

Central America

U.S urged to aid nations, not Contras

by Gretchen Small

Aid totalling \$100 million to U.S. allies to fight narcotics trafficking, would make a better investment for the United States than financing Nicaraguan "Contras," Peru's deputy interior minister, Agustín Mantilla, suggested on March 23. Peru receives only \$4 million in aid for its war on drugs, Mantilla said, "totally insufficient" compared to the enormity of the problem faced. As he noted, defeating narco-terrorism requires "social development plans" as well as military operations.

The National Democratic Policy Committee's candidate for U.S. senator from New York, Webster Tarpley, has begun to campaign for a similar shift in policy. "I have just returned from a fact-finding trip to Guatemala, where I had the opportunity to meet with the defense minister and interior minister," Tarpley states in a campaign radio ad. "President Reagan, at the urging of George Shultz, has made \$100 million for the Contras in Nicaragua the be-all and end-all in Central America." Tarpley charged that "the Contras are just one gang of drug smugglers and terrorists fighting a bigger gang, the Sandinista regime . . . and if we insist on supporting the Contras, all of Latin America will turn against us."

Tarpley proposed that the United States "wage a serious war on drugs," which will win "wide support," and "checkmate a Soviet and Cuban destabilization strategy that runs on heroin and cocaine and marijuana." U.S. cooperation with Guatemala, which has a new civilian government backed by a patriotic military, is "a good place to gear up a war on drugs," Tarpley said. "But for 8 million people, Guatemala has 28 police cars, and only one radar set. U.S. aid is non-existent. For a small part of the \$100 million, Guatemala could have the tools to wage war on drugs, and put the Soviets and the Cubans on the defensive."

Honduras-Nicaraguan war

A strike by Sandinista Army units against "Contra" bases inside Honduran territory March 23-24, reopened Washington's policy dispute over how to defeat Soviet operations in Central America, whether by strengthening its allies, or the rag-tag "Contra" irregulars.

On March 20, the U.S. House of Representatives had defeated the administration's proposed \$100 million aid package for the Contras. The debates on the House floor produced no alternative strategic initiative, but did gain time

for Ibero-American efforts to negotiate a realistic basis for ceasefire. A meeting of foreign ministers from the expanded Contadora Group with Central America's foreign ministers had already been scheduled for April 5-6, with the main item on the agenda being the creation of Contadora border commissions to ensure the inviolability of borders in the region.

Guatemalan President Vinicio Cerezo warned Nicaragua that the defeat of the House vote threw the ball into its court. "Holding to hard and intransigent positions could lead to the generalization of the conflict," Cerezo said on March 21. Nicaragua has a "Latin American responsibility" to not spread the war.

The Sandinistas decided otherwise, launching a strike at Contra bases in Honduras. The U.S. State Department saw the Sandinista action as a propaganda opportunity to ensure a reluctant Congress votes up the Contra aid package. Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, back from an emergency tour of Central America, reported that 1,000 to 1,500 Sandinista troops had moved into Honduras. For the next 36 hours, reports of "heavy losses" in battles flowed out of Washington.

The State Department greatly exaggerated the extent of the fighting, military sources in Contadora reported, estimating that some 300 Sandinista soldiers had entered Honduran territory. Their figures matched private estimates given by Pentagon sources. U.S. military professionals argued that the United States should let Honduras take the lead in delivering the Sandinistas a military defeat, with the U.S. providing whatever aid was needed for Honduras to defend its sovereignty. The State Department's press operation only threatened to blow the crisis into greater proportions, they argued.

For 36 hours, Honduran officials denied the State Department reports outright. "We are unaware of it," a Honduran armed forces spokesman announced March 24 when asked about a "massive invasion" by Nicaraguan troops. At one point, Honduran government spokesman Lizardo Quezada suggested Larry Speakes "shut up," and called reports of 1,500 Nicaraguan troops in Honduras "disinformation," part of the "political and propaganda tactics of the Reagan administration to obtain approval" for its Contra package. Not until midday on March 25 did the Honduran government admit that "there have been new incursions by the Sandinista People's Army on Honduran territory."

Honduran military and civilian leaders are angry over the crisis thrown them by the "Contra" policy. The benefits for Honduras have been few. Honduras remains the second poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, a poverty which opens the country to insurgents organizing. Now, some 10,000-20,000 armed men, who take orders from U.S. intelligence, and traffic cocaine as well, have been introduced in the country. Honduran leaders wish to defend their sovereignty, but without throwing their nation into civil war. In Tegucigalpa, *El Tiempo* bitterly headlined its report on March 26, "Washington Told Us That We Are at War."