

The Contras Get their Aid

War seems inevitable in Central America as the mercenary bands get what they asked for

The U.S. House of Representatives approved a presidential request for \$100 million in military and economic aid for the counter-revolutionaries who are trying to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. The June 25 vote was the culmination of one of the most difficult campaigns yet undertaken by the Reagan administration to achieve foreign policy objectives.

It was an arduous campaign. Reagan used countless forms of pressure, arm-twisting and disinformation, to finally break the resistance of a considerable sector of the House that opposed the policy as another step toward war in Central America.

In their quest for the aid, Reagan and his team ignored the Contadora Group, the Socialist International, the European Economic Community and the Non-Aligned Movement, among others. All of those organizations had declared their opposition to more aid for the contras and struggled to find a negotiated solution for the Central American crisis. But for the Republican administration, the only way to achieve peace in the region is via the overthrow of the Sandinista government.

The Congressional decision to support Reagan's war against Nicaragua will have consequences of an historic dimension for the region, as

well as for relations between Washington and the democratic governments of Latin America. Mexico's Foreign Minister, Bernardo Sepúlveda, stated that the House decision represented "an historic mistake that could damage relations in the Americas," because the principle of non-intervention "is not only a legal question; it is also a political matter."

The Nicaraguan government reiterated its position that aid to the contra will lead to a Vietnam-style war in Central America and to the eventual involvement of U.S. troops in combat. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega called Reagan "a new Hitler, a true fascist" who murders people who disagree with him.

In the campaign to convince Congress, Reagan's efforts followed three main lines: to convert the regional conflict into an East-West confrontation in which Nicaragua is supposedly the beach-head for the Soviet Union; to neutralize the Contadora Group's efforts to gain a negotiated settlement; and to clean-up the contra image as a corrupt force with strong ties to the deposed Somoza dictatorship, in order to make them into "freedom fighters."

In addition, Washington constantly accused the Sandinista government of maintaining ties with Middle East, European and South American terrorists, as well as with narcotics dealers. Both Reagan and Secretary of State George Schultz repeatedly claimed that Nicaragua is another Libya just next door to the United States. Schultz went so far as to assert that "Nicaragua is a cancer, and we've got to cut it out."

The day before the final vote, Reagan spoke personally to a number of Congressmen, who finally tipped the balance in the President's favor. The administration's package, which passed by a



Contra groups display their high-caliber weapons.

latin american issues

221 to 209 vote, also includes authorization for the Central Intelligence Agency, CIA, to direct the activities of the "contra" forces and allows the Pentagon to train them.

Led by House Speaker Tip O'Neill, the sector of the Democratic Party opposed to Reagan's policy worked hard to block the Presidents' plans. In the March 20th vote, O'Neill and his group managed to defeat the administrations' request. Later the Democrats moved to have the \$100 million aid request tied to a supplementary aid package, knowing that Reagan opposed that bill. Republicans Congressmen were able to undo the move.

In general terms, the Democrats who opposed the policy tried to buy time in order to allow the Contadora Group to advance in some important way. O'Neill admitted at the beginning of April that if Contadora did not achieve a settlement soon, it would be impossible to stop Reagan's policy.

For that very reason, Washington turned its efforts in the region toward achieving one basic objective through its Central American allies: to get a peace agreement that would meet the administrations' interests and block any initiative that recognized the legitimacy of the Sandinista government.

The White House also worked to neutralize the efforts of Latin American governments who opposed aid to the contras. The fact is that the majority of these countries, represented in Contadora and its Support Group, held firm in their positions. Every declaration produced after meetings of the two groups this year has included a section that affirms their opposition to any support by extra-regional powers for irregular forces seeking to overthrow any Central American government.

When the Contadora process bogged-down, the Reagan administration was able to make important political capital of the situation. As part of its propaganda, the administration claimed that peace efforts had failed because of the Sandinistas' intransigence.

With the \$100 million in contra aid approved, the

Nonetheless, the international community has raised its voice to protest the Congressional decision to approve contra aid. Two days after the vote, the International Court in The Hague declared that the United States had violated international law in its aggression against Nicaragua. In the United Nations there were also statements that censured the decision that



Civilian militias dig trenches to protect their homes in northern Nicaragua.

possibilities for a negotiated solution for the Central American crisis have become even more limited. Immediately, Nicaragua implemented a series of security measures that make it practically impossible for any internal political opposition to continue operating. The closing of the daily newspaper, *La Prensa*, and the denial of entry into the country for Catholic priests with ties to opposition forces, are among the most noteworthy of them.

In Reagan's logic, these actions by the Sandinistas confirm their lack of interest in political solutions and open the door for the intensification of military pressures. Within this framework, the space for peace-seeking efforts such as Contadora is drastically reduced.

provides aid to the anti-Sandinista forces.

A number of democratic governments around the world have expressed their concern regarding the Reagan administrations' violations of international law. And yet another cause for concern in the international community is the possibility that with the the CIA and the Pentagon's participation, Washington is advancing rapidly toward its own direct involvement in a regionalized war.

It is significant that even governments and political forces with close ties to the U.S. have expressed their disapproval of the recent House decision. For example, the American Christian Democratic Organization (ODCA) deplored the decision to give aid to the anti-

Sandinistas. And the Costa Rican government stated that it does not share the White House position that military pressure will force the Sandinistas to negotiate with the contra.

Ignoring international opinion, and given his obsession with destroying the Nicaraguan government,

now with Congressional support and a vast military infrastructure already built in Honduras, Reagan has a free hand to fully implement his plans for the region. It seems that the tragic hour for Central America has finally arrived.★

Horacio Castellanos Moya