

the rebel coalition, has remarked, "The rebel fighters in El Salvador today are drawn mainly from families that have lost land or who never had land." An estimated ninety-two percent of El Salvador's farms are unable to sustain even a single family's needs. This has already led to the country's complete deforestation; no forestry industry exists because there are no forests left. Some environmentalists refer to the conflict as the western hemisphere's first "ecological war."

THE RESULT HAS BEEN INCREASING PREOCCUPATION WITH SHORT-TERM SECURITY, both on the part of the Salvadoran and the US governments – and at tremendous cost. In 1986 the Salvadoran government spent US \$211 million on military activities; the number of military personnel had climbed from 10,000 in 1978 to 47,000 by 1987 – a total that does not include an additional 12,000 in the paramilitary security force.

The trend has been similar in the other countries. Guatemala's army numbered 14,270 in 1978 and is now at 38,000. Nicaragua's armed forces of 77,000 are the largest in the region, growing from 14,000 in 1981. Even Costa Rica, which boasts of its lack of an army, almost doubled its paramilitary security forces between 1980 and 1987. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, military spending in the region increased by fifty percent in real terms between 1979 and 1983.

These figures don't include all of the vast expenditures by both the US and the Eastern bloc in support of regimes they consider sympathetic. The United States became obsessed with security during the Reagan years. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger observed, "if we cannot manage in Central America, it will be impossible to convince threatened nations in the Persian Gulf and in other places that we know how to manage the global equilibrium." Yet the 1984 Bipartisan National Commission on Central America that Kissinger headed, while identifying poverty and inequality as two of the forces driving destabilization in the region, passed over the environmental linkages almost without mention.

THE HUMAN AND FINANCIAL COSTS OF THE INTERLOCKING CRISES IN CENTRAL AMERICA are clearly enormous. But no accounting can estimate the effect that fears about security have had in shifting the entire psychology and priorities of governments. Democratic governments are notorious for being obsessed with the short term; their horizons rarely extend beyond the next election. In countries where crises predominate – either military or economic – the reaction of governments can be even more short-sighted; they respond with crisis management to deal with the worst cases first, and environmental and natural resource issues do not qualify as worst cases until the disasters brought on by short-sighted planning are at hand. Only then do they generate the headlines which evoke an immediate response.

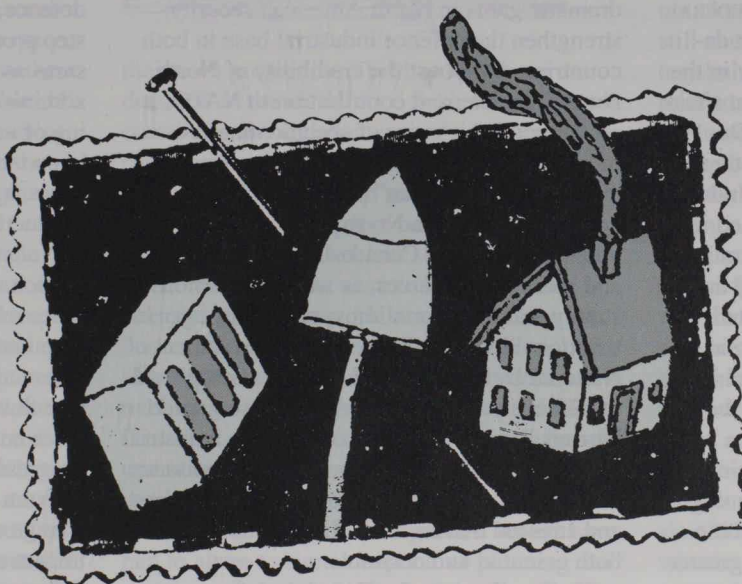
Yet these issues are central to the viability of national economies throughout Central America. The environment is not something that can be dealt with after peace is achieved; nor is it simply a matter of parks and conservation. Its full reach is both broad and profound, for it embraces fundamental questions: what land is used, by and for whom. The significance of these questions is magnified with the squeeze of population, land, and natural resources. If measured over available arable land, the population densities of the other countries of Central America are close to that of El Salvador.

The way the natural resource base is used or abused is, to a large extent, a function of decisions taken in capital cities. These decisions in-

volve land distribution questions, but they also include issues of land tax, farm credit, the control of prices and subsidies for various types of crops or inputs such as pesticides or fertilizers, entitlements and concessions to exploit resources, export promotion incentives, building and maintaining roads, and the coordination and funding of public agencies responsible for implementing policy.

The new and still fragile civilian government in Guatemala, for example, is currently planning a comprehensive survey in order to reveal the quantity, value and ownership of property. At the moment, this information is simply not known. The government is even seeking to include in its survey the vast northern frontier area of the Peten which for years has been under the control of the repressive Guatemalan army. The region is regularly shaded over on maps in Guatemala as if in recognition, whether conscious or not, of some dark spirit hovering over that part of the country. A survey of this scope promises to be political

dynamite in a country with among the most inequitable land distribution and regressive taxation systems in Latin America.



IDEOLOGY DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE AS decisive a factor as might be thought in determining resource use. Revolutionary Nicaragua, which has come closer to solving the problem of land distribution than any of its neighbours, is poised in the post-war period to decimate its eastern frontier with settlement plans and export dreams for beef and cotton that rival any ambitions that Honduras or Guatemala might harbour – and with equal unconcern for, or innocence of, the long-term consequences.

The destruction of natural resources is not the root cause of political disruption in Central America. The reality is much more clouded and complex: there are many causes and many effects, with no single source. Less obscure is the correlation between economic development and social and political stability, and the specific connection between natural resources and economic growth. To turn the equation around, what seems clear is that social and political strains emerge when economic growth is halted or reversed. Since Central America is highly dependent on natural resources for its economic livelihood, it follows that only policies which stress the sustainable development of these resources are likely to have much success in achieving long-term economic growth and social peace.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence in the region that the idea of linkages between macro-economic decision-making and resource use – not to mention their connection with long-term security – has yet been grasped by people in a position of power. Nor have the international donors been noticeably far-sighted: both multilateral agencies like the World Bank and the aid agencies of most developed countries have tended to invest heavily in big agricultural operations and have neglected the ten million small farmers of Central America – despite the perversity of land use patterns. This is hardly surprising since the same implications – the interrelatedness of the economy and the environment – are only beginning to dawn on politicians and policymakers in Western Europe and North America.

The problems are the same everywhere, but their acuteness in Central America adds to the urgency of needed changes. Only when the linkages are appreciated and acted upon, will the triad of hope – peace, democracy and development – proffered by the five Central American Presidents at Esquipulas be sustainable. □