

Talking for Peace in Central America

Both the Organization of American States and United Nations join the popular demand to and military intervention in the strife-torn region.

After the constant threat of war that marked 1986, Central America moved into the new year with storm clouds still gathered thick overhead. The possibility of war seemed to be gaining ground over efforts for a negotiated solution and greater integration in the region.

Central America, a stretch of territory covering only a little more than 400 square kilometers, is today the most conflictive region in all of the Americas. The panorama is serious: economic crisis, revolution and counter-revolution, a quick-paced arms race and foreign intervention. In addition, a large majority of the area's 23.5 million inhabitants live in the most precarious of conditions. Thus, the situation adds up to a breeding ground far more conducive to war than to regional integration. This is the challenge for the five small countries caught in the midst of struggles to achieve balanced economic and social development, to leave behind the old models characterized even today by remnants of pre-capitalist structures.

Two new presidents came to power in Central America in 1986, Oscar Arias Sánchez in Costa Rica and Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo in Guatemala.

The former has moved his country slowly but surely to the right, and Costa Rica, El Salvador and Honduras now make up the major regional alliance opposed to the Managua government, the counterweight to Contadora's peace efforts.

The situation with Guatemala is rather different. Independent of the controversies sur-

rounding Cerezo's domestic policies, the most important regional meetings of 1986 were held in Guatemala under the auspices of the country's new president. The Central America Presidents Summit was held in Esquipulas in May, and the OAS General Assembly met in the country in November.*

At the Esquipulas Summit, despite the obvious tensions between Nicaragua and the "Tegucigalpa Block" (Honduras, El Salvador and Costa Rica), agreements were reached calling for support for Contadora and for the creation of a Central American Parliament, as proposed by Cerezo. The latter project received a serious setback recently when a group of Honduran congressmen announced that they were establishing a Central American Parliament of Democratic

Countries, with the obvious intention of excluding Nicaragua. While it is very unlikely that their plan will jell, it has sown yet another seed of discord in the region and achieved its underlying goal: to steal the thunder from Cerezo's original proposal, making it impossible to implement.

The OAS General Assembly took on new complexity and importance as it began to modify its traditional role as a mere appendage of Washington's inter-America policy. While its measures didn't go beyond making a renewed call for peace, there is clearly a new balance of forces building within the Organization of American States. Particularly noteworthy was the meeting's closing document which urgently called on Contadora "to prevent a war in Central America."

At the same time, emphasis was placed on revitalizing the process of Central American integration as a way to involve the region's dependent economies in a Latin American program of multilateral cooperation and assistance. Without a doubt, the major obstacle to this process is the polarization of political and ideological positions, with its militaristic overtones, that widens the gulf between the five nations.

Nonetheless, international pressures have made it increasingly clear to the Central American regimes that there will be no economic aid, especially from Western Europe or Latin America, if one or another country (Nicaragua, for example) is excluded from projects. Technical and financial aid packages are not being implemented to support the development of isolated countries, but rather of a region characterized by dependent national economies,



AYAX

"You know what? All of a sudden I had an irresistible desire to stay here in Honduras"

Ayax

* The 16th Ordinary Session of the OAS General Assembly was held in Guatemala on November 10-15, with delegations representing 31 nations and others participating as observers.

Latin American issues

traditional export schemes and the inequitable distribution of wealth.

There are currently two major economic aid projects for the region. The U.S. — designed, Caribbean Basin Initiative, which in principle excludes Nicaragua, is basically oriented toward meeting new demands in the U.S. market with nontraditional exports to be produced in Central America. The program would help the four countries overcome their competitive disadvantage in relation to countries like Japan and Taiwan, with much more developed technologies. Nicaragua's exclusion from the program is actually contradictory to the Kissinger Commission Report which stated that "despite the political differences dividing the region, Nicaragua represents an essential element in the Central American economy."

The second major project, supported independently by the European Economic Community and the Latin

American Economic System (SELA), promotes regional integration, without excluding any country, based on increased self-sufficiency, increased production of non-traditional export products and opening new markets outside of the U.S.

One of the most recent events with potential major implications for the region was the tour through the area by the "Group of Ten," made up of the Contadora countries, their "Support Group" and the General Secretaries of the U.N. and the OAS. The delegation visited the governments of all the Central American nations, ending its whistle-stop tour in Mexico City on January 20. Their purpose was to buoy up the possibilities for a negotiated solution to the political-military conflict besetting the region now for the past several years.

The foreign ministers of eight Latin American countries, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and Panama (the Contadora Group), and Peru, Bra-

zil, Argentina and Uruguay (the Contadora Support Group or Lima Group), made the tour in search of regional peace. Together these countries represent about 90% of the population of Latin America and make up the so called "Group of Eight." The participation of the heads of the U.N. and the OAS was a significant addition to the peace effort.

The formation of the Group of Ten, a body with significant social, political and moral standing, has been a long time coming. The more independent positions assumed by the major Latin American nations in the OAS after the Sandinista triumph laid part of the groundwork. The creation of the Contadora Group in 1983 was another important step, as was the "Cartagena Consensus." The latter was established in a meeting in Venezuela as a Latin American forum to discuss possible solutions to the foreign debt problem and the need for a New International Economic Order. The process proceeded with the creation

of the Lima Group and its subsequent merger with Contadora to form the Group of Eight. The official participation at the highest levels from the OAS and the U.N. in the recent Central American tour gave even greater international projection to the Group of Eight's efforts.

El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica gave cold receptions to the Group of Ten and tried to orchestrate a boycott of the tour that would have further isolated the Nicaraguan government. The boycott attempt failed when another key actor, Guatemala, distanced itself from the measure and asked the Honduran government to "listen to the Contadora Group."

In Nicaragua, on the other hand, the Group of Ten was warmly received by a crowd of some 20,000 people and presented with a 9 point proposal by the Sandinista government for the immediate signing of a regional peace accord. As a part of the results of the tour, the Sandinistas were able to broaden their audience with the principal Latin American countries, undoubtedly consolidating their positions in political and diplomatic terms.

Within the context of the Iran-contragate scandal, the Group of Ten's tour and the efforts undertaken last year toward peace and regional integration represent a de facto challenge to the legitimacy of U.S. regional policy. They also represent an important trend toward a Latin American consensus against the politics of force promoted by the Reagan Administration.

Hopefully the masterminds of U.S. policy will take note of their increasing isolation in the Western Hemisphere. And hopefully the major Latin American countries will be able to continue forward in their gradual process of integration and thus, serve as a model for the tiny countries of the isthmus. ★

Haroldo Shetemul and Augusto Morales



Photo by Sergio Dorantes

A contra truck reads: "We are defenders of capitalism"