
Central America

Contadora seeks war on narco-terrorism

by Gretchen Small

Buried by the American media under the debate over funding Nicaraguan "contras," called "freedom fighters," were two Ibero-American initiatives which have opened new flanks for *winning peace* in Central America, instead of Washington's current, Soviet-supported, no-win strategy of fomenting violence and counter-violence in the region.

While Washington talked, a quick "working and goodwill" visit to Colombia by Panama Defense Force head Gen. Manuel Noriega on Feb. 28 concluded with plans to make their borders "impervious" to drugs and arms traffic, and initiated discussion on how to close off the Panama Canal to clandestine arms and drug traffic.

General Noriega was received with honor in Colombia, greeted at the Bogota airport by Colombian Defense Minister Miguel Vega Uribe, and hosted by the commanders of all of Colombia's military forces during his two-day visit. In a brief comment with the press, he explained that the purpose of his trip was to work out the "joint infrastructure" required to fight narco-terrorism. "Because of our geography," the general explained, Panama "is vulnerable for our soil to be used as a trampoline for cocaine and marijuana towards the consumer markets. Narco-terrorism is a new concept of the violence we are living in these days, in which anti-social elements make use of the enormous economic power and resources of drug traffickers to achieve their ends."

Noriega noted that the Panama Canal functions as a sieve for illegal arms and drugs shipments. "The canal zone is very big, since ships of all nationalities go through it." He proposed that "a special police to inspect the holds of those ships" be created. Before leaving Colombia, Noriega signed an agreement with Colombian Army Chief Gen. Rafael Samudio Molina, to cooperate in keeping their common border "impervious" to arms and drug trafficking.

Every major Ibero-American government, minus the Israeli client state of Ecuador, has warned the United States that its so-called "military solution" in Central America—arming tens of thousands more combatants in the region—will create the strategic crisis in the Western Hemisphere which the Soviet Union seeks. Hitting the terrorists on their vulnerable flank, their logistical supply lines, however, isolates and weakens the insurgents, while avoiding the Soviet trap. As the drug trade is the primary source of weapons,

money, and logistical support for all sides in Central America's war, a war on narco-terrorism outflanks the Soviet gambit.

Ibero-American governments, therefore, have taken a new step to block U.S. strategic disaster. As Noriega arrived in Colombia, the foreign ministers of the Contadora Support Group, Ibero-America's diplomatic coordinating council, announced at the end of a two day meeting in Uruguay, that they have agreed to establish a multinational civilian peace force along the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan border. "We are talking of a commission for observation, prevention, and inspection," Colombia's foreign minister, Augusto Ramírez Ocampo, explained, "not an armed force aimed at separating the two sides, or at intervening in armed conflicts." The Commission, which will patrol the border against illegal weapons shipments and troop incursions, was requested by Costa Rica last month, to halt the continuous border skirmishes between Nicaraguan military forces and the "contras" based in Costa Rica.

Peru immediately volunteered to participate in the commission. The Contadora Support Group, joining Panama, Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, announced they will invite the nations of Europe, Japan, and Canada to provide communications and transportation equipment for the Commission.

The Nicaraguan/Costa Rican patrol force is viewed as a precedent for the creation of others throughout the region, especially along the "hotter" Honduran/Nicaraguan border, where much of the "contra" activity is concentrated. "We hope there will be a chain reaction of this magnificent idea in the region," Ramírez Ocampo stated. Final details of the new peace commission are to be hammered out on March 12, at a meeting in Costa Rica.

The Commission challenges stubborn U.S. insistence on escalating war in the area. The final statement from the Support Group meeting reiterated that a cessation of *all* foreign support for guerrilla and irregular operations in the area "is an imperative need." Costa Rica's new President, Oscar Arias, reiterated another basic principle of Contadora strategy in a U.S. television interview March 2: "If I were President Reagan, I would give those funds to Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Honduras in economic aid, instead of military aid to the contras."

Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams flat-out rejected any cooperation with Ibero-American concerns for the region, in a satellite interview with Ibero-American journalists on Feb. 28. "There will never be a Contadora agreement unless there is pressure on the Sandinistas to sign it," Abrams stated. For Abrams, "pressure" means deployed armed insurrection against the Sandinista regime. U.S. officials now speak of arming 25,000 men. "Thousands of Nicaraguans are willing to die," he told the journalists. Under present U.S. policies, undoubtedly they will.