

Rotten 'partnership' in Central America

by Gretchen Small

The June 4 issue of *Time* magazine provides inside details of "the secret story of U.S.-Soviet partnership in Central America." Reviewing a year of mutual U.S.-Soviet "bluff, deception, anger, accusation, threat, candor, misinterpretation, goodwill and, above all, creative diplomacy," *Time* proclaims that the end-result is that today, Moscow and Washington not only have the same goal, but also a "common strategy" on how to shape the future of Central America.

The details are revealing: U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Bernard Aronson, and his counterpart at the Soviet Foreign Ministry, Yuri Pavlov, view themselves as "kindred spirits" and "now describe themselves as friends," *Time* reports. An academic at a Moscow think tank believes that "in Latin America, where every leader thinks he is some sort of mystic God, diplomacy requires dealing as one deals with children. If you say no all the time, you are ignored, even if, as a parent, you hold all the theoretical power."

The official agenda of the partnership is no surprise. Pressure on respective allies by the two powers has led to elections in Nicaragua and negotiations in El Salvador between the government and the guerrillas; changes in Cuba are to be arranged shortly. "Soviet-American cooperation in Central America . . . can serve as a model of trust and shared success" for other crisis areas, *Time* concludes.

Sacrificing El Salvador's army

But what *Time* did not report, is the result of all this wheeling and dealing: a greatly strengthened hand for Moscow in Central America. Take the case of El Salvador, where U.S. pressure is about to hand Soviet terrorist allies more power than 10 years of fighting ever won them on the battlefield.

With President Bush and the U.S. Congress threatening to slash U.S. aid if it didn't cooperate, the government of President Alfredo Cristiani in May agreed to negotiate with the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN) on the terrorist army's demands. The first round of talks, held in Venezuela under the auspices of the United Nations, concluded with the signing of an accord which committed all parties to reach agreement on seven issues ranging from constitutional changes to restructuring the judiciary, before a hoped-for September ceasefire.

FMLN delegates emerged from the talks triumphant. They had succeeded in placing the very existence of El Salvador's armed forces at the top of the agenda. The leader of the FMLN delegation, Communist Party Secretary General Shafik Handal, told Reuters that the FMLN is proposing nothing less than the "purge, reduction, and extinction" of the armed forces. Other commanders stressed that forcing through "fundamental changes" in the military is the FMLN's number-one objective.

If troop strength of El Salvador's military is cut in half, as the FMLN proposed in secret talks with U.S. State Department officials in February 1989, the FMLN's power to dictate conditions to the government zooms accordingly.

The FMLN meanwhile states that it will not reduce its own forces. Venezuelan Marxist ideologue Domingo Alberto Rangel reported on his three-hour discussion of strategy with Handal during a break in the Caracas talks, in the Caracas daily *Ultimas Noticias* on June 2. Handal, one of Moscow's oldest loyalists in the Western Hemisphere, argued that the FMLN was participating in the peace talks in order to "gain time while the international panorama clears." He assured Rangel that "there will be no disarmament on our part; we will not even interrupt our offensives until long after reaching a political accord."

Nicaraguan sellout

The new government in Nicaragua provides sufficient testimonial to the kind of castrated governments which the Moscow-Washington partnership intends to install in the region, no matter how much Salvadoran President Cristiani protests that his government has no intention of sacrificing its army "under pressure from interested parties."

Nicaraguans may have voted the Soviets' Sandinista allies out of office by a landslide in February, but even before the new government of President Violeta Chamorro had taken office, Washington and its Ibero-American allies moved to ensure that the core of Sandinista power would be left intact. Stopping through Managua for the inauguration of President Chamorro in April, on his way to Washington, Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez insisted that Sandinista Gen. Humberto Ortega be left in command of the Nicaraguan Army, in order to "guarantee" a peaceful transition.

Chamorro's reappointment of Ortega as Army chief, announced as she took office, dangerously weakened the credibility of the new government. "If a civil war breaks out in Nicaragua, it will be the fault of Carlos Andrés Pérez," columnist Luis Mejía González noted in Miami's *Diario las Américas* on June 3, "because national unease began" with the last-minute announcement that Ortega would be reappointed. Chamorro acceded to that demand under blackmail, he added: The Venezuelan government had promised to cut off oil supplies to Nicaragua unless the Sandinistas were protected.