

Contadora needs Canada

It's not so far from home

A Canadian role in Central America

by Cecilio J. Morales, Jr.

The European conference on Central America, held in San Jose, Costa Rica, in late September 1984, illustrates the role that Ottawa could have played, but neglected to, throughout the Trudeau era. While the middle rank powers of Western Europe have not produced an all-encompassing solution, their show of concern, and their language of dialogue appears to have revived hopes for the moribund Contadora peace plan and to have altered the diplomatic and political landscape.

To Washington critics of US foreign policy towards the region, Canada's fence-sitting through succeeding crises is not only baffling, but tragic. Certainly, Ottawa has generally tried to avoid Washington's spiral of intervention, but always at the cost of downgrading Canada-Latin American relations. Admittedly, the problem is old, yet several developments, including Canadian and US elections, and the virtual resurrection of Contadora from its comatose state, suggest that the time is ripe for Canada's self-projection as "top-tier" player, even in a morass as deep as Central America. But several changes are needed first, before Canada can make a life-saving difference in the Central American maelstrom.

Canadian policy schizophrenic

Unfortunately, Ottawa has not made a whole-hearted effort to become involved in Central America, despite the recommendations of two major reports within the past three years by the Parliamentary Sub-Committee on relations with Latin America and the Caribbean, which urged that the External Affairs department pay more attention to the developing crisis. The result has been a schizophrenic policy in which good sentiments have not been matched by deeds.

Rather than joining the mediation of Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela — which sponsored the Contadora Group — two recent External Affairs ministers have merely offered lame rhetorical support. The 21-point peace plan, which has been accepted for signature by Nicaragua, is a model of evenhanded de-escalation: it calls for the withdrawal of *all* foreign military personnel and arms from Central America, and sets the framework for negotia-

tion between the region's belligerents. Arguably, it combines gradualism and activism in a way that the Canadian foreign policy establishment could find most appealing.

Former External Affairs Minister Allan MacEachen praised Contadora, but he did not back his words with action. The Pentagon was gearing up to establish a multi-lateral military ring around Nicaragua, and a regional base for counterinsurgency forces in Honduras, at the very time President Reagan was purportedly offering Contadora support. Yet Ottawa neither unmasked nor criticized the peace plan's effective rejection by Washington. Silence on the part of US allies such as Canada has allowed the State Department to maintain that the Contadora document "is not final," and therefore unworthy of consideration.

Canadian aid unwholesome

Canada could also have been more judicious in its sales of hardware with military applications and more evenhanded in its offers of economic aid. For example, in March 1983, the same month Ottawa co-sponsored a United Nations resolution condemning human rights violations by the Guatemalan military regime, Canadian embassy officials in Guatemala City were discussing the sale of de Havilland aircraft to that country's air force, which among other things was known to use its equipment to strafe Indian villages.

Similar overtures were made to Honduras, which has received the lion's share — 43 percent — of Canada's official development assistance to Central America, despite opposition within Canada. Church and labor organizations in Canada have cited Honduras' undisputed role as a base of operations for the US-sponsored Regional Military Training Center in Puerto Castilla, the port which incidentally is also the debarkation point for CIA supplies to the anti-Sandinista rebels.

Mr. MacEachen responded to critics by noting that Canadian economic aid "is not designed as a tool to reward or punish foreign governments." Curiously, in the case of Nicaragua, where, despite serious political problems, dissent is not paid with life and limb, MacEachen's principle did not stand up to scrutiny. During a visit last April, the Minister dangled Canadian assistance before the Sandinista government as an inducement to meet what he termed the original goals of the revolution. In view of Managua's efforts to raise health and income standards, despite struggling out of a civil war devastation estimated at \$1.8 billion by the UN Economic Commission for Latin

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