

## Contadora's Tortuous Path

*When hopes were high for a peaceful resolution, new pressures once again prevented the signing of the Contadora Treaty*

Contadora's efforts toward a peaceful, political solution to the Central American crisis increasingly resemble an endless race. Each time the contestants seem to be reaching the end of the track, the finish-line gets pulled further back. Time and time again, obstacles appear in the path of new peace proposals.

In their search for a breakthrough, the foreign affairs ministers of Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Panama (the countries that make up the Contadora Group), as well as their counterparts from Peru, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay (the Contadora Support Group), met in Panama last April 5 through 7. They agreed on a two-month ultimatum, ending on June 6, for the five Central American nations to conclude peace negotiations and sign the Contadora Treaty for Peace and Cooperation in Central America. Thus, the Group's efforts would end on that date.

Discussions were tense at the April meeting. Reports indicated there were three main points of disagreement: arms controls and reductions, suspension of international military maneuvers, and treaty verification mechanisms.

The main point of tension at the diplomatic summit was Nicaragua's refusal to sign a joint communique agreeing to a set date for the Peace Treaty's signature. Managua argued that it could not "dismantle its army at a time when it is under attack from the number one economic and military power in the world."

Significantly, three Democratic congressmen from the U.S., and a representative of the European Economic Community, were present at the meeting as observers. Contadora issued a formal petition to the United States Congress requesting that the vote on President Reagan's proposed \$100 million in aid to the contra "at least" be postponed.

Between the April 7 meeting in Panama and the Central American presidential summit held in Guatemala on

May 25, two positions arose around Contadora's ultimatum. On the one hand, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica stated their willingness to sign the Treaty on June 6. Nicaragua, on the other hand, insisted it would sign only if Washington ceased its aggression.

Guatemalan president Vinicio Cerezo said that Nicaragua's position would mean an end to Latin America's peace efforts in Central America. Likewise, in his inaugural address on May 8, the new Costa Rican president, Oscar Arias Sánchez, stated that the Contadora Treaty was the only alternative for the region, "or an apocalyptic war will destroy us all." Honduran head of state, José Azcona, took a similar stance.

Yet this eagerness to sign the Treaty changed, following the presidential summit in the Guatemalan town of Esquipulas. On May 27 Rodolfo Castillo Claramount, who is both vice-president and minister of foreign affairs in the Salvadoran administration, declared that his government would ask Contadora for an extension on the time-limit. On the following day, the Costa Rican government said they considered the June 6 deadline "utopian."



From left to right: Fernando Cardoze (Panamá). Bernardo Sepúlveda (México), Augusto Ramírez Ocampo (Colombia), Isidro Morales Paul (Venezuela).

The fact that the Nicaraguan government had changed its position was what led Washington's Central American allies to bring up new obstacles to the signature of the Treaty. In Esquipulas, the Sandinistas not only agreed to sign, they presented a list of weapons and security aspects they would be willing to "reduce, limit, regulate or do away with."

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Washington's attitude, on the other hand, wavered between statements of support for Contadora and open opposition to the peacemaker's activities. Presidential envoy to Central America, Philip Habib, first said that the U.S. would suspend aid to the contras if Managua signed the Peace Treaty. Present at Oscar Arias Sánchez's inauguration in San José, Vice-President George Bush declared that the United States would abide by the Contadora agreements if they were "global and verifiable."

Nonetheless, a week later, on May 14, White House spokesman Larry Speakes indicated that Washington would not withdraw its support of the contra even if Nicaragua signed the peace accords. The following day, President Reagan confirmed this position. Meanwhile, Washington analysts spoke of struggles within the administration concerning the official position *vis a vis* Contadora.

The differences came to light when on May 20 the *New York Times* published a Pentagon document which argued that the Peace Treaty would lead the United States to a costly policy of containment of Nicaragua, as well as risking a generalized regional war. The Defense Department immediately disowned the document. The conflict was apparently resolved when the White House reconfirmed the official position: support for a peace treaty will be conditioned to the

restoration of democracy in Nicaragua, that it cease to support subversion, that it break off military ties with the Socialist countries, and that it reduce its military apparatus.

Thus, June 6 loomed closer and closer. Five days before the controversial date, Guatemalan president Vinicio Cerezo announced that none of the five Central

"negotiating modifications to the Treaty has come to an end, since all that remains is to implement and execute the agreements, given the political goodwill of the countries concerned."

As for the Panama Declaration, the document states three basic commitments: Central American nations will neither lend their territory nor support irregular



Nicaraguan children defending their national sovereignty.

Photo from La Jornada.

American nations would sign the Peace Treaty on the programmed date. He explained that the decision had been made at the Esquipulas presidential summit. So June 6 came and went, and nothing was signed.

But there was one other meeting between Contadora, its Support Groups and Central American representatives, to discuss pending aspects of the agreement. Out of this gathering came two documents: a definitive version of the Peace Treaty, and the Panama Declaration. Jorge Abadía, Panamanian Foreign Affairs Minister, declared that the time for

forces; no country will join military or political alliances that threaten peace and security in the region; no power should provide military or logistical support to irregular forces or subversive groups, nor threaten the use of force as a means of overthrowing a government in the area.

Reactions to the final version of the Peace Treaty and to the Panama Declaration were diverse. The Sandinista newspaper, *Barricada*, said the documents were a "political bomb for the United States." On the other hand, Guatemalan foreign affairs Minister Mario Quiñones, declared that Contadora's

new proposal, "rather than closing gaps between the positions of the Central American countries, in certain aspects opens them even further."

But the harshest criticism came from El Salvador and Costa Rica, where the final version of the Treaty was referred to as "an incomplete, gray and somewhat intranscendental document." At the same time, it was announced that together with Honduras and Guatemala, they would work on a new plan to resolve the regional conflict. "Contadora's tutelage has disappeared," said Salvadoran Minister Rodolfo Castillo. And Rodrigo Madrigal, head of Costa Rican diplomacy, accused Contadora of creating an aura of complacency around the Sandinistas. "We leave behind the realm of complacency to enter the realm of peremptory demands."

Most regional analysts believe that the Reagan administration's policy of support for the contra continues to be the "crucial element" hindering the Contadora agreement. And it's probably no chance coincidence that on the same day Secretary of State George Shultz stated that the Central American countries might reject the final version of the Peace Treaty, the Salvadoran government called a meeting to discuss the formation of an alternative to Contadora. Nicaragua was pointedly excluded from the initiative.

The road to peace in Central America is long, winding, and full of obstacles. Once more the peace-making group's proposals come up against seemingly insurmountable difficulties. But the members of Contadora have reaffirmed their determination to continue their mediating efforts. The firm support of the world community is with them.★

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