

New flank for peace in Central America

by Gretchen Small

The reactivation of the Central American Defense Council (Condeca), announced on Nov. 22 in Panama, introduces a new factor with the potential to break the strategic impasse in Central America. Condeca can provide Central America's militaries with an active role in policy-planning for the area; facilitate coordination of the war against Moscow's agents, narco-terrorism, and economic collapse in the region; and allow the military to assist the diplomatic efforts of the Contadora Group, spokesmen announced from Panama.

Panama's Defense Force Commander, Gen. Manuel Noriega, hosted the Nov. 15-22 meetings of top representatives of Central America's military, where the final details of Condeca's reconstitution were worked out. Originally formed in 1963, Condeca has not functioned since the 1969 El Salvador-Honduras war. Efforts to revive the Defense Council during the 1970s failed, in large part because of its association with Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza.

This time, Panama has joined the Council; Costa Rica, which has no military, will participate as an observer; and Nicaragua remains, for the time being, excluded. The policy outlook dominant in Central America's military has also shifted since Somoza's days, as military leaders recognize that the economic well-being of the population—or its lack—determines the limits of national security. In Panama and Guatemala—the two nations which have taken the lead in the revived Condeca—military participation in national development is viewed today as critical to national defense.

General Noriega, the region's most outspoken proponent of this broader definition of national security, indicated the thinking behind the revived Condeca, following the meeting. In his speech at an award ceremony for Honduras' military chief, Gen. Humberto Regalado (awarded Panama's Omar Torrijos award at the end of the Condeca meeting), Noriega emphasized that military cooperation is essential to end backwardness in the area. Without such collaboration, the region will never escape the appellation of "Third World," he stressed.

Neither can the communist threat in Central America be ended without military participation in peace negotiations. Condeca "ought to be an organization of military assistance and counsel for the evaluation of military aspects of the region," advising in particular the Contadora Group, Reuters news agency reports Noriega told the Condeca meetings. "The war in Central America is real, not a game. . . . the efforts of the Contadora Group must rely on advice of experts

in war, which we, the military, are," Noriega said in a Nov. 30 television interview.

The Contadora Group was founded by Panama, Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela in 1983, to stop Central America from being destroyed in the surrogate warfare deployed within the region by both sides of the "New Yalta" deal struck between the Soviet Union and Western imperial interests. The Contadora Group insisted that sovereignty must be respected—by Washington as well as Moscow and its Cuban and Nicaraguan assets—and provided a regional forum for negotiating a return to peace.

Washington has ignored Contadora's advice, and stuck with an economic policy which feeds Soviet-dominated narco-terrorism, and a military policy pivoted on the drug-linked Nicaraguan Contras. And while Soviet power grows, the folks at the State Department, led by Sikh terrorist supporter Elliott Abrams, the Israeli-linked assistant secretary for inter-American affairs, have turned their fire against the two strongest militaries in the region, those of Panama and Guatemala.

For several months, Noriega has argued that, while Contadora is the only forum in which peace can ultimately be concluded, diplomatic means are not sufficient in and of themselves. "The negotiating table must be advised by military men, because war is military. For example, they speak of lowering armaments, of eliminating military advisers. But what do diplomats know of this?" Noriega pointed out in an interview with Bogota's *El Tiempo*, published on Aug. 24.

He cited the example of Nicaragua's maneuver during the meeting of Central American Presidents in Guatemala this past May. Nicaragua there proposed an arms freeze, and offered a list of weapons which should be excluded from the area. "To the Presidents of the area, the list presented by Nicaragua appeared very satisfactory," Noriega said. "But, when military men saw it, they exclaimed, 'Nicaragua does not even have this equipment!'"

The danger of Sandinista army attacks into the territory of its neighbors has grown. "The presence of Nicaraguan troops along the Honduras border threatens to provoke a war throughout Central America," Honduras' General Regalado warned from Panama on Nov. 26. "The danger is imminent, not just for Honduras but for the whole region." Costa Rican Public Minister H. Garron Salazar announced shortly thereafter that his country will establish a military zone along its border with Nicaragua.

Condeca's reactivation at this moment of crisis offers the United States an opportunity to dump the rotten Contra policy, and instead attack head-on the elements of the crisis through which Moscow is working—economic crisis and the drug trade, in cooperation with U.S. allies in the region. Hopefully, this will be the message conveyed by U.S. Southern Command head Gen. John Galvin and Pentagon representative Nestor Sanchez, who participated in the Condeca meetings.