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NOTES ON THE ARMY, SECURITY, AND PEACEBUILDING IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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By Francisco Jiménez Irungaray*

The work involved in peacebuilding brings to light the classic paradox between theory and practice in the sense that peacebuilding requires that we interact, from a conceptual framework, within ever-changing dynamics. Theory and practice imply not only thinking followed by action but, simultaneously, thinking as one does and doing as one thinks. And I say this because within the discussion about the meaning of peace in Central America today, especially from the perspective of security, we consider matters that are not only related to crime but also to defence. Thus, we need to engage in a conceptual reflexion about the interrelationship among national security, citizen security, and public security.

This talk is a reflexion on the process that Interpeace in Central America has been furthering during more than ten years on security issues and which I will attempt to explain today. To do that from a peacebuild-

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ing perspective, one must refer to the role of the army in public security. A first approach to the issue at hand must of necessity be conceptual. Central America, at odds with other regions of the world, has developed its own reflexion about the meaning of security and possesses a level of clarity about the challenges required to achieve it by means of public policies. I am not going to address this issue exhaustively. I only wish to address two very important concerns for the region:

1) The Framework Treaty on Democratic Security for Central America, signed in 1995, as one of the first experiences that adopts the concept of human security of the United Nations and applies it to the issue of security under a fundamental characteristic: it establishes the individual, that is, the citizen, and not the State, as the central concern of public policy in matters of security. This qualitative step taken in 1995 was huge: it meant moving from the classic vision of national security, especially the one established in Latin America under the influence of the National Security Doctrine which, as we all know, was extensively developed

at the School of the Americas in Panama, to a concept of security centred on the human being. This paved the way for an important debate about the role of the armed forces as a result of this paradigm change, a debate which is still unfinished with regards to their role in citizen security.

2) The second important concern that must be addressed is the impact that this paradigm change had on the region's armies from a conceptual perspective. In the case of Guatemala, at Interpeace we have established a difference, which we consider basic to all peacebuilding tasks, between "the armies" as institutions and "the military" as a group of people who have developed a professional career within the army. In order to explain this difference in greater detail, we must address a situation which is unique to the Central America region: in other regions of the world, for example in South America, the term "armed forces" refers to a balanced relationship between the navy, the air force, and the army proper. In the case of Central America, even though the distinction between the three branches exists, what

we observe in practice is the supremacy of the army over the navy and the air force. In fact, the term "armed forces" is replaced with "national army"; the first is meaningless in contrast, for example, with its use in South America. One might think that this is an irrelevant detail. However, this distinctive feature of the region determined the very character of its internal armed conflicts in view of the fact that strategy on the battlefield was derived from the army's supremacy given that the infantry is in direct contact with the population and its actions can result in human rights violations.

Having said this, we can observe that in the case of Guatemala, apart from the army's supremacy, there is another distinction involving the institutional character of the army and the concept of the military as a socially identifiable group. In Guatemala, in addition to the army as an institution, there are informal institutions, structures, or networks made up of individuals who, although no longer on active duty within the army, maintain a sort of corporate structure and common identity which, in certain ways, continues to influence



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the State’s institutions, especially under the aegis of its authoritarian legacy. This makes it possible for certain military officers, upon leaving the formal-institutional sphere, to maintain a number of prerogatives derived from this authoritarian legacy and corporatist conception which, in the case of Guatemala, has allowed the intelligence structures, very active during the internal armed conflict, to remain in existence even though they are formally outside of the institution itself. Thus, there is a distinction between “the military”, as a spontaneously organized group or not, which although not part of the military institution, is geared towards influencing the political

system. It is not by chance, for example, that many of them are the owners of private security companies. In the specific case of socio-environmental conflicts surrounding the exploitation of natural resources, it is not by chance either that former military officers provide security for the large mining concerns. In other words, there is sufficient evidence of a permanent network. This allows us to establish a necessary distinction with regards to actors who are involved in peacebuilding. Why is it important then to speak about the army – as an institution of the State and not as a group of individuals who are linked by their original training and professional

development but no longer members of its institutional structure – and its role in security matters with regards to peacebuilding? To answer this question I am going to refer to three key considerations:

1) The army was a fundamental actor during the armed conflict and played a determining role in the transition to democracy. If, in fact, it was the State as such that signed the peace accords, the fundamental political actor that determined the conditions under which those accords were signed was the armed forces. Even though the politicians had a lot to say, it was the active army officers who in reality de-

termined, from the perspective of the State, the course of the negotiations. In this manner they assured a level of relative autonomy for the armed forces within the political system while at the same time guaranteeing formal conditions of amnesty for themselves. This allowed them to preserve their own identity as an institution of the State with much enhanced strength. At that moment, the concept of peace was restricted because peace was understood basically to mean the absence of armed conflict. And even though the peace accords in El Salvador and Guatemala provided a structural understanding of the conflict as well as alternatives to broach and resolve it, the primary objective of the accords was not to foster structural change in the short term but to put a stop to the fighting.

2) The army is the guarantor of national sovereignty and, therefore, in charge of safekeeping the territory of the country. One of the aspects that remained unchanged after the transition to democracy was the predominance of the army in all aspects related to security. Whereas its primary function is the defence of national sovereignty

and territory in the face of foreign aggression, there is a problem in the fact that other functions are assigned to it that in a democratic context surpass the specific nature of the institution, as a result of which the distinction with other institutions charged with security becomes troublesome. However, in the current scenario, where threats to security acquire a transnational character, its function of protecting territory and guaranteeing national sovereignty take on relevance once again.

3) Historically, the army has been present in all aspects of national life. From its very origins, the army of Guatemala has been the main political linchpin of the State’s institutional nature, a condition that during the years of the armed conflict reached its highest levels of intensity insofar as the army’s involvement. The transition to democracy and the peace accords fuelled processes of political transformation aimed at strengthening the role of civilians within the institutions of the State. Nonetheless, it is doubtless true that, in the case of Guatemala, such a context placed the army in a position as the most stable of the State’s

institutions, which in turn has made it respond, more or less frequently, to a series of societal and institutional demands that surpass its functions.

When these three elements are taken into account, the concept of peace, from the perspective of Interpeace, is not only the absence of armed conflict but the strengthening of the capacities of society and the State to administer and resolve conflicts without recurring to violence and within the framework of a strong institutional framework.

Within this logic the need arises to broach the topic of security from a perspective of peacebuilding, given that nearly two decades after the signing of the peace accords the institutional capacities of the State are still weak and the threats to security have evolved. When they were signed, the peace accords did not take into account the critical variables of security which today are decisive in the region, especially with reference to delinquency, from extortion and kidnappings to contract killings, as well as criminal organizations involved in drug, weapons, and people trafficking. Even though the

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impact that these have on homicidal violence has not been demonstrated so far in precise terms, no expert analyst who works in this field would dare to affirm that organized crime is not a determining factor on the levels of violence in the region. However, it must be stated that drug trafficking is not the fundamental problem that impinges on security. For the common citizen, the main problem is associated with the constant possibility of being held up on the way to work, as well as becoming a victim of extortion and kidnappings with fatal consequences.

On the face of it, two issues stand out. In the first place, we have a State that is incapable of responding to these

threats and of resolving a problem which, even though not new, in certain ways has worsened in the last fifteen or twenty years in the region. In the second place, and as a consequence of the first, a threat and a debate are evident today in Central America: if the State is obliged to make use of all the resources at its disposal to confront the problem of insecurity, the national army, once again, becomes an important actor in light of the three elements mentioned previously to which must be added the State's weakness as reflected in the inefficacy of the police. As a consequence, politicians and civil authorities turn to the army to solve this problem. The debate centres not so much on the legitimacy which the

army might have as an instrument to confront the problem of insecurity but on its necessary use in the absence of other alternatives. In this sense, we must assume, in ideal terms, that the army should be the final alternative, that is, when the threat reaches an existential level, or when the threat's threshold is vital. However, in Guatemala the tendency is to turn to the army in the face of any protest of a social nature, as a result of which social phenomena become "securitized", that is, a social problem becomes a security problem.

It is at this point that the issue of security becomes fundamental for peacebuilding given that, in the absence of a sustained

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effort to strengthen the civilian police, politicians will continue to make use of the recourse of the military to confront the problem of insecurity, independently of the level of the threat. What does this mean? Should we take sides with classic tradition and say that the army cannot participate in the fight against insecurity, when in fact and in any number of ways it will continue to do so as a result of political decisions? Or should we promote and participate in a debate that will allow us to discuss this issue?

For this reason, Interpeace in Guatemala is encouraging a process based on a fundamental concern: How to resolve the extremes of conflict when it becomes violent? This is where the risk is highest to employ the armies in security matters. Some examples are the states of siege that, under Guatemalan legislation, were enacted for two regions in Guatemala to respond to environmental conflicts. The process supported by Interpeace seeks, therefore, to establish spaces for dialogue and debate

between civil society and the armed forces in order to develop technical and methodological tools for monitoring and auditing the behaviour of the army in such circumstances. For Interpeace it is important that the results of this experience are translated into concrete lessons that further regional debate on security and peacebuilding adapted to the needs of specific contexts.

*Francisco Jiménez Irungaray. Coordinator of the Central American Security and Justice Programme.