

# A MIDDLE ROAD TO PEACE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

*Newly elected governments in Central America seek a fresh perspective on the region's problems. President Vinicio Cerezo of Guatemala may hold some keys to future events.*

War and peace are the key issues in Central America. The region has been in-turmoil since the late 70s, as the area's social and political climate became increasingly polarized. Conditions of extreme poverty, repression and outmoded struc-

speaking out for peaceful regional coexistence. Nonetheless, the United States seems intent on completely eliminating the region's revolutionary forces, despite the fact that they are a natural product of existing social, economic and political conditions. It appears that only through all-out war and eventually the use of U.S. troops would it be possible for the Reagan administration to achieve that goal. Thus, the



Trapped in poverty. Photo by Renzo Gostoli.

tures made it possible for armed revolutionary movements to grow in several countries. Local struggles have threatened to become a regional war as the Reagan administration becomes more deeply involved in the conflicts. War means uncertainty, suffering, prolonged crisis. Peace would open the possibility of renewed stability and economic growth.

New forces have appeared on the scene, demonstrating varying degrees of willingness to sit down and discuss their differences. The Church, labor and middle class sectors are becoming increasingly vocal in favor of a negotiated settlement, especially in El Salvador. In Guatemala, moderate Christian Democrat Vinicio Cerezo is playing an important role by

new forces seeking peaceful solutions have found rather limited opportunities to advance their positions.

In 1979, in a matter of months, but after years of struggle, the Sandinistas led a massive uprising against Somoza to victory. The war was rather short, in comparison to many other revolutionary struggles, but close to 50,000 lives were lost and much of Nicaragua's infrastructure and industry were damaged. Shortly thereafter, in January 1981, the Salvadoran revolutionary movement launched what they called their final offensive, in an all out effort to seize power. At the same time revolutionaries in Guatemala enjoyed broad grass-roots support and, thus, were able to extend guerrilla warfare throughout the country.

A tidal wave of revolutions seemed about to engulf the region, as Honduras and Costa Rica looked on with a mixture of fear and sympathy. Today, the situation is quite different. Although stability is by no means around the corner, the chances of another revolutionary takeover in the near future are quite remote. Nicaragua is defending itself, not exporting its cause. The war in El Salvador seems to be at a strategic stalemate, in which both sides have proven their capacity to match each other's advances. The Guatemalan movement suffered serious setbacks in 1982-83 and will not become a serious threat again for years. There are no short-term revolutionary victories in sight.

Actually, there don't seem to be short-term victories of any kind in sight. Almost everyone agrees that the contras fighting a border war against the Sandinistas are far from becoming a serious military threat, no matter how much aid they receive. The Salvadoran army is

predominant factor in keeping the fires burning. By the mid-1980s the FMLN had scaled back its program for revolutionary change, adopting a power-sharing, democratic, gradual-change platform. But even this moderate position was considered unacceptable. In Nicaragua, on the other hand, the contras have been kept alive artificially, as their own military failures and internal divisions would otherwise have brought their demise long ago.

Honduras and Costa Rica have been drawn into confrontations with their neighbors, and this in turn has produced internal frictions in both countries. Always a region of interdependent countries, Central America is being forced to divide itself into blocks, going not only against the grain of its own history but against the tide of its present day social and economic reality. Obviously this strains relations and creates increasing tensions.

Now that revolutionary takeovers no longer pose an



Honduran fishermen at work. Photo by Renzo Gostoli.

expected to receive \$136.3 million from the Reagan administration this year alone. This amounts to close to one fourth of total U.S. military aid to Latin America in 1986. With U.S. aid, the Salvadoran military has modernized its equipment and streamlined its fighting force. Nonetheless, it has yet to gain an upper hand over the remarkably resilient FMLN. On the other hand, the Guatemalan army used massacres and scorched earth tactics to pacify its country, at a tremendous social cost in lives lost and communities destroyed. Although it was victorious, the army is racked by internal divisions and widely hated as a result of its dirty work.

The Reagan Administration's policy seems to be the

immediate danger in El Salvador or Guatemala, nor do those struggles threaten to spill over into Honduras and Costa Rica, a trend towards a negotiated settlement has slowly gained force. This trend has been spurred on by the Contadora countries (Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Panama) and their support group (Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay). Ninety percent of all Latin Americans live in these countries; all favor political negotiations and fear a full scale war and direct U.S. intervention. Local businessmen, politicians, workers and people in general, are increasingly calling for dialog, political agreements and peace.

Three newly elected presidents in the region—Vinicio Cerezo in Guatemala, Liberal José

Azcona in Honduras and Social Democrat Oscar Arias in Costa Rica— have all gone to Washington to say they don't want war. All are political moderates, and all can be swayed by Washington with the carrot of military and economic aid, since the three countries are in dire economic straits. Yet last March when Phillip Habib, presidential envoy to Central America, said that all the area's governments approved U.S. aid to the contras, the Guatemalan government denied his statements—a rather brave stance, coming from a former banana republic. Even before Arias took power, he reached an agreement with Nicaragua to set up an internationally supervised, joint border patrol to avoid activity along the Costa Rica-Nicaragua border. Although Costa Rica has publicly proclaimed its neutrality, it is common knowledge that forces work within its borders. Costa Rica has also pledged its support of Contadora, though its explicit political positions don't necessarily coincide with what actually happens.

Recently Honduras' new Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that "Our territory neither is, nor will be a sanctuary, nor will it be used to channel aid to insurgent groups which mean to use Honduras for their own ends." Yet it's public knowledge that they operate out of Honduras and that the U.S. relies on that country to channel their aid to them. The question is whether they can continue to do so without further upsetting the delicate balance of internal forces and generating increasing internal opposition.

In this regional context Guatemalan President Cerezo, "Vinicio" as he is referred to by most Guatemalans, holds a special position. Since its armed insurgency is basically under control and Guatemala is not in conflict with any of its neighbors (the country doesn't share a common border with Nicaragua and doesn't harbor camps), it is the only country that doesn't figure directly as part of the regional problem. Guatemala appears as a part of the solution, a sort of referee or experienced older brother with advice, suggestions and proposals for everyone.

Guatemala is Nicaragua's largest regional trading partner, the only country in the area that has not entered into the U.S. sponsored confrontation with the Sandinistas. On the other hand, no one could be less suspect of leftist or communist

leanings than the Guatemalan regime. So, as a local saying goes, Guatemala is on good terms "with both God and the devil".

Why is Guatemala, staunchly anticommunist for the last thirty-odd years, on good terms with the revolutionary Sandinistas? One would expect it to be the first in line with U.S. policy in Central America. The country known for its extreme right-wing positions (General Romeo Lucas, president

down a rebellion, but the social cost was too high to continue paying it indefinitely. Now, instead of defending the existing order as it is, many officers see the need for government programs that would improve the lot of the impoverished masses.

The Guatemalan army waged its campaign without U.S. aid, which was cut off in 1977 because of the regime's human right record. As a result, Guatemalan officers developed

In accordance with his regional policy, president Cerezo has promised internal reforms, an end to government-sponsored political violence and overall economic and social modernization to speed the country's development. The guerrilla organizations that make up the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, the URNG, issued a statement saying that they would not oppose Vinicio's democratic programs, but would continue their strug-



The difficult task of reconstruction in Nicaragua. Photo by Renzo Gostoli.

between 1978 and 1982 called Jimmy Carter "Jimmy Castro" for his policy toward the region) is now the swing vote in the area, swinging towards political agreements and away from armed conflict, proposing a regional parliament and the revival of the Central American Common Market. And all of Guatemala's proposals include Nicaragua on an equal footing.

In the early 80s the Guatemalan army waged an all-out war against the growing rebellion in the country. It massacred entire Indian villages, scorched the earth, destroyed homes, crops and animals, all to deprive the guerrilla movement of its base of support. The price was high. One of the results is that the dominant position in the army today is that as an institution it should not be involved in government or politics (the army was in power for over 30 years), and that the country needs to change in order to deprive the revolutionary movement of followers and support.

The army understands that it can't wage war against its own people indefinitely. It succeeded this time in putting

an independent and self-sufficient mentality, as well as a mistrust of the U.S., the ally that didn't come to their aid in a pinch and that publicly criticized them. In addition, the army doesn't want to leave its home front unguarded and is very much aware of the dangers and implications of a regional war. Thus many in the military reached the conclusion that it was better to negotiate with Nicaragua than to fight it. In fact, it was the army, while still in power, who designed and began to develop the regional policy that Vinicio is now carrying out.

The Guatemalan business community is divided on the regional issue. Ideological zealots support U.S. and want the Sandinistas overthrown. But many others, especially those whose business interests need a Central American regional market, tend to take a more moderate stance and are opposed to military solutions. For the most part, they don't particularly care for the Sandinistas, but they are against a war, U.S. intervention and the long term instability that all of this implies.

gle until those promises became a reality.

According to local observers, Salvadoran president Napoleon Duarte would much rather be in Vinicio Cerezo's shoes than in his own. A moderate with a progressive political record, Duarte came to power in El Salvador as part of U.S. policy and committed to waging war against the FMLN. Duarte would much rather have been the president who put an end to war and violence, modernizing his country in the process, than one who will be remembered by history for sustaining a war without end.

But politics is the art of the possible, and peace and modernization seem well beyond the reach of tiny El Salvador. Whether Vinicio Cerezo will be able to actually move in that direction is an open question. Vinicio has asked for time to carry out his much promised reforms, and time seems to be counting against him in the regional context. Yet only time will tell if he comes through on his promises and proposals. ★

Blanca González