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PEACE IN CENTRAL AMERICA?

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INTRODUCTION

In early January 1983 the foreign ministers of Panama, Colombia, Venezuela and Mexico met on the Panamanian island of Contadora to discuss the deteriorating situation in Central America. The region, they agreed, had become a powder-keg. Anti-government forces on Nicaragua's borders were growing rapidly, the civil war in El Salvador threatened to spill over its borders, and a counter-insurgency campaign of unprecedented scope had been launched in Guatemala. Tensions between Honduras and Nicaragua increased as border incidents multiplied. The superpowers were becoming deeply involved in these conflicts: observers spoke in ominous terms about a possible regional war, about direct US intervention, and about the "deadly connection" between the crisis in Central America and the rising crescendo of superpower confrontation.

The struggles in Central America* are struggles over power, social justice and national self-determination. They are conflicts among the forces of conservatism, the forces of reform and the forces of radical change. They have led to pervasive militarization, over one hundred thousand deaths, and over one million refugees and displaced people in the region. Since none of the parties is likely to win a decisive military victory, further militarization and bloodshed are likely unless the Contadora initiative bears fruit soon.

EL SALVADOR

Since 1984, El Salvador has been governed by José Napoleon Duarte of the Christian Democratic party (PCD). President Duarte has been a firm ally of the

*This paper focusses on El Salvador and Nicaragua, although it also touches on the situations in Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica as they affect the prospects for peace in Central America.

United States since he headed El Salvador's civilian-military junta from 1980 to 1982. As the architect of the country's "centrist option," President Duarte announced his intentions to bring the military under civilian control, eliminate human rights abuses, reform the judiciary, build a democratic political system and implement moderate economic reforms. He also promised to negotiate with the armed opposition alliance in order to end the civil war which has been raging since 1979.

Certain steps have been taken to attain these goals. The 1984 presidential and the 1985 legislative and mayoral elections were administered with greater fairness and efficiency than the election of 1982, although the absence of participation by the parties of the Left cast doubt on the legitimacy of the results.

Other major reforms attempted by President Duarte have faced immense obstacles. Land reforms were stalled before reaching the stage of significant redistribution. Labour unions have been allowed to organize, but the exercise of workers' rights has been seriously hampered by official and unofficial repression. Negotiations with the armed opposition took place in the fall of 1984 but no agreement was reached and the talks have not been resumed.

Certain judicial reforms have been implemented, but these have had little impact on the human rights situation in the country. Indeed, as a 1985 report by the UN Commission on Human Rights' Special Rapporteur argued, human rights violations by official and unofficial agencies had decreased but remained widespread.¹

Some critics of the Duarte government have argued that the power and political extremism of the military, as well as the influence of those landowner and business groups which have historically resisted any reforms that might jeopardize their interests, have together prevailed over reformist elements in the Duarte Government and have succeeded in conserving existing social and economic structures.

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