

Perils of an Occupied Country

Honduras might be the next country destabilized in Central America. Yet rather than the result of a strong internal opposition, conflict stems from the presence of the contra.

Alarming consequences are looming for Honduras due to the presence of the counter-revolutionary groups fighting the neighboring Managua regime. Not only is the contra held responsible for robberies, kidnappings and murders, they are also blamed for the displacement of some 25,000 Hondurans, mostly coffee growers, from the border region with Nicaragua where contras are active.

What's more, reports are surfacing linking the contra to the killings of Honduran political dissidents. These incidents took place between 1981 and 1984 when General Gustavo Alvarez Martínez, a close CIA associate, was head of the Honduran Armed Forces.

Yet the most alarming implication of contra presence in Honduras is just now coming to light. Several incidents are revealing the acute power struggle within the Honduran military over their share of the \$100 million in aid to the contra approved by the U.S. Congress last July.

Two armed incidents brought

this situation to public view. One was an attack last July 23, with high-powered rifles and grenades, against a contra house in a residential neighborhood in Tegucigalpa. The second was an assault carried out on August 6 by the Honduran Public Security Force, FUSEP, on the home of Rodolfo Zelaya, an ultrarightist businessman and member of Congress. Zelaya is one of the main providers of goods to the contras, and it has been reported that they spent some \$4 million in his store during 1985.

The first incident is still shrouded in mystery. For his part, Zelaya accused colonels Wilfredo Sánchez, FUSEP Commander, and Roberto Núñez Montes, Chief of Army Military Intelligence, of instigating the assault in order to move in on his business dealings with the anti-Sandinistas.

Both high-ranking officers were removed from their posts following the incident, and General Humberto Regalado, Chief of the Armed Forces, ordered an in-depth investigation, stressing that there are no internal divisions in the Hon-

duran military. Yet local observers insist that these events are merely the tip of the iceberg of the internal disputes raging in the upper levels of the military establishment.

According to political analyst Víctor Meza, Director of the independent Tegucigalpa-based Honduras Documentation Center, CEDOH, "there's no doubt that the \$100 million put an end to the period of expectation that arose in Honduran ruling circles following the refusal of Congress (U.S.) to approve funding for the contra."

When Congress failed to approve President Reagan's aid request last year, Honduras entered a period of "anguish and uncertainty," in which everyone thought only of how to get rid of the contra, who had become "uncomfortable guests" once they lacked funds. But Mr. Meza believes that after the approval of the \$100 million, "a new phase of anxiety, illusions and hopes" has opened up among the Honduran military. Besides seeing the contra as an ace up their sleeve vis a vis Managua and as a means of pressuring



Photo by CEDOH

President Azcona surrounded by the men of power.

Washington into granting more aid to Honduras, the military now see the counter-revolutionaries as an excellent business opportunity. Meza describes the military's attitude toward the contra as one of "incredible, almost gangster-like delinquent pragmatism."

There seems to be little precise knowledge concerning the identity of the different groups within the military struggling to control the aid Washington hands out to the contra. But most sources agree that alignments in this new confrontation are also closely linked to the Armed Forces' internal power struggles.

Ramón Ouelí is an academic who specializes in scrutinizing the Honduran military. He explained to VOICES that before the end of the year the Armed Forces will choose a new chief who will take charge on January 27 of 1987. This election was decided in an agreement drawn up last February between the main promotions of officers when General Walter López was removed as head of the armed forces.

mand and contribute to resolve internal political disputes in the army. The pact also calls for officers of the so-called Fifth Promotion to rise to the head of FUSEP, the navy and the brigades, while officers of the Sixth Promotion would go on to head the army's infantry battalions, acquiring direct command of troops.

The Fifth and Sixth promotions (colonels and lieutenant colonels) dominate the High Council of the Armed Forces, COSUFFAA, the military's highest decision-making body, which is made up of 43 officers. According to Professor Ouelí, COSUFFAA generally follows democratic procedures, since each military chief consults with his staff before supporting or voting against a given issue.

Ouelí believes that Fifth Promotion officers are political and ideological hard-liners. The Sixth Promotion, on the other hand, functions more as a corporate group that comprises some 22 officers, meaning it has quite a deal of strength in the COSUFFAA. A revealing fact concerning both

Negotiations are currently underway to select the new head of the Honduran military. The main candidates are both colonels: William Thomas Said Speer, currently Head of the Armored Cavalry Regiment, and Leonel Riera Lunatti, Head of the First Infantry Battalion and Commander of FUSEP. Both are associated to the Fifth Promotion.

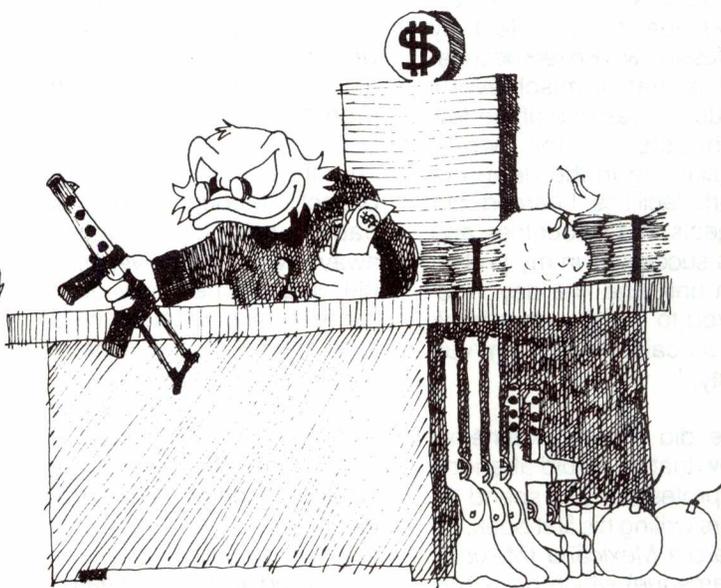
Most analysts believe that above and beyond other political differences, none of the military promotions are anxious for an all-out war against Nicaragua. They stress how some 90% of COSUFFAA's members were low-ranking officers at the time of the war between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969, and thus regard the Salvadoran army as their "historical enemy." This helps to explain why the Honduran military were wary of President José Azcona's visit to San Salvador last July, the first such visit by an Honduran president since the armed conflict 17 years ago.

The director of CEDOH believes the core of the problem is that the Honduran Armed Forces helped promote the

solid and decisive institution in Honduran society. According to most observers, the prospect of internal divisions over the contra issue is an alarming one. In this sense, Manuel Gamero, Director of the newspaper *Tiempo*, stated that the contra have affected both the army's image and its stability, and that the country is undergoing a process of de-nationalization.

Thus, it seems the Nicaraguan counter-revolutionaries have become an internal security problem for Honduras. It's obvious to all that with Washington's help, the contra expects to develop its armed forces to some 20,000 to 25,000 men, practically equal to the Honduran army. What will happen if the contra are again defeated by the Sandinistas and pushed back into Honduras?

Washington's \$100 million to the contra will bring out the fact that "corruption among the anti-Sandinistas together with corruption in the Honduran Armed Forces generates an uncontrollable landslide of corruption," as a local political analyst put it. Given the situation, many Hondurans fear the



According to this agreement the period of time during which a given officer will hold the position of Head of the Armed Forces will be reduced from the current five years to three. This would allow for greater mobility in the chain of com-

military groups is that the Sixth is in favor of punishing those responsible for the disappearance (kidnapping and probably murder) of political dissidents, while the Fifth, with U.S. support, opposes such measures.

contra as an external phenomenon, but now the counter-revolutionaries have become an internal issue that plays a role in uniting or dividing the different factions within the military. There is no doubt that the military is the most

worst. The ghost of Lebanon sheds its shadow over Honduras, a country with at least three armies within its national boundaries. ★

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