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Yale-UN Oral History Project

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Jean Krasno, Interviewer
18 April 1996
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Index: Central America

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Jean Krasno: We would first like to ask you, for the record, for the oral history, if you would provide us with some background history of yourself, and when you began your work at the UN.

Francesco Vendrell: Well, I began my work at the UN in 1968 as a junior professional—I mean, there was no such thing as a junior professional—I was a young professional, aged 27, recently out of university in England (and Spain). I had been in one year in Papua New Guinea, teaching at a university. And so, ever since I have been working with the organization, mainly on political issues. I have dealt with the Pinochet regime in 1973-75, as part of both human rights analysis and also in the offices accompanying the first representative of the Secretary General to Chile in 1975. I worked on de-colonization and on African issues. Then, I worked on Iran-Iraq for a period. And then in 1986, I began working on Central America with Alvaro de Soto on Latin America really, but mainly on Central America.

JK: Are you originally from Spain?

FV: I am Catalan—I am from Barcelona, Spain.

JK: It's a beautiful city—I have spent a little bit of time there.

FV: It is.

JK: Well, then, today I'd like to focus on the work that you have done in Central America, and then if we have time, we will discuss some more on Haiti because you had an important role there. I understand, as you just said now, that you had been involved in the Central American peace process from very early on—from the beginning. Can you explain how you got involved in it and the work you were doing on Nicaragua?

FV: Well, Alvaro de Soto and myself felt that with a Latin American Secretary-General, and at a time when the United Nations was becoming involved in virtually all kinds of disputes, including disputes in which one of the two super-powers was involved, as was the case in Afghanistan, for example, or in Cambodia, that it was somewhat absurd that the UN should not be involved in the Central American process. It was the one major conflict in which the UN was out. And we knew the reasons that there was a reticence, particularly by the United States, to accept a UN role in Latin America, and even more so in Central America. We also knew that as a result of this policy, many of the Latin American countries, particularly the Central American countries, saw the UN as a less friendly organization than the OAS, and then tended for favor the OAS. So, we were willing, I mean the Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar was willing, to allow the

Contadora process, to see if it could succeed. By late 1986 it was clear that the Contadora process was running out of steam, and it was then that the Secretary-General of the UN, joined with the Secretary General of the OAS, to avoid susceptibilities between the UN and the OAS, that we made a joint offer of services to the five Central American countries and to the eight countries that were part of the Contadora and support group in Latin America. And that was how our involvement began. Eventually, the Contadoran support group countries more or less vanished from the scene and the Esquipulas agreement, signed by the five Central American countries in August 1987, gave some kind of a monitoring role to the Secretary-General. It was from there, from this monitoring role, that we evolved first ONUCA, the first Blue Helmets in Latin America, which was the Central American Observation Group. And we became involved also in the verification of the Nicaraguan elections. With that, we eventually became involved with the demobilization of the *contras* and in basically the peace process in Nicaragua—which we never, perhaps, did to the same depth that we did in El Salvador, because it was our first experiment.

JK: Right—in Central America. As we had discussed last week and have just been going over a little bit, you were working with Mr. de Soto when the idea of forming a 'group of friends' of the Secretary-General on El Salvador was developed. Can you just briefly now describe, for the Oral History, how that came about and why?

FV: Well, in a way, when we had been dealing already with Nicaragua and the Central American process in terms of ONUCA we had drawn in some kind of support group of

countries. In those days there were West Germany, Canada, and Spain. We felt also that in a negotiation in which there were two parties, one the government and the other the FMLN [Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional], at a time when the support that the FMLN was receiving from the outside was decreasing, Cuban assistance for the FMLN was virtually at an end, whereas U.S. support for the government of El Salvador was still there, that the Secretary-General might find it difficult to mediate and to be an honest broker in a situation where one of the parties was much weaker than the other one. We felt that the Secretary-General would need, therefore, some support from some countries which might share more or less the viewpoint that the Secretary-General has of how the conflict ought to be resolved. It might be a counter-balance for the pressure the Secretary General might receive from other Member States. That was the idea of the Friends. We chose them, as you pointed out in your paper, because three of them had been the founding members of Contadora, and they each had—well, particularly in the case of Mexico and Venezuela there were very good reasons for having them, Venezuela because the President Carlos Andrés Pérez was a very dynamic person who was very involved in Central American issues, and Mexico because there always had been a major Mexican interest in Central America. In particular because Mexico from the end of 1988, just before Carlos Salinas de Gotare came to power, Mexico came to us, to the Secretary-General, and said, "We can no longer be in the forefront in Central America. Our relations with the U.S. are far too important. We are burning our fingers terribly over this issue, with the U.S. So, why don't you, Secretary-General, move forward and we will support you, but from behind."

There was another reason for bringing in the Mexicans. Spain, for the reasons I have given you already, mainly the country was a European country that had participated in ONUCA that was interested in Central America, which had undergone a process of democratization itself, with a dynamic king, and a Prime Minister who was very interested in Latin America.

JK: OK. That's very important to clarify that. From your experience had previous Secretaries-General used this particular tool, the 'group of friends'?

FV: Not that I know of. Certainly not with the title 'group of friends'.

JK: Yes, that was the title.

FV: It could be—you would have to ask other people. I am not aware of that.

JK: Before we turned the tape on, you were talking about the Member States that had been active on Namibia. Could you clarify that again for us?

FV: Well, the Secretary-General had mandate of good offices on Namibia in terms of bringing about the withdrawal of South African forces and to establish self-determination in Namibia, which would lead to the independence of Namibia. The Secretary-General had appointed a figure called a Commissioner for Namibia, who was established in the 1970s, I think it was in the late-70s. But the Secretary-General was perceived as being

too tied by Security Council and particularly General Assembly resolutions on Namibia, which were very anti-South Africa; I think UNTAG was perceived in South Africa as very pro-SWAPO. So, that was one reason.

The second problem was that because of the Cold War, there were tremendous difficulties in moving South Africa forward. At the time that President Carter became President in 1977, Carter was interested in trying to move the policy forward from the approach of Henry Kissinger. As you may recall, Henry Kissinger had more or less opted a policy of tilting toward the white regimes in southern Africa. And so Carter and his representative here, who was Andy Young, was very interested in moving this thing forward. That's when they, the U.S., agreed to the thought of establishing a contact group of all the Western members of the Security Council, at the time—namely, Britain, France, and the U.S., as permanent members, and West Germany and Canada, as non-permanent members. The group was very much led by the U.S., because we were very much a U.S. initiative, to move things forward. Both Young and his replacement Donald McHenry were very interested in this. That's how the contact group started.

For a long time, it was quite separate from the Secretary-General and from the Secretary-General's good offices. It was. The contact group, in a way, was willing to bend, I would almost say go against, Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, on the subject, which were very different from the Secretary-General's view. The Secretary-General, obviously, could hardly go against resolutions adopted by the Council, for example, that South Africa's presence in Namibia was illegal and that they had to withdraw immediately, whereas the contact group was perfectly willing to accept the *de*

facto sovereignty of South Africa and to turn to some degree a blind eye on the legal niceties of whether South Africa was or not the legal sovereign.

JK: On El Salvador, again some things that you had said before we turned the tape on, I'd like to get a little better understanding of how specifically the group might work in dealing with the parties to the conflict. For example, just to help stimulate your thinking on it, either on implementing the human rights agreement or demobilization or land reform—some of those issues.

FV: The 'group of friends' really did not help so much, here, on the very issues you just mentioned. And of course, I'm sorry—I forgot—the reason why Columbia was made a member in the 'group of friends', because Columbia was a member of the Security Council in 1989, and had as you point out in your paper, together with Algeria, it had been the initial sponsor of Resolution 637, which formalized the Secretary-General's good offices in Central America, in July 1989.

So, the friends were more important in other respects. They were important particularly on the issue of the armed forces. This was the most difficult issue, you can imagine, to sort out. And they were instrumental in sometimes persuading the FMLN of not, for example, insisting on the demand that the armed forces of El Salvador be dissolved. Helpful also in persuading the U.S., or the government, to be much more forthcoming in terms of the reduction of the armed forces, the unification of the armed forces, and so on. It was mainly on the armed forces and on whenever the process got stuck, trying to push the process forward. I think that they were particularly useful, for

example, on the San José agreement on human rights. They were helpful in getting Security Council approval for ONUSAL, but I would have to say that the U.S. and Cuba were also very helpful at that time, on these issues, so it was not specifically the 'group of friends'.

JK: I remember reading about an incident where the FMLN were holding back on demobilization in the camps because they said the government had not lived up to the land reform, which was a key issue for them. Eventually, that got worked out, and I didn't know what had happened there.

FV: I can't tell you that, because my involvement in El Salvador in the negotiations goes up to the Chapultepec agreement, the final agreement. I was not involved in the implementation phase, because I was dealing with Guatemala.

JK: OK.

FV: But yes, I'm sure that that was one of the cases where the friends were helpful. Now, it would be interesting for you to ask whether the help of the friends was at the request of the Secretary-General, or if they themselves did it without ... I mean, I don't know in this particular case.

JK: OK. So, eventually I'd like to interview the ambassadors who were involved in that, on how that worked on that end. I'm going to come back to Guatemala in just a

minute. Do you think that the 'group of friends', this concept, can be helpful to maintain peace after the UN operation has left the country?

FV: Yes—there is no reason why is shouldn't. 'Maintain peace' is perhaps a strong word. Better say that it can help maintain international interest on an issue which the UN has no longer an implementation machinery in place. But don't be too—we should not be over-optimistic. Only those governments that continue to have a direct interest in an issue will remain seized of it. The fact remains today that very few countries, including the U.S., which was so interested before, are interested in El Salvador.

JK: Is there still a friends group on El Salvador?

FV: I suppose there still is—the four plus one. I suppose. You'd have to ask, but it does not do very much. If you look at the Salvadorian friends, Spain, for example, to some degree is still interested. I don't think there is in Columbia, with the problems they have. The U.S., we wish it was more interested in providing international assistance.

JK: Do you think the 'group of friends' as a tool should become more formalized?

FV: I wouldn't formalize it at all. I think it has to be ad hoc for each 'group of friends'. There may be situations where a 'group of friends' may not work. For example, you very rightly point out in the paper that the 'group of friends' have to be of the same mind—now it's true that in the case of the Core group, on Cambodia, perhaps they were

not all of the same mind, but I don't know enough about it. But I can think of a couple of cases in Asia, which we are dealing with, where a 'group of friends' would just not work because either they would all support one side, or they have too different minds to be able to play a coherent role.

JK: So, the perception of impartiality, as we talked about it...

FV: ... the perception remains, yes, or at least, there has to be an element of shared values, and shared objectives. This is also very important. I would say almost more than impartiality. This is not a tribunal.

JK: Now, let's switch to Haiti—I was just going to review a couple of dates, just so we get ourselves thinking on that now. The coup took place in September 1991. The OAS was seized with the issue in the beginning but nothing was really changing.

FV: The OAS was seized, and was the one that adopted sanctions against Haiti as a result of the Santiago declaration adopted by the OAS in June 1991. The UN was seized and then the president [Aristide] came, made a statement to the Council, which took no action, and then the General Assembly was involved, but only, as you say, in a basically more supportive role to the OAS.

JK: Then, by late 1992, Mr. Dante Caputo was named Special Envoy, and you were asked to work with Mr. Caputo. Can you explain what began to happen at that point, and

how, as I understand, you had suggested that a 'group of friends' concept could be used here?

FV: Well, I think the first point is why does the UN become involved in late 1992, the Secretary-General got involved as opposed to 1991. The feeling was that there were various reasons. One was the OAS had failed, we felt. Certainly, it had failed to get Aristide back in power. Two, there had just been a change of administration in this country, and the perception was the Clinton, having committed himself to change Bush's policy on refugees from Haiti, and being very likely to be unable to deliver...

JK: ... you already knew that?

FV: ... would therefore need to put pressure for the return of Aristide. That was the only was he could escape the problem of continuing the Bush policy. He would have to take a more active role in attempting to get Aristide back, not simply saying that he wanted Aristide back. And three, we were a little bit on a high after Somalia. We felt the UN was able to do perhaps more things than it's turned out to be able to do. So, then we appointed Caputo, and we realized that Caputo would have to work closely with the United States, and we felt that it would be important that other actors in the UN become involved. That's when we suggested the group of France, Canada, and Venezuela. We felt there was no point in keeping the U.S. out this time, as a separate actor—and so this is the way the group was created.

JK: And so then how was there a balance created between the OAS as an organization and the UN, now both having the same envoy?

FV: I think this should be left until after my meeting with the Korean Ambassador Lee, because that's a difficult question to answer.

[a break]

FV: We (the United Nations, Pérez de Cuéllar, Mr. de Soto, myself) felt we had not had a very good experience of working together with the OAS. Mainly because it's a little bit like--now this is only for the oral history—deciding that Switzerland and Zaire are going to work together on a mission: the working methods of the Swiss are very different from the working methods of the Zaireois. Our working methods were very different from those of the OAS. The OAS had, to be entirely honest, a slight inferiority complex vis-à-vis the UN, it felt it didn't have the resources. On the other side, it depended much more on one Member State than we did. And, of course, by being totally depended on the UN, it meant whenever we had the good offices at work, for example on Nicaragua, the parties tended to use one of the mediators against the other one. They tried always to drive a wedge between one mediator and the other one. As a result of that, after the Nicaragua experience, we had decided that we would not have any more joint roles with the OAS in terms of good offices and mediation. We didn't do it in El Salvador and we didn't do it in Guatemala. We told the parties that they could choose. We weren't necessarily saying that we should be the ones, but that they had to choose,

because otherwise there was going to be too much of a conflict. Instead of moving things forward, we would be stalled.

Of course, in the case of Haiti, the OAS was already involved. When we appointed Dante Caputo, the Secretary General of the OAS said that he also should appoint a Special Representative, after all he had already had one before, one or two. Anyway—one. So, the United States in particular but other Member States too, prevailed on the Secretary General of the OAS not to appoint a separate envoy, who would inevitably make things more complicated, but to appoint the same person. And so, from their point of view, it was fine, because although Caputo was the envoy of both, in practice since his salary was being paid from New York, since he was working from New York, he was more linked to the UN, but of course, he had to manage the OAS, as well. On an issue like sanctions, a major problem arose because Baena Soares, the Secretary-General of the OAS, was deadly opposed to the UN imposing mandatory sanctions against a member of the hemisphere, and he was very angry that Caputo was supporting the idea of sanctions imposed by the Security Council.

JK: Why was there the objection to that, when the OAS already had imposed sanctions?

FV: The OAS had imposed sanctions that were not mandatory. They were hemispheric sanctions, and somehow—I don't see the logic either—but somehow the idea of hemispheric sanctions was considered to be one thing. The idea of mandatory

sanctions, including issues like oil, against a member of the hemisphere, even though it was at the request almost all of the Member States, because the legal government was Aristide, grated some members of the OAS, particularly countries like Mexico and Brazil.

JK: Let me ask you a question related to the OAS—it's something that I have never completed understood. Latin American members of the OAS have also experienced military coups and military governments.

FV: Quite.

JK: I never quite understood their position on Haiti in relation to their own histories. I don't know if that played into the application of sanctions. Wasn't there some sensitivity toward the whole idea of a military coup?

FV: Well, yes. You know, Member States, not only Latin American I should say, most Member States, do not always act in a logical way. There are competing emotions that play a role. In fact, the reason why both the UN and the OAS got involved in Haiti was because, as I said before, when the OAS General Assembly met in Santiago, Chile, in June 1991, it was the first time that all Member States in the hemisphere had democratic governments, except Cuba not being a member of the OAS. So it was at that time that they decided to adopt the Santiago Declaration which stated that in case there was a coup in a member state of the OAS, there were a series of automatic steps that would follow, including cutting relations with them, having a meeting of the ad hoc council of the OAS.

However, nobody quite thought that the first case where this would happen would be Haiti. Now, President Aristide, who was elected in January 1991, if you like, arose the same kind of passions in this country and in some Latin American elites, provoked the same passions that Salvador Allende had provoked 23 years before. Therefore, instead, here was a government that possibly, some agencies of the U.S. might wish to see overthrown, being now overthrown and forcing Member States of the OAS, in particular the U.S., to try and bring back a President whom they very much disliked. This led to enormous controversies in policy.

JK: Very, very interesting. Then, I guess the next part of the question I was leading up to, is the Security Council action in June 1993, the resolution establishing an oil and arms embargo. This was one of the first real actions that the Security Council took. I was wondering, you know, now had members in the Security Council evolved into a different way of thinking, some kind of stronger consensus on that?

FV: Well, it was not easy. And that was why getting the U.S. solidly behind the idea of UN-mandated sanctions was vital, because only the U.S. had the capacity to persuade all members of the Council to go along. There was one side, particularly, at the time Brazil was a member of the Council and Brazil had traditionally very strong views on the intervention in the internal affairs of Member States, and this was seen as intervention in a domestic affair. Of course, Aristide was in favor of sanctions, but he would not go and call for them openly. So that made it more difficult.

JK: Why would he not call for them openly?

FV: Because he felt that he could be leaving himself up for impeachment.

JK: ... because he knew it would cause harm on his people?

FV: Right—so it was a very difficult position for him. It was a very awkward position.

JK: OK—now we've come to the point where the parties actually agreed to meet, at Governor's Island. Now, what I've never understood also, is how was it that it was achieved that the parties actually agreed to meet?

FV: It was achieved because the U.S., mainly, but the other friends so some degree and the Secretaries-General of the UN and the OAS also, threatened both parties. In the case of the U.S., it basically said to Aristide "Unless you go to Governor's Island we will stop supporting you. And we will say that 'you are to blame for intransigence,' and there for everything the press is already saying about you, Mr. Aristide, mainly that you are an intransigent person, will have the official rubber stamp of the U.S. and then you will be left to dangle alone." And pressure was put on the army, also, saying, "This is the best chance you have to get an honorable settlement, in which you will have what is known as a 'golden bridge' opportunity, a way of leaving without preserving the armed forces."

Since we are not going into the history of Haiti, but the history of the friends, I will not mention now the great misgivings that I had about this approach. One of them being the reason why I ceased to be advisor to Caputo after Governor's Island.

JK: I would like you to actually explain that because now we are really doing this as a broader oral history, and not just focusing on that. So, yes I would like to have your interpretation and your analysis of that.

FV: It's a longish discussion to have. There were several factors involved. First, the role of the U.S. How will I put it? I don't think Caputo, and we, all of us, succeeded in stopping the U.S. from... I think it was a mistake for the United States to appoint a Special Envoy for Haiti. The very thing that we tried to avoid by having Caputo be the Special Envoy of both the UN and the OAS—the same problem arose even more strongly when the U.S. appointed a Special Envoy, because then we have in reality two envoys: the U.S. envoy and the UN/OAS envoy. Inevitably, the U.S. was perceived by both parties in Haiti as the key, to a large degree rightly. Aristide, because he felt all the U.S. had to do was to send an airplane to Haiti and tell the army, the generals, to jump into the plane and take them into exile, for the coup to collapse. And the armed forces because they felt that the U.S. was their protector. So, the result was that we were to some degree over-shadowed by the U.S. once this appointment occurred.

JK: When did that appointment occur?

FV: That occurred in March or April 1993.

JK: Now, did you work closely with Caputo?

FV: We worked very closely, but I must confess that the relationship that developed was one of a subordinate. We became subordinate to the U.S. effort. And this is where the difference lies between the working methods of the Special Representative, or someone like Caputo or someone like de Soto, and also perhaps on the different ambitions of each. Caputo was a politician, who had a career ahead of him in Argentina. Caputo was a person who had been very left wing as a young man in Paris, and like many reformed left-wingers, he had an over-sized view of the importance of the U.S. Traditionally, the left had also seen the U.S. as an all-powerful evil. In fact, one can manage the U.S., and one has to know how to play with the U.S., because the U.S. is not a monolithic, as we all know. Now, de Soto knew how to handle the U.S., and I think we courted risks, and we were strongly criticized, both of us. We had the U.S. against us throughout the negotiations. I had the U.S. against me because of my role in Nicaragua. He had it mainly for El Salvador. We were highly distrusted. However, we knew we could get allies in Congress; we knew there were elements of the Bush administration who wanted get out of Central America. And, with the help of the 'group of friends', we were able to play, in a way, even despite the fact that the Bush administration was more conservative than the Clinton administration, we managed to get a good deal of support at the end of the day. Everything being said.

In the case of Caputo, Caputo felt that his future in Argentina was very important and that he wanted a success in Haiti. I don't think he realized that he could out-maneuver people. I had always felt that the key people in the U.S., both Clinton and the Vice President, the Secretary of State, and the people at the NSC, would eventually support us if we took a strong position against the military and in support of Aristide, and that there were enough allies in the U.S. Congress, namely the liberal democrats and the black caucus, to help us push things forward. Caputo never, although while agreeing in theory with this approach, in practice, found himself unable to challenge Pazullo [the U.S. Representative]. I began to see that what we were going to do in Haiti was get Aristide back in power but tied, hands and feet, by the military. In other words, the UN was going to try to help establish in Haiti the kind of military-dominated regime that we had tried, successfully, to abolish in Latin and Central America. I felt that the way we were playing our cards in the case of Governor's Island, the humiliating way in which Aristide was treated in Governor's Island, where basically he was told, "You either sign on the dotted line or we are going to again blow the whistle on you, and say that you are at fault."

The way that the military was allowed to sign the agreement at Governor's Island before Aristide—normally you never have one of the parties sign without the other one.

JK: But my understanding was that they would not sit at the same table and sign it at the same time.

FV: Oh no. That was a question mark, but that didn't matter because they could have signed one at 10:00 and the other at 10:05. The trouble is that the military signed before Aristide was committed to signing it. So, there was a very good chance, a perfectly good chance that one party would sign and the other one would not. There was U.S. pressure on Aristide, saying "Look, here is an agreement, brokered by the UN and the U.S., and the military has signed, you're not signing it, so who is at fault?"

JK: Were there things in the agreement that he wasn't happy with?

FV: There were lots of things in the agreement that he wasn't happy with. Actually, the agreement, the reason why it failed, was that neither party believed in it. And the military had no intention of complying, which one, which I could see was going to happen, and Aristide was deeply unhappy with what he had to sign.

JK: So by actually twisting arms and forcing them to sign an agreement, they were really creating an agreement that was not viable?

FV: ... that not surprisingly, failed two months later.

JK: OK—that was a question that I wanted to ask you. Another question that I have, though, is that the agreement was signed and part of the agreement was that a Prime Minister would be named, Robert Malval—what I was wondering was why were sanctions lifted so quickly after Robert Malval was installed as Prime Minister?

FV: Well, here again, I am already out of the loop, because I left at the end of July and then I was on a long trip to India to clear my mind, and when I came back and dealt with Asia. But the reason again, was that, I mean you'd have to double-check with what I am saying now, but the reason was that again there was this enormous desire to remove sanctions, partly of course because the people were indeed suffering, but partly also because basically the key thing was to get a legal government formed, and quite honestly whether or not Aristide returned or not was not so important. There was always this question: to what degree did they really want Aristide? There were still many people, in the U.S. too, who still felt that if Malval stayed and Aristide returned very late, it doesn't really matter. There was a complete failure to understand that the elections in Haiti in 1990 were a turning point in Haiti of the kind that the elections in South Africa in 1994 were. The comparison with South Africa is carefully chosen. Because it is the first time that the Haitian people at large were able to cast their votes freely for anyone they wanted. Aristide had the kind of charisma that a prophet tends to have—a Mandela or a Khomeini... or a Perón. These are people who transcend a particular election. The charisma...

JK: The charisma was pretty strong. That played a very important role?

FV: At the end of it all, the policies that I was advocated eventually occurred on the part of the U.S. itself. In 1994, Clinton decided to change policy, and did the very things that we would have wished him to do earlier. He appointed a different envoy, a black

American William Gray, who was committed to the return of Aristide, and at the behest of the liberal democrats and the black caucus. And then things moved in the way, they eventually did move.

JK: Just back to the sanctions, though, for a moment. I'd like your opinion on whether the sanctions worked, did they do what they were supposed to do, or did they actually cause more damage without having effect? And then, the lifting of the sanctions when Malval became Prime Minister. Many people have said they were lifted and the elites were able to move their money around and so forth, and so that prolonged the situation. I don't know if that's an accurate description.

FV: Well, the sanctions, of course, did a lot of harm. Sanctions are a very unsophisticated tool. You cannot distinguish whom we are actually sanctioning. Inevitably, in most cases, the elites manage to avoid them and it is the common man who bears the heavy stone. But, number one, in my understanding and the understanding of people who work in MICIVIH, the civilian mission in Haiti, was that the average Haitian, despite the misery they were having to undergo, ...

[end of side 1]

JK: Let me just ask you to repeat what you were saying about the importance of the sanctions and how people perceived them.

FV: As I was saying, sanctions are an unsophisticated tool. They do harm irrespectively. You cannot target them with due care. Inevitably, wealthy people are often able to avoid sanctions, more easily than the poor. But the impression we got, and many poor Haitians would tell the MICIVIH in Haiti, was that they were prepared to put up with the misery of sanctions if it were to lead to the return of Aristide and the departure of the military. But they were becoming anxious that they were going to have sanctions yet nothing was going to happen in the end. I have to say that Caputo and myself, when we went for sanctions—I mean we supported sanctions and we really moved in that direction. I think it did cross our minds that sanctions might eventually lead to a U.S. invasion, and I must confess that to some degree we felt that perhaps a U.S. invasion would not be so terribly bad.

In a certain way, I think both the armed forces and Aristide wanted a U.S. invasion. In other words, I would say, the army clearly preferred Aristide to return after a U.S. invasion, when they would be protected from the wrath of the Haitian public, than if they simply had to face Aristide on their own if he ever came back. And Aristide felt that, although he didn't want to appear to be returning on the back of the U.S., at the same time in order to cope with the armed forces and with the unruly elements that existed in Haiti like the *attachés* and the *chefs de sections*, that some kind of international presence was required, except he could not ask for it because he could have been impeached for saying that. So he was in a very awkward position too.

JK: OK. Now you mentioned that sanctions might lead to invasion—what's the connection there?

FV: Because it was increasingly clear that there would be two possibilities: one is that sanctions would probably work but never work to the extent that the armed forces would actually depart, and that therefore there might be need for some kind of a force. Now it's true that the U.S. did not always enforce sanctions at the very beginning, but after they adopted sanctions my understanding, and again you'll have to check with others, is that the U.S., for example, did not put enough pressure on the Dominican Republic to stop violations of the sanctions, and that was of course very essential. Also, the U.S. did not take some of the steps that they had said they were willing to take, and which they could have taken without even Security Council sanctions, which were to, for example, withdraw entry permits from the key Haitian families who had children studying in the U.S., or freezing their assets.

JK: OK—that was not done.

FV: That was done very late. Indeed, on a couple of occasions when Caputo and I were negotiating in the first half of 1993, the U.S. led us to believe that if the armed forces did not play cricket with us, that is, did not go along with our proposals, that they would then proceed to take these kinds of actions.

JK: OK. So, they were reserving that for a later threat.

FV: First, as an earlier threat to the sanctions by the Council, because after all it was easier, they could do it through executive action. There was no need to go to the Council and persuade so many other people to go along. At the end of the day, for reasons you can only imagine, those sanctions actually were implemented much later than the Security Council sanctions.

JK: Right. Is it your opinion if they had actually been implemented earlier, would that have made a difference?

FV: ... been implemented earlier? I think that if they had been implemented earlier, and all the signals that went to the Haitian military from the U.S. side had been in one direction, then yes. If there had been mixed signals, as there tended to be either from the Pentagon or perhaps from the CIA or from some elements in the State Department, then, of course, then I don't know exactly how it would play.

JK: Because, as you were saying earlier, often people don't understand that the American government is not monolithic. There are all kinds of things that go on, and policies made, and decisions made.

FV: Right.

JK: And it isn't always consistent!

FV: Right!

JK: Let's see. The conference that took place in Miami in January 1994; did that play any significant role?

FV: That's past my time.

JK: Oh—that's past your time. All right then.

FV: Unfortunately, my period in Haiti is even prior to Caputo's appointment when I was on a mission with the Secretary General of the OAS there. And from 1992 to the end of July 1993. You know there was a difference in policy, and we parted and they took a quite different approach.

JK: Actually, while we're still talking, I'd like to ask you some things about Guatemala. You were very involved in that and...

FV: ...in getting the talks going, yes.

JK: So, explain to me what your involvement in Guatemala was, and when you started?

FV: I started at the very beginning, in February 1990 the Norwegian government—why the Norwegian government? Well, I told you the other day, the Lutheran World Federation's Secretary-General was Norwegian, the former head of one of the political parties in Norway, the center party, and he had sponsored these meetings between a group representing the Guatemalan government and the URNG, the guerrillas. At that meeting, I saw to it, because I already knew the guerrillas, that they would propose that the UN be invited as an observer at future meetings. That's the way, in the Oslo agreement that we were asked to be observers. Then the UN Secretary-General waited for the President of Guatemala, Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arevalo, and for the URNG, to formally ask us to be observers, which they did a month later.

JK: This is Pérez de Cuéllar?

FV: Pérez de Cuéllar. That was a month later. And so, the original role we played was observer, but soon after that we became a kind of joint mediator with the bishop, the Chairman of the National Reconciliation Commission of Guatemala, who was the Bishop of Esquipulas. And so we had this peculiar arrangement for two years, in which there was a joint mediation between someone who was an internal Guatemalan, I mean a Guatemalan bishop, and the UN.

JK: That's an interesting arrangement.

FV: With all kinds of various ramifications. And then, he was sent to the UN, of course, presumably to myself. Then we got the two parties, the government and the URNG, to agree to a peace process at a meeting in Mexico City on 30th April, 1991. I continued in the negotiations up to the time when we had already agreed on the basis of a human rights agreement. Then I left in May 1992, basically following a failed meeting that the Lutherans (the Norwegians) and I had tried to arrange. We had tried to arrange a secret meeting in Geneva between President Serrano [Jorge Serrano Elias] and the guerrillas. Unfortunately, on the one side the bishop felt upset because he was not involved in arranging it, and on the other side the armed forces found out about the meeting. The idea was to have a meeting without the military. The President of Guatemala until recently has been a prisoner of the armed forces, so he could basically talk to no one without the armed forces listening in. So the idea was to try and have a meeting completely on a *tête-à-tête* basis. Anyway, that failure led to the fact that the military of course didn't agree with my views, and so I left.

JK: And so then it was no longer possible to...

FV: Yes.

JK: But there was a 'group of friends', there was Norway...

FV: No—up to then there were no friends.

JK: There were no friends.

FV: Then, in May 1992, after the position of the government was not so much to challenge me, per se, but to say that I had superceded my role since after all the UN role was not entirely that of being the mediator, so the Secretary-General decided to down-grade the level of the UN representation and he sent a more junior person, who was Jean Arnot, who is now of course the mediator, the moderator.

JK: Say his name again? I don't know him...

FV: Jean Arnot, whom you must talk to for the process after I left. Basically, he took over, kept a low profile, the negotiations broke down, and then only they were properly resumed, I think, at the beginning of 1994. At that time, the UN then became the official mediator and this arrangement with the bishop lapsed.

JK: I see. Is that group still in existence?

FV: The friends of the Secretary-General come up by then. In my time, the negotiations on Guatemala were always seen as secondary to the ones in El Salvador. There was not a great deal of interest in Guatemala at the time. The U.S. had little influence on Guatemala; they were more concerned with El Salvador. So, there were three countries I involved myself, which I felt would be useful: one was Mexico, because of course they were next door, one was Spain because they had a very good ambassador

in Guatemala City, and anyway they were anxious to help, and then Sweden/Norway—Sweden because they had a very good man. At that time Norway had no embassy in the whole of Central America except in Costa Rica, and the Swedes had very good representation in Guatemala City, so they were involved in terms of helping. In fact, they organized for us—I asked them to do on Guatemala what they had done for us in El Salvador, namely to organize a meeting of experts on how the UN could help establish a reunification mechanism on human rights in Guatemala and also on indigenous populations. So we organized this meeting in Sweden in June 1991. Again the problem became about the role of the bishop. The bishop, who had a very large ego, felt slighted that this meeting was to advise the UN rather than him. So, he boycotted the meeting.

JK: He was invited?

FV: He was invited. And, the military learned about this and decided to use it against the UN. So they continuously accused the UN of having organized a meeting in Sweden to assist the URNG in the negotiations, when it was of course to assist *us* in the negotiations. So, Guatemala was a much more difficult case than El Salvador and the role of the armed forces at that time was a very negative role. Now things have changed a great deal in Guatemala. So, that's basically it. Norway was a little bit involved because of the Lutheran World Federation and then increasingly Norway became involved.

The establishing of the 'group of friends' takes place in a different way. It takes place, really, in 1993, when there was a meeting, I think, of the Presidents of Mexico, Venezuela, and Columbia, in Venezuela, at which President Serrano was invited. He

went there and he proposed there and then the establishment of a 'group of friends' *of the President* of Guatemala—so originally they were established as the 'group of friends' of the President of Guatemala. And they added Spain, because Spain had already been a member. Spain had to point out that this was a very unusual 'group of friends' because it was the friends of one of the parties. And that is when things were changed, to become a 'group of friends' of the *process*, not of the Secretary-General, but of the process. And the U.S. was added, and then I'm not sure how but Norway was also added, basically because the perception of the URNG was that the 'group of friends' was too sympathetic to the government and by adding Norway they felt they would have a more balanced 'group of friends'.

JK: That's very interesting. I want to ask you on the human rights agreement in Guatemala: what role you played in bringing that about, and did it have some of the similar parts of the agreement that the El Salvador [agreement] did, with the truth commission, and the certification...

FV: Yes. I would agree to discuss that but... unless you want to wait...

JK: ...another time?

[break]

JK: We were just wanting to finish up by talking about your involvement in the human rights agreement in Guatemala, and I was asking you somewhat what was contained in those agreements and whether they were somewhat similar to the El Salvador human rights agreements.

FV: Well, if you look, actually, it is quite easy for you to see what was agreed because the agreement on human rights that was signed in 1994, I think—now I may be getting my years confused—1994 or 1995, on human rights, is very much the agreement that we had already negotiated as early as late 1991, early 1992. And if you look at the agreement, there are a lot of parallels with the San José agreement of El Salvador.

JK: Interesting.

FV: Of course there are some differences, and I gather there are some other differences added since I left. But on the whole it was very similar to the San Jose agreement, changing a little bit the wording and so on to avoid offending Guatemalan sensibilities. The Guatemalan government felt all along that, at least I should say the 'Guatemalan authorities', that is the President and the armed forces, felt that they didn't want to suffer the fate, as they saw it, of their El Salvadorian counterparts, where they felt the army had been reduced, had been purified, had been removed from a role in civil society, and so on a so forth. Therefore we had always to be careful not to appear to be copying the El Salvadorian process. The UNRG, on its side, also felt that the FMLN had gone to far in concessions. As it turned out, of course, we all knew eventually they would follow a

similar path, if they were going to reach an agreement at all. So anyway, the agreement is relatively similar. When it came to the Truth Commission, the Truth Commission, I should remind you, in El Salvador, was not agreed at the time of San José, it was agreed much later. In the case of Guatemala, the URNG immediately put, as a major issue for agreement, a commission to look at the abuses committed in the 30 years of war. Now, the Guatemalan military was very opposed to the idea of a truth commission. First, it didn't want the name, of course, because it was the same as El Salvador's, but particularly it feared, to some degree rightly, that a commission to investigate the past would be used to really, completely, deprive the military of any legitimacy because the abuses committed in Guatemala during the 30-years war were far worse than the ones in El Salvador. And, some of the most incredible horror stories happened in that time.

So, why was it possible to have the idea of a commission on the past introduced? I suggested a different name: Commission on the Past, to avoid the words Truth Commission. I felt we were able to get a truth commission because President Serrano is a Protestant as you know, an evangelical Protestant. As a good evangelical Protestant, he had much greater feeling of guilt and of the need for reconciliation of guilt, than a Catholic would. And so he, on that issue, despite the fact that his military was so against it, he accepted the principle. Once he accepted the principle, then it was a question of finessing how it was going to be done. The main difference, and I think it is an unfortunate departure from what I would have liked to have seen, is there was only going to be one foreign member of the Truth Commission, whereas in the case of El Salvador the three were international. My feeling is that mixed commissions or internal truth

commissions don't work so well. The one in Haiti has not worked very well; this was a mixed commission. It is very difficult. I can't think off-hand of any Guatemalan who is entirely impartial about what happened during those horrible 30 years. So anyway, it is still a major step forward, and since it had the experience of El Salvador beforehand, and I think it should be able to go beyond what the Truth Commission in El Salvador did. The situation in Guatemala is evolving favorably, the armed forces are changing, both because they have been purified already to some degree, but also because they themselves realize they can't continue behaving as they did 30 years ago, and Minugua has done a very good job, the praise for Minugua is very universal.

JK: Now, is there also a component of verification of on-going practices?

FV: Yes, now what we have, as a result of what was agreed upon in 1991 or 1992, was that although all the agreements would come into force at the same time, that is nothing was agreed until everything was agreed, in the case of human rights, and of the human rights verification mission, this could begin upon signature of that particular agreement.

JK: OK—now, we're still talking about human rights in Guatemala?

FV: Yes. And so, in Guatemala, as soon as the human rights agreement was signed, which was only in 1994 or early 1995, now I'm confused, Minugua was established, that is the verification team, which was able to draw on personnel that were already used in El

Salvador and Haiti, where a previous human rights mission was established at the same time negotiations began.

So, now, people didn't believe in 1990-91 that it would be possible for the UN to establish a verification mechanism on human rights in a country like Guatemala. I must confess that I was almost afraid myself of that—that is how will the military and the death squads in Guatemala, allow a UN mission to poke it's nose around the country as to what was happening. Well, it's working.

JK: Why? Why is it working?

FV: I'm not entirely sure. I believe that a lot of these peace processes, these internal peace processes, have a dynamic of their own. The fact that two parties sit down and agree to start talking does not mean that they want an agreement of the kind they would eventually sign. In fact, I'm sure neither the FMLN nor the government of El Salvador thought in 1989 that they would end up signing what they signed in 1991. The same happened in a way in Guatemala, the peace process has developed it's own dynamic, has led to changes within Guatemalan society--and as you know there have been several palace coups in Guatemala in the last few years. And all of that has led to a change in mentality.

JK: Amongst the people, or ...?

FV: No, the people were not so important. Amongst the elites, and particularly amongst the armed forces and a lot of the urban elites.

JK: Now, changes in terms of that they want to get on with their lives and have peace, or change in a sort of moral sense?

FV: Well, I think both. I think mainly they see other societies evolving and they see that nothing terrible has happened. I mean, despite all their fears about El Salvador, they realize now that in El Salvador the business community is profiting from peace, that the coffee growers are profiting, so they are beginning to feel that perhaps in Guatemala they don't have to fear that allowing greater participation by indigenous people, for example, that cutting the size of the army, or preventing them from committing atrocities, is going to lead to a major change in their daily lives. I think that the end of the Cold War has helped, of course. Exposure to the outside world has helped. And, of course, it was very important what happened in this country, the U.S., in the last two years, Jennifer ... now I've forgotten her name, the widow of the Guatemalan guerrilla who has made this campaign, because there has been enormous publicity in this country about Guatemala, particularly in 1994, and about the role of the CIA in Guatemala, which has stiffened, I think, those forces in the U.S. which want to help civilize, and civilianize, both, Guatemala. I think that has also been helpful. I would say that that has been very helpful.

JK: And the issue of the torture of the American nun.

FV: And the issue of the torture of the American nun, the killing of the innkeeper, Michael Devine, in 1990. Yes.

JK: Was there another component to this, where another step in the area of human rights is to prevent impunity, in other words is to have this now built into the justice system?

FV: Well, clearly, for the future you have to build into the justice system. If you are going to reform society you have to establish solid national institutions. The Guatemalan negotiations have not yet reached the issue of the judiciary. They will need to reform the judiciary, as has been done also in El Salvador. If you are going to have national mechanisms to prevent abuses in the future—without that, you are never going to prevent it in the long run. That is why institution building is so important in these situations. Now, at the same time, it is very difficult to say should the issue of impunity be built in the negotiations?

We have the major issue, when we started negotiating on Haiti, of the issue of amnesty for those who brokered the coup. But the issue was not so much, actually, those who brokered the coup, giving them amnesty for being involved in the coup, which you could claim is a political crime, but on the human rights violations that took place in Haiti in the following two years. And, we were in a very difficult position because the army, of course, insisted on a blanket amnesty. The U.S. at that time was leaning on us to agree to a blanket amnesty. What was worse was that we never quite clinched the deal. We were

talking of an amnesty in the future—that is, the army more or less realized that they could continue to kill and to commit human rights violations with impunity, because at the end of the day if there was ever an agreement at all, there would be a blanket amnesty. Now this was, you know, *carte blanche* for abuses. Now that was completely unacceptable. At the same time, to say in negotiations that you are never going to accept amnesty for human rights violations, it's too big a thing to say to start with. It may be necessary to swallow hard and accept and amnesty for at least some violations, if you are ever going to reach peace. I mean, if the Israelis and the PLO were to insist on truth commissions, and truth commissions not only to find out the facts but to punish the guilty, well I think every one would be indicted on both sides in the Middle East, for example. So, basically, the important thing in my view is not so much getting rid of impunity. It is certainly important to get rid of impunity, but the important thing is to at least be able to bring the truth to light. I think people need to know what happened to their relatives. I think the country needs to go through the catharsis of knowing what happened in the recent past, to learn and draw lessons and avoid repeating the same in the future.

JK: So then, reforming the justice system would take care of future abuses.

FV: Reforming the justice system, reforming of course the entire mental approach of citizens, of course, creating a culture of human rights and democracy, which takes time. It needs a change in the educational system.

JK: Just one more question, and then I think we should quit. In the courses that I teach at Yale one of the questions that has come up is what criteria, or how do you establish a court system or justices, in a way that does protect the system? You know, if you're going to go in, the UN is going to go in, and set up a justice system, what criteria do you use for the establishment of a court of justice, or sitting judges, that will actually work?

FV: Well, I don't think we have an answer yet. I think we did something in El Salvador and it worked some way. We didn't do enough of it, to say the least, in Cambodia. It is also a very lengthy process to start. So, what we basically tried to do was to establish a school of magistracy, in other words a school for judges, and also to establish a procedure that would be as impartial and as apolitical as possible for the appointment of judges, through the establishment of a body that would select judges for both appointment and promotion, that would be either apolitical or would be multi-party in its composition. And that is what we did in El Salvador. Now, time will only tell. Things have improved in El Salvador, no question, in terms of the administration of justice. Have they improved in a way that the clock can't be turned back? I don't know—we'll have to wait.

JK: OK—well, I don't have any further questions. This has been really fascinating and I appreciate your helping us with this research. Thank you.

Yale-UN Oral History Project
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