on the island of Contadora, did Mexico invite the other foreign ministers?



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Tello: No, the invitations, as I remember, were issued by the Panamanian government. Mexico took the initiative to set up a group that would follow on a permanent basis the internal situation as it developed in Nicaragua and try to find political solutions to that crisis.

JK: What was particularly important about the countries that made up the Contadora Group? Mexico, Panama, Colombia, and Venezuela.

Tello: Yes, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, and Mexico. Those were the four. The importance of Contadora was that in some quarters abroad, the crisis in Nicaragua was an East/West problem. The view of the Contadora Group since the beginning was that this was not an East/West

confrontation or the result of this confrontation, but rather a problem of the lack of development, lack of opportunity for the people. So, that is why the Contadora Group sustained and maintained that the solution had to be a non-military one, a civil, economic, and political one. As far as the key role of Mexico, we never did more than we were requested by the interested countries. We accompanied the process and we supported the political process there, but we were very careful, always, of not interfering, and not appearing to interfere, in the internal affairs of the countries. You must remember that at the time the Cold War was still going on.

JK: That's right and that was an important factor.



Tello: There were even statements in the United States about how long it would take for the Nicaraguans to reach the United States' border. I don't know if you remember statements made by people in the Reagan Administration such as "how long would it take for Nicaraguan soldiers to arrive from Nicaragua to Corpus Christie," or something like that. That was totally absurd. We were still in the Cold War days when this crisis developed. Some people in the United States thought that the best solution to the Nicaraguan crisis was through military means. And we opposed that, definitely.

JK: What I was trying to ask was, was there a particular reason why these four countries? Mexico was particularly interested in resolving the crisis, but was Panama and the others?

Tello: Well, Panama was a country in the region and the other countries shared the preoccupation of

Mexico that these problems had to be solved mainly by Nicaragua and a political solution had to be found.

JK: And they were willing to take that step and make that initiative. I understand that the FMLN, the rebel faction in El Salvador, had an office in Mexico beginning in the early '80s. Did Mexico support the efforts of the FMLN?

Tello: I don't know about the existence of this office. I am not denying it. I just don't know myself.

[turns to Ambassador Albin] Did you know about an office by the Farabundo Marti?

Albin: What I know is that there were contacts in Mexico City among the members of the FMLN and the government [of Mexico]. Contacts, but I don't know if they had an office.

JK: So, they had a presence.

Albin: I don't know if they traveled. That I don't know.

JK: So, it may have been informal, but there were contacts between the Mexican government and the FMLN in Mexico City. Do you recall about when they started?

Albin: [Shakes his head as a negative.]

JK: No, okay. Mexico was also involved in Esquipulas. What was the reason for Esquipulas?

Tello: Esquipulas came to replace what had been called until then the Contadora Process.

JK: What was your evaluation of the Contadora process? Was it successful?

Tello: Yes, it was successful because a political solution was found to solve the Nicaraguan crisis.

Albin: To put it the other way around, it avoided a military intervention.



JK: I see, it avoided a military intervention. How did Esquipulas evolve out of Contadora?

Tello: Esquipulas dealt not only with the Nicaraguan crisis, but also what became a civil war, or military confrontation, between a group of rebels in El Salvador and the Salvadorean government, plus also an incipient group -- they had been there for many, many years -- the guerrilla movement in Guatemala. So, what Esquipulas tried to do was to set up a framework to deal with the crisis that existed then in the Central American region.

JK: Dealing directly with the Presidents of the Central American countries.

Tello: Yes, this was set up by the Central Americans themselves. And, of course, they had our full support.

JK: In that particular process which involved the presidents of Central America, Mexico played a support role because of its membership in the Contadora process.

Tello: Because the Contadora Group had been successful in avoiding a military confrontation. We were in accord with the decisions that the Central American presidents took in Esquipulas to try to find a peaceful, negotiated solution to the crisis.

JK: In addition to the Contadora Group, there developed a support group of another four countries.



Albin: Yes, Brazil and Peru were two of them.

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JK: Did that make a difference to have additional countries involved?

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Tello: Yes, I think that the contribution that the support group gave to the process was not only reflected in the countries that joined the support group, but that the support group gave the impression that the whole of Latin America believed there should be a non-military solution to the problems.

JK: That was the key purpose. Mexico hosted a number of meetings with the parties to the conflict in El Salvador. Why did Mexico hold these meetings and what kind of logistical support did you offer?

Tello: Well, I don't know exactly how many meetings took place in Mexico with the Farabundo Marti [FMLN]. There were formal and informal meetings. But, of course, we were willing, as we did later on in the Guatemalan process, to provide all the facilities that were required so that these meetings could take place, in the case of El Salvador, to put an end to the armed conflict.

JK: So, Mexico would provide the hotel, the meeting space, support staff . . .

Tello: Oh sure, whatever was required of Mexico, we were willing to provide in both cases, in El Salvador and later in Guatemala.



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JK: That is an important factor if the peace process is going to move ahead. You have to be able to have a place to meet that is secure. That is a very important contribution. Were there countries within the Group of Friends that were more active than others?

Tello: You have all the information about how the Group of Friends was set up by Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cúellar.

JK: Could you explain that? It is not really documented.

Tello: As far as we know, the Secretary-General, at the time Javier Perez de Cúellar, -- I think for the first time in the history of the UN -- took the initiative of inviting a group of countries that

became known as the Group of Friends of the Secretary-General. And the mandate that this group received and accepted was to help the Secretary-General in finding a solution to the conflict that was raging at the time in El Salvador. The Secretary-General chose the countries. He asked each one of the countries that he had in mind if they were willing to become part of this Group of Friends. And in the case of Mexico, when we received that invitation, my predecessor here at the time, Ambassador Montana, received instructions from Mexico to tell the Secretary-General that Mexico was not only willing, but Mexico was ready to do whatever was necessary to find an end to the armed conflict in El Salvador.

So, we became engaged from the very beginning and so did the other countries that were invited by the Secretary-General.



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JK: The Friends of the Secretary-General, the group of countries, reflects somewhat the Contadora Group, only that Panama is not in it, but Spain is.

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Tello: Spain became a member. They were Spain, Colombia, Venezuela, and Mexico.

Albin: And after that, the U.S. joined the group and it was then called the "four plus one." It was called the Group of Friends plus One. The government of El Salvador and the FMLN arrived to an agreement in 1989, or so, to start a process of dialogue. And in that agreement they requested the Secretary-General of the United Nations to help them in the dialogue. Back then, they were asking the Secretary-General to exercise his good offices to advocate the process. At that time, the Secretary-General considered it necessary, for him to be able to effectively carry out his good

offices in the process, that he needed some company. He needed some support from countries that had shown interest in solving the problem. So, the decision of establishing a Group of Friends was one of the Secretary-General. Of course, one might imagine that he had consulted with the government of El Salvador and the FMLN to seek their agreement.

But the decision to establish, or to have some sort of support group around him was of the Secretary-General at that time. And he chose at that time these four countries. Why Colombia, Venezuela, and Mexico? Because we are the neighbors, and Spain perhaps because there was a link with the European Union which was interested in the peace process in the region, not only in political but in financial terms. They were very supportive, without conditioning aid or establishing strings attached in the way the U.S. had done in Central America. So, perhaps as a link to the European Union, the Secretary-General decided to include Spain. But we were only Friends of the Secretary-General. We assisted the Secretary-General in his duties within his good offices.

Tello: There is a man in the Secretariat who has been involved in the El Salvadorean process from day one until today. That is Alvaro de Soto. I don't know if you have been in touch with him.

JK: I have spoken him and Jim Sutterlin has been in touch with him.

Tello: He could give you all the details. He has been involved from day one.

JK: Did the Group of Friends always agree on the solutions that were being discussed or was there some disagreement?

Tello: I think that you should have clearly in mind that the Group of Friends, as far as I know, never met with the two sides at the same time.

JK: Oh, they didn't?

Tello: No, as far as I know. The Group of Friends, as Ambassador Albin has pointed out, had as the main mandate to help the Secretary-General find a solution to the problem in El Salvador, to the war that was going on in El Salvador. The Group of Friends was always willing and available to meet either with the representatives of the Salvadorean government or with the leaders of the Farabundo Marti, the Front. And I repeat, as far as I know, there were no meetings of the Group of Friends with the two side to the conflict at the same time. We met here [at the Mexico Mission to the UN] many times, in our conference room.

JK: You met here in the conference room at the mission.

Tello: Yes, all the meetings were here at the Mexican Mission. We met with the envoys from the government. And after that meeting was finished, then we received the envoys of the Farabundo Marti Liberation Front.

JK: Let me see if I understand this correctly. Here in the conference room at the Mission of Mexico, you would have the ambassadors to the United Nations of the four "Friends" countries and

then you would meet with the envoys of the government of El Salvador and then when that meeting was finished, you would have a meeting with the representatives of the FMLN.

Tello: Exactly.

JK: Were these people the ones who were the designated negotiators?

Tello: Yes, of course. As far as the government delegates, yes, they had been sent by their government to talk on the one hand, in some cases, with the Secretary-General and his people, and in some cases they came to talk with the Group of Friends. And we were always ready to receive them, to see what was going on, what advances were being made. Maybe at the end, there were meetings with the two sides, before the signing of the peace agreement. But most of time they met separately.


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Albin: On your question as to whether the Group of Friends agreed on what was going on, the Group of Friends was never requested to agree on anything. The parties, meaning the government of El Salvador and the FMLN, had to agree to their own agenda and they had to draft their own accords. We were never asked to express any opinion, whatsoever, on the contents of these. Our role was basically to keep the table of negotiations open and to try to accompany them and to try to establish a framework to encourage them to continue negotiating, but not to express any views on the contents of what they were negotiating.

JK: Ambassador Albin, were you here during that particular period?

Albin: [He nods to the negative.]

JK: So, you were not inside those meetings.

Tello: None of the Ambassadors "Friends" of that period are present in New York now, none.

JK: So, now they have all changed.



Tello: They have all changed, that of Venezuela has changed, that of Colombia, also. This was an ongoing process. The change of Ambassador did not really remain an obstacle to the role of the Friends because what we were doing mainly was to facilitate the process and to keep the process going. When we received a proposal from the government [Salvadoran], instead of making a judgment, we would pass them on to the guerrillas. And when we got our reply, a reaction from the guerrillas, that they wanted to convey directly to the government, they used the Group of Friends to convey their opinion, whether they would agree or disagree to any given point.

JK: That is a very interesting aspect of the Group of Friends because it is not dependent on a particular person or a particular ambassador. I understand that if a meeting were to take place in Mexico City you could involve the ambassador to Mexico from Venezuela.

Tello: And the Group of Friends met in El Salvador later on, the same countries through their ambassadors in San Salvador. The same thing happened in Guatemala when we were involved in the Guatemalan peace process.

JK: It is really a fascinating process.

Albin: In a way there were three chapters of the Group of Friends, one in San Salvador, one in Mexico City, and one in New York.

Tello: And with the same mandate, the same objective: to facilitate the negotiations between the two parties to the conflict without ever pretending to dictate terms for an eventual peace agreement.

JK: I think that is a very interesting part of this because if, for example, were to decide to take a more active role and propose a solution, that might have been seen as breaking away from the continuity.

Tello: The Group of Friends took initiatives.

JK: They took initiatives?

Tello: Yes, to urge the parties to accelerate, or to contemplate, or to study. The Group of Friends was in charge of drafting the resolutions that were necessary when the reports of the Secretary-

General were issued.

JK: So, one of functions of the Group of Friends was to be able to draft the Security Council resolutions. Were some of the members of the group on the Security Council at the time?

Tello: Yes, some of them were, not permanently, with the exception of the United States that is a permanent member of the Security Council. Mexico was not a member of the Security Council. The last time Mexico was a member of the Security Council was in 1980.

Albin: The Group of Friends, as such, never passed a public judgment of what was going on as to the contents of the proposals. The judgment of the group was critical, however, because we drafted the resolutions that had to be considered by the Security Council. The Security Council makes a value judgment on the progress of the negotiations.

Tello: It is important to point out that at no time was the participation in the Group of Friends conditioned on being a member of the Security Council. With the exception of the United States, the countries that were chosen by the Secretary-General were countries that he thought could provide the help he wanted which was to find a peaceful solution.

JK: That was the primary reason for the selection of the countries.

Tello: The ones that were really interested were really committed. It had nothing to do with

whether they were members of the Security Council or not.

JK: The other question that I had was why was it that the Friends were writing the Security Council resolutions? Was it felt that this group understood the situation better than others?

Tello: They had more details as to what was going on and had a more comprehensive understanding on the reports that the Secretary-General was asked to issue on the evolution of the process.

JK: They almost became a kind of an expert group.



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Tello: Yes, you could call it an expert group if you want of that particular situation. Because the Group of Friends got to know the main players of the exercise. The Group of Friends had a dialogue with the two sides and with the main people involved. As far as I know, and I am talking about the last three years, the Security Council never challenged the opinion of the Group of Friends. The opinion that was reflected in the draft resolutions that were adopted. The Security Council, including the Permanent Members, accepted the judgment of the Group of Friends.

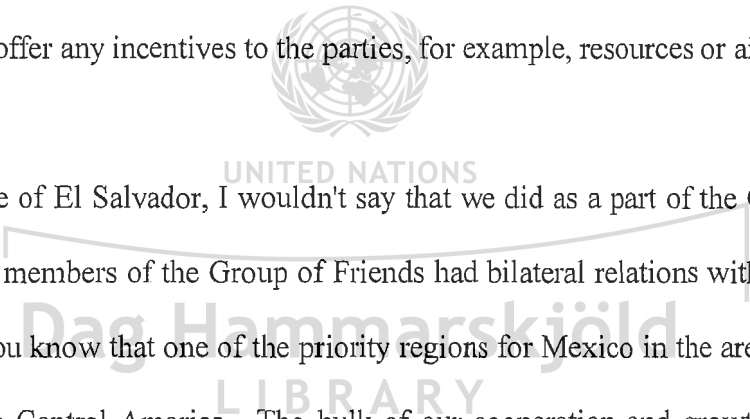
JK: So, they must have been respected as the experts on the issue.

Tello: They were respected and they were trusted by the Security Council, by the Secretary-General, and by the General Assembly.

JK: And that is very important because the process went on for a very long period of time. Did members of the Security Council, prior to a vote, ask the advice of Mexico or the others?

Tello: Yes, there were occasions in which the members of the Security Council, permanent and non-permanent, were in touch with the Group of Friends, individually or collectively. They wanted a clear understanding of paragraph one or the preamble, i.e., why did you say this, etc. We were always willing to answer those types of questions.

JK: Did Mexico offer any incentives to the parties, for example, resources or aid?



Albin: With the case of El Salvador, I wouldn't say that we did as a part of the Group of Friends. Of course, all of the members of the Group of Friends had bilateral relations with the Salvadorean government. And you know that one of the priority regions for Mexico in the area of international cooperation is inside Central America. The bulk of our cooperation and growth is with Central American countries. We have bilateral programs with all of the Central American countries and with Central American bilateral institutions. I would say, during these years since the end of the '70s, our cooperation with Central America has been very important. Not because we were members of the Group of Friends, but because it was in our interest to have good bilateral relations. And we want our cooperation to have an impact on the social and economic development of those countries.

JK: Mexico is a pivotal country within the region in terms of trying to maintain the success of the region itself, for its own interests.

Tello: What you are asking is did we use the carrot or the stick.

JK: Yes, I have that written down.

Tello: Not that I know of. It may have happened, but not that I know of. I say this in all sincerity.

We had, as Ambassador Albin has pointed out, we have traditionally maintained very close relations with all of the countries in Central America. We have major cooperation programs in Central America and the Caribbean. Those programs were never suspended, as far as I know, because of the peace processes that we were following with the Group of Friends. To say that, "you must accept this paragraph or we will suspend this project," that, as far as I know, was never done. We never used this kind of tactic.

Albin: What I can tell you is that since the beginning our cooperation with Central America has been unconditional.

JK: Unconditional, that is very interesting. You explained to me in the beginning some of what Mexico's views were of the conflicts that were occurring in Central America. So, in the specific case of El Salvador, what was Mexico's view of the reasons for the conflict?

Tello: They were mainly of two kinds: political and economic. On the political side, I think that a good proportion of the Salvadorean people got sick and tired of having the government run always by military men. They were convinced, rightly or wrongly, that the military governments that succeeded one after the other were controlled and handled by a very small oligarchy in El Salvador. That is on the political side. On the economic side, I think that a good part of the Salvadorean people was not content with their lot. They see the government investing in what they considered the priorities to achieve a social and economic betterment of the majority of the people of that country. These were two of the main reasons why the conflict became military. Now, there were ideological inputs, definitely. That cannot be denied because what some of the people in the Farabundo Movement wanted was to start a new type of government in that country. And this was resisted by the government with help from abroad, mainly from the United States.

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JK: The government in El Salvador had received considerable support, financial aid, from the United States. The rebels were receiving training and support from abroad, also.

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Tello: And the rebels were receiving help from other sources, mainly from Nicaragua. There was a lot of talk about them receiving help from Cuba.

JK: Were Cuba or Nicaragua ever involved in any of the Friends discussions?

Tello: No.

JK: No, it is interesting to know that they weren't. We have been talking primarily about the negotiation process in reaching the peace agreement. How important was it that the final agreement be reached while Perez de Cúellar was still Secretary-General? Part of the agreement was signed here in New York even a bit past midnight on December 31, the last day of his tenure.

Tello: The end result of the negotiations, but the agreements were signed in Chapultepec.

JK: Yes, right, in Mexico in January.

Tello: The last negotiations took place in New York. The whole package was confirmed in New York by having the Group of Friends in a very active period talking to the two sides until the whole thing was agreed and signed on the 31st of December. After that was done, I don't like to sound like I am bragging, but I think that everybody agreed -- and I wasn't here so I think I can say it -- that everybody agreed that as a recognition of the role that Mexico had played since the very beginning, the peace agreements should be signed in an official ceremony in Mexico. That is how Chapultepec came about. There was no other option, as far as I know. Everybody, the Secretariat, the government, the guerrillas agreed as a sign of recognition the ceremony should take place in Chapultepec.

JK: I was in El Salvador a few weeks ago and I was interviewing members of the government and members of the FMLN, and one of the things that they said was how terribly important was the role that Mexico played -- they were extraordinarily appreciative of the role that Mexico played and

that was one of the reasons why I wanted to talk to you -- one of the things that they said was that in the beginning they did not have a place to meet because they couldn't come to the United States. Certain key members of the negotiating team on the FMLN side could not get visas to come into the United States. Mexico offered them the opportunity to be able to actually meet. While Contadora and Esquipulas had been important initiatives, they still had not established a means by which the two parties could meet together and negotiate. Therefore, the role of Mexico in offering a place for them to come together, peacefully and securely, to meet and have a dialogue was very important. That was an important factor that they had pointed out to me. After the final agreements were signed in January in Chapultepec, did Mexico continue to play a role?



Tello: Yes, we were asked by the Secretary-General, and this was now Boutros-Ghali, to play a role in the implementation of the agreement signed in Chapultepec.

JK: So, Boutros Ghali was interested in following up the process.

Tello: To be sure that what they had committed themselves to do was going to be done. That is why the Group of Friends continued, and continues until now, to make sure that the agreements signed are respected by the two sides. That is the role now after Chapultepec.

JK: So, that you were a facilitator and a guarantor, in a certain sense.

Tello: In a sense, yes. As you know, the United Nations presence in El Salvador has diminished

because most of the agreements have been fulfilled. There are minor things still pending. The number of issues pending has been decreasing. That's why the presence of the UN has also been decreasing.

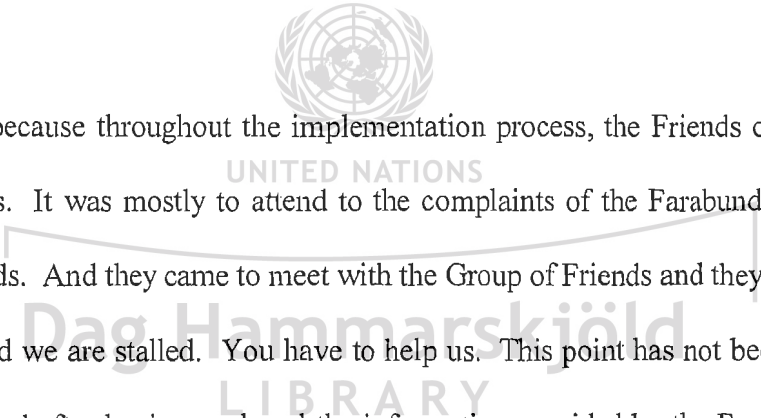
JK: When you say that the Group of Friends is still meeting, now that you are ambassador here at the UN, do you meet with the Friends periodically?

Tello: Yes, but not as often as in the beginning. The activities of the Group of Friends in the case of El Salvador has come almost to a complete stop. It has diminished a great deal. The office in El Salvador has only now about four people. There is no need to have a bigger presence now because most of the agreements have been fulfilled.

Albin: The Chapultepec agreements entrusted the United Nations with implementation and clarification of the agreements. The Secretary-General had to report periodically to the Security Council about the progress of that implementation. As the Group of Friends, we continued to be involved in the process of implementation and we continued, as we did in the past, to draft resolutions that were going to be considered by the Security Council or the reports of the Secretary-General of the actual implementation of the peace accords. Later on, a few years after that, the Security Council decided that it was not necessary anymore for the Security Council to be seized of the question of El Salvador. It was no longer a matter of international peace and security. It became more a matter for the General Assembly and more of a political issue than one of security. In the General Assembly, the Group of Friends continued to receive the reports of the Secretary-

General to make an analysis of them and make certain recommendations to the General Assembly. This is what we have done in the last three years, to receive the reports of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the peace accords, make an assessment of the report to the Secretary-General, and to recommend to the General Assembly through a draft resolution what the reaction of the international community should be on the report of the Secretary-General. That is what we have been doing for the last three years to four years.

JK: In that role, in the implementation, the role that the Friends play in watching over the process, do you think that has an impact on the ground?



Tello: Definitely, because throughout the implementation process, the Friends continued to meet with the two parties. It was mostly to attend to the complaints of the Farabundo Marti to ask to meet with the Friends. And they came to meet with the Group of Friends and they said, "this or that is not happening and we are stalled. You have to help us. This point has not been implemented." As a result of that and after having analyzed the information provided by the Farabundo Marti, we asked the representatives of the government to come and meet with us. And we explained to them what the complaints were and how these complaints would be solved. Because what we wanted as a Group of Friends was to have the agreements which were reached and signed in Chapultepec implemented as soon as possible and within the time frames that were established in Chapultepec.

JK: And the time frames were key to the process. As I understand it, for example, with demobilization the FMLN were to give up their arms and to disband and on the opposite side of

that issue, the military and the police would be reformed.

Tello: There were the reforms and the Commission of Truth. There were many things, modification of the judicial system, modifications of the electoral system. There were many things to be done by the two parties upon signing at Chapultepec. The responsibility of the Group of Friends was to see that those agreements were implemented and within the time frames set up by Chapultepec.

JK: Is there a specific example of something that the FMLN had come to the Group of Friends about.



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Tello: To complain about? For instance, the reform of the police or the distribution of land, or the compensation for those who had been hurt or wounded during the war, or the modification of the judicial system.

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Albin: The job programs to assist the demobilized persons.

JK: When that was reported, did you see some action?

Tello: What we did was after hearing the complaints, the Group of Friends, individually, got in touch with their respective embassies in the country, asking them to please give us information regarding if these complaints had any basis or not, were they exaggerated or not, to get the facts

because they were inside the country. When we got all that information, and in most cases the Farabundo Liberation Front had presented very well its case, in most cases. They were very thorough. They came with their papers drafted in a very clear manner. After we got confirmation from the embassy that this was the case, then we met with the government. And we had a stronger position because we had more data.

JK: Then did you see evidence that the process did move along?

Tello: Yes, of course, it did move along. It did move along, sometimes at a slower pace and sometimes at a faster pace. But it as a whole it moved along. The end result is what we are having in El Salvador. The recent elections that were not contested. We have new representatives in the National Assembly. We have people from the Front elected as mayor of San Salvador. The whole process is one of the successes of the UN. When people tend to complain about the UN because of the case in Bosnia or the one in Somalia, there is a tendency to ignore the success stories. One of the success stories was El Salvador for the UN. And even though the UN still has a presence in El Salvador, that presence is minimal.

JK: In Mexico's role in implementation, were there resources put into the implementation? For example, in providing the necessary resources for setting up the camps, demobilizing the rebels?

Tello: I don't have that information. In Mexico, you could find out. It will be even more evident if we go on to the Guatemalan case. The amount is quite considerable, but I don't know why, but we

do not want to publicize numbers. In the case of Guatemala, it was transportation, accommodations, lodging, everything. And I'm sure in the case of El Salvador at that time it was the same. But we never publicized that.

JK: Someone who would be doing a deeper history into this could get this information and the documentation by doing research in Mexico?

Albin: Yes, I wouldn't know how to access the archives on this history. I don't know if they are classified. One can do research in Mexico.



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JK: Ambassador Montana, where is he now?

Tello: Teaching, he is a professor in the Colegio de Mexico on international affairs, in Mexico City. Perhaps we have his address.

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JK: Ambassador Albin, when did you begin your work here in New York?

Albin: In 1993.

JK: You were here earlier. Were you here meeting with the Group of Friends during the implementation period.

Albin: Yes, we met many times.

JK: Do you have any anecdotal information on some the meetings that you had with the parties?

Albin: As Ambassador Tello was telling you, the meetings were very business-like. There were no specific things that happened. There is no special anecdote that I can recall. I can tell you that both parties, the government and the Front were very serious. They brought their documents or their complaints or their concerns in writing with their assessment of what the progress on a particular issue was and what action was needed. It was very business-like.

JK: Did you meet with President Cristiani? Was he involved in the meetings?

Albin: I don't remember if he came every year, but he came two or three times to the General Assembly to speak to the General Assembly.

Tello: And he met with the Friends.

Albin: And he always convened with the ambassadors of the Group of Friends, to meet with them and make his own assessment of the process of implementation. Also, he took advantage of the opportunity of the meetings with the ambassadors to make some additional commitments. "We have taken extra steps, for instance, in this area or this area and we will comply with this aspect of the agreement by x or y date." They were very useful.

Albin: President Calderon has also done this.

JK: Oh, I see, he has done the same. So, even though there have been changes in the people, the process has continued to move forward.

Tello: You must not forget there is a chapter of the Friends in El Salvador and they have met also with President Cristiani and with President Calderon and his cabinet, whatever is necessary, people within the cabinet responsible for aspects of the implementation.

JK: One issue that had come up that was an emotional one, is the report of the Truth Commission. I understand that the members of the government knew that the report was coming out and had heard that it was going to give specific names of people. They tried to have the names not put into the report. Were there any meetings that you had on that issue?

Tello: We discussed on several occasions the Truth Commissions report, but you mustn't forget that the report was done independently of the Group of Friends. I don't remember who appointed the people who made the report, if it was the Secretary-General or if it was one of the chapters of the Chapultepec agreement. The Commission of the Truth was set up and was presided by the former President of Colombia, Belisario Betancur. On occasions we heard from the government side that it would exacerbate the situation if specific names were to be mentioned in the report. The only thing that the Group of Friends did was to convey this to President Betancur and the members

of the Commission. But the decision whether to include specific names or not to include them was a decision of the Commission.

JK: In a sense then, the role was that the Group of Friends respected the independence of the Commission. The role was to convey that you had received this complaint.

Tello: Precisely. And the Front considered it necessary that the people who were found to be responsible for the killings or whatever would be mentioned. We thought so, too, but we always assured the Commission that the responsibility was theirs, and theirs alone. But it was our responsibility to convey what the feelings were from the two sides.

JK: By not taking a particular position, the Friends remained impartial.

Tello: And useful.

JK: And in that sense, useful.

Tello: Throughout the whole process, we had to maintain the confidence of the two parties.

JK: You had to keep the confidence of the two parties.

Tello: Once the confidence is lost, with one or the other, then the Group of Friends becomes

useless. I am sure that throughout the years, they appreciated the neutrality that the Group of Friends maintained.

JK: That is an important issue. I wanted to ask you if we could go on to Guatemala. Is there a Group of Friends on Guatemala, as well?

Tello: Yes, the main difference is that this group is known as the Group of Friends of the Peace Process of Guatemala.

JK: Not of the Secretary-General. Why is there that difference?

Albin: They decided when they signed the agreement, the rebels and the government, they decided to request the Secretary-General to use his good offices in mediation of the process and also decided to establish a Group of Friends. It was a decision by the parties. The Friends are the same, plus Norway.

Tello: Because one of the agreements was signed in Norway, in Oslo. Most of them were signed in Mexico, one in Madrid and then one in Oslo.

JK: But as far as you know, you don't know why it was changed to be Friends of the Peace Process rather than Friends of the Secretary-General.

Tello: When we were asked, what I told them, the two parties, was that we were prepared to do whatever they wanted, principally, but we preferred to be Friends of the Secretary-General rather than Friends of the Process.

Albin: Friends of the Secretary-General gave us more room to maneuver, to move in the process more freely rather than to be just in the framework of the peace process, or of the piece of paper.

JK: Oh, I see, that would be the difference, as far as you were concerned.

Albin: If you are part of an agreement and you are asked to play a role only within that agreement, you are bound by this. If you are a Friend of the Secretary-General, you would have more space and maneuvering capacity like we had in El Salvador.

JK: Did they understand that when they asked you?

Albin: They told us they understood it, but they preferred to have us in the agreement and they decided. So, we agreed to it, of course.

JK: As you say, it is the same countries with the addition of Norway. So, was it felt that it had been successful on El Salvador.

Tello: I suppose Guatemala took very much into account the role that the Group of Friends had

played in the solution of the Salvadorean conflict. And I supposed that they decided, based on that experience, to ask for a similar process for that main reason, with the change of being Friends of the Peace Process instead of the Secretary-General. Another big difference is that in the case of Guatemala the main representatives of the Front were in Mexico. The members of the Front in El Salvador were in El Salvador throughout the conflict. The members of the Front in Guatemala were in Mexico, the majority of them. So, the contacts in Mexico became more extensive than in the case of El Salvador.

JK: Was that because you share a border?

Tello: No, they were in Mexico City, not along the border. The main leaders of the Guatemalan Front were residing in Mexico. So, that explains why in the case of Guatemala, a lot of the contacts between the Front and the government took place in Mexico. These people did not feel secure going back to Guatemala to negotiate with the government. So, most of the negotiations took place in Mexico.

JK: Then, the center of those negotiations were much more in Mexico.

Tello: Yes, in the case of Guatemala.

JK: Because on El Salvador, some were in Venezuela, in Costa Rica, and New York.

Tello: El Salvador was mostly in New York, but Guatemala was mostly in Mexico.

JK: So, Mexico played a very important role.

Tello: And that is another success story of the UN. These agreements were signed on the 29th of December last [year, 1996].

JK: Did they meet here in New York and did they have the same process? Did the Group of Friends meet with them here at the Mexican Mission?

Tello: The last three years we were involved in those meetings.

JK: Did you have the same kind of process that you were describing before where the government would come and the Group of Friends would meet only with the government?

Tello: Yes, and then with the guerrillas.

JK: They would come with proposals and you would discuss the proposals with them. Then would you convey those proposals to the other party?

Tello: Or to the Secretary-General, depending to whom the proposal was addressed.

JK: If there were an impasse, would the Friends try to find a way out of the impasse?

Tello: Of course, and this was also the case in El Salvador. When the two sides didn't find a way out of an impasse, the Group of Friends tried to propose something that would permit the negotiations to continue.

JK: Do you have any recollections of something specific? You were here for Guatemala.

Tello: In the case of Guatemala, it was a matter of what should come first, a cease-fire, a disarmament, the integration of the guerrilla into civil society, land reform, Indian rights, human rights. There were several issues. The first thing to do was to ascertain whether the two parties considered that all those issues had to be tackled. Once an agreement was reached as to the main issue that had to be part of the peace agreement, then another problem arose as to which of them had to come first. A calendar had to be set up and agreed to by the two parties. That calendar was agreed upon and the two parties started to negotiate the specific agreement. The first one was human rights.

JK: Human rights became the first priority in Guatemala.

Tello: The first agreement negotiated and signed. Then the one on indigenous populations.

JK: That is an interesting parallel because in El Salvador the first agreement that was actually

reached was also on human rights. There is a parallel of the importance of particular issues. In your opinion, why was this the case? Let's talk about Guatemala.

Tello: Well, there were a lot of complaints that the violation of human rights in Guatemala was a thing that occurred every single day throughout the country. A practical solution had to be found to put an end to the abuses of human rights in Guatemala. The impunity of the Guatemalan authorities became a very important issue. They had to put a stop to the way these people acted without being responsible to any authority in abusing human rights. Once the human rights agreement was signed and agreed upon, this was a clear demonstration to the Front that the negotiations would continue until a final peace agreement could be signed. In the case of Guatemala, it followed a step-by-step approach. In the case of El Salvador, the whole thing came together on the 31st of December here and then ratified in Mexico, Chapultepec. In the case of Guatemala, there were partial agreements that were reached throughout the process until finally a peace agreement was signed.

JK: Will the Group of Friends on Guatemala continue to play the role that they did on El Salvador, in other words, receiving complaints from one side or the other?

Tello: Meeting with the two sides whenever they requested a meeting, which means being entirely at the disposal of the two sides to hear their ideas as to how the problem should be approached, or to hear concrete proposals for the specific agreement that was being negotiated at the time, or to hear complaints.

Albin: So far, the implementation has been very successful. We have not received any word from either of the two parties complaining anything specific. Most of the meetings have been to praise both sides. It is very encouraging.

Tello: On the military aspect, as you remember, the Security Council authorized a military presence of the UN in Guatemala for three months for the disarmament phase. That was done before the three months elapsed.

JK: Did Mexico provide peacekeeping troops?



Tello: We have never sent peacekeeping troops to any place, ever.

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JK: That is a particular policy decision?

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Tello: It has to do with the internal legislation, the Constitution. Troops cannot be sent abroad without consent of the Senate. We have never participated in peacekeeping operations with military personnel. In the case of El Salvador, we provided police officers to train the civilian police of El Salvador, the new force. That was the first time.

JK: That was the first time.

Tello: Yes.

JK: Are you doing something similar in Guatemala?

Tello: Not yet. But if we sent people to Guatemala, it would be doctors, nurses, or civilians, not military. But the military phase of the Guatemalan operation has finished, in less than the three months that the Security Council authorized.

JK: In light of your experience with the Group of Friends and the peace process in Central America, were there some lessons learned? Would you recommend that in other conflicts that a similar type of process be set up?



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Tello: I think that the Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, in situations similar to the ones that occurred in Central America in which the mechanism of the Group of Friends was applied, could keep this idea very much in mind, for similar types of conflicts in other parts of the world. I think that he has done so for the Great Lakes region in Africa. There is a group of countries; I don't know if they are called Friends of the Secretary-General. But there is a group of neighboring countries that are dealing with the crisis in the Great Lakes region. And I suppose that it is an experience that can be useful if the conditions are similar.

JK: What conditions do you mean; what conditions would be conducive?

Tello: It is very important that the country that has suffered the conflict will accept the

participation of a group of outside countries, call it Friends of the Process or Friends of the Secretary-General, whatever you want to call it. The first requisite is for the country involved should think of asking the Secretary-General to set up a Group of Friends. In the case of El Salvador and in the case of Guatemala, it proved to be useful in finding a peaceful solution to the crisis.

JK: That is one important condition. Are there other important conditions?

Tello: You can't set up a Group of Friends to solve a problem in any particular country without the consent of the parties. It would be like trying to impose a solution. It might work, but I don't think it would be successful. That is the prerequisite that you need, the consent of the country involved.

JK: What other kinds of conditions would be important?

Tello: Once a country accepts an outside group to help in the process, the factions have to consent. So, not only the country, but the parties involved in the conflict have to accept to talk with and meet with a group from outside.

JK: What about the group of countries themselves? Is there some kind of condition that they would need to meet?

Tello: That would depend on what the Secretary-General thinks is the best composition for the

group. We think that it would not be a logical way to think if the Secretary-General were to invite Mexico to form part of a Group of Friends to deal with a crisis in Asia. It sounds logical, and it is better to say it, that a Group of Friends at any given time has to be made up of countries that know the country concerned and know which are the main issues in the conflict and countries which are interested in getting a political solution to the conflict and that will continue, whether it takes five years or six or whatever. They are committed to see that the process ends in a successful way.

JK: There has to be a commitment and a commitment to a political solution. You had talked about the importance of impartiality, neutrality.



Tello: They have to show to the two sides in the conflict that they are not taking sides, that they can be trusted throughout the process by one or the other, and to deal with the issues in an impartial way, and keep the process moving. When necessary, they must find a way to keep the process moving. When you reach an impasse, you have to find a way to break the impasse.

JK: Is it important that there be a language similarity?

Tello: It is important but not essential. In the case of Guatemala with the presence of Norway, most of our meetings were done in English.

Albin: Some of the US delegates don't speak Spanish.

JK: That is all I had in mind to ask you but if there is something you would like to add, please do.

Albin: Perhaps as a corollary to the success of El Salvador, not only of the United Nations, but the success of the process proved that it was possible to find a non-military solution without any foreign military intervention. That was key, not only for Salvadoreans, but for the rest of the world. We have experienced military interventions that were useless, and now we have proved that it is possible to do otherwise.

JK: Which brings to mind that Panama did not become a member of the Group of Friends. There was a crisis in Panama at that time. There was the intervention of the United States.

Tello: A unilateral intervention.

JK: A unilateral intervention that made it very difficult for Panama to play a role. Well, thank you so much.

Yale-UN Oral History Project
Ambassador Manuel Tello
and
Ambassador Gustavo Albin
Interviewer by Jean Krasno
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