

28. CENTRAL AMERICA THE CONTADORA PROCESS

Background

On 9 January 1983 the foreign ministers of Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela met on the island of Contadora, off Panama, to discuss the deteriorating situation in Central America. Local conflicts in El Salvador and Nicaragua had spilled over their borders, creating tensions between the countries of the region and attracting increasing superpower involvement. The Contadora countries, as the Latin American group came to be known, initially sought to encourage dialogue which would help to de-escalate conflicts in the region. This initiative soon became a formal vehicle for conflict resolution in Central America.

On 7 September 1984, the Contadora Group presented the five Central American governments (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua) with the Contadora Act for Peace and Co-operation in Central America. This treaty would have committed the parties to halt the arms race in all its forms, to launch a process of negotiated arms reductions, to cease supporting irregular forces, to promote national reconciliation and to establish representative and pluralistic political systems. It provided for the elimination of all foreign military facilities and prohibited all international military manoeuvres in the region.

Although the Act was accepted without revision by Nicaragua, it was rejected by Costa Rica, El Salvador and Honduras. On 12 September 1985, a new treaty was presented by the Contadora Group, which included improved guidelines for national reconciliation as well as for control and verification. It did not, however, prohibit US military exercises in the region or explicitly commit the United States to cease supporting the forces fighting to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. For these and other reasons, the 1985 treaty was rejected by Nicaragua, and the Contadora negotiations were suspended until May 1986.