

THE PERILS OF PEACEKEEPING

Canada should think twice before sending its peacekeepers into the quagmire of Central America's wars.

BY GILLES PAQUIN

CANADIAN PEACEKEEPING forces first arrived in Cyprus over twenty years ago. In theory, their assignment was to be relatively short, of sufficient duration to allow the two parties in conflict to negotiate a settlement to the crisis. Even today, no one knows when they will leave. The Canadian government renews their mandate every six months, and still cannot envisage the end of the longest temporary assignment ever undertaken by the Canadian Forces.

Why raise this issue? Simply because the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Joe Clark, seeks to engage in a similar crusade, this time in Central America. And he has already consulted officers of the Canadian Forces in this regard. In a document prepared before his visit to the area last November, military experts briefed Mr. Clark on all the problems that could arise in this kind of operation. They made no mention, however, of how Ottawa might extricate itself from such a hornet's nest. The question is worth asking, in view of the complexity of Central American affairs and the stubbornness of opposing factions.

The problems encountered in Cyprus pale in comparison to those found in Central America. The total area of Cyprus is only half that of El Salvador, and its population is twenty-five times less than that of Central America as a whole. In the isthmus of Central America, just as in Cyprus, confrontations exist between peoples, especially in Guatemala; between ideologies, in Nicaragua and El Salvador; and finally between social classes in all five countries.

To add to this dismal picture,

the heavy hand of Washington and the somewhat less obtrusive hand of Moscow weigh on all the governments. Following many years of authoritarian rule, most Central American states are still under the watchful eye of the military. Before the Canadian Forces embark on another short-term venture which could extend to the end of the century, some brief consideration should be given to what strategists refer to as the "theatre of operations."

THE TURBULENT HISTORY OF THE five sister republics of Central America is punctuated with deadly conflict, brutal repression and chronic social injustice. And yet these countries have never been so bruised and bloodied as during the past two decades. The facts speak for themselves:

EL SALVADOR – Eight years of warfare, 60,000 dead and over a million displaced or exiled persons. A conflict in total deadlock where the army, bound to the oligarchy in power, refuses to negotiate with a still powerful guerrilla force. The most densely populated country of the area, El Salvador, also has the doubtful honour of being the leading recipient of US military aid.

GUATEMALA – Almost twenty years of warfare, 70,000 dead and hundreds of thousands exiled. A military regime ran the country from 1954 to 1986, when the current president, Vinicio Cerezo, was elected. This is a president who admits in scarcely veiled terms that the army still holds the reins. A large proportion of Guatemala's eight million inhabitants are Indians and, as a result,

are virtually excluded from any participation in the country's political and economic life.

NICARAGUA – A bloody revolution in 1979 and six years of warfare since 1982 has produced close to 40,000 dead. Nicaragua is fighting an irregular force of some ten thousand troops financed and supported by the United States through Honduras. Although the economy is in ruins, the Sandinista government must devote over half of its budget to defence. The state of emergency restricting civil liberties was imposed in 1982 and lifted only in January of this year.

HONDURAS – The poorest country in the region and the quintessential banana republic as a result of an epidemic of coups d'état which have plagued its political life. For two years, Honduras has had an elected president, José Azcona Hoyo, who "shares" power with the US embassy and the army. The presence of Contra troops in Honduras has a destabilizing influence, notwithstanding the benefits which accrue to the state treasury.

COSTA RICA – The only haven of peace in the area, Costa Rica has not maintained an army since 1948. It has, however, tolerated the presence of Contra forces on its territory for years. It was plunged into an unprecedented economic crisis at the beginning of the 1980s, and its 2.3 million inhabitants are now burdened with a national debt of over US \$5 billion. The arrival of some 200,000 refugees, driven from neighbouring countries by war, has compounded the problems of the homeland of Nobel Peace Prize winner, Oscar Arias.

THE FIVE CENTRAL AMERICAN governments finally reached an

agreement (the Guatemala Accord) on 7 August 1987 in Guatemala, aimed at starting the lengthy and delicate process of re-establishing peace in the area. In this accord, the five presidents undertook to establish a National Reconciliation Commission to initiate dialogue with "disarmed opposition forces," to grant amnesty to the combatants and to guarantee democratic freedoms.

In addition, each president must prohibit the use of his own territory to irregular forces fighting another government. Foreign aid to these groups must also be ended. To ensure that their commitments were carried out, they formed an International Commission of Verification and Follow-up. Its membership comprises the foreign ministers of the five signatories, the members of the Contadora Group, the Support Group, the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Secretary-General of the Organization of American States. The eyes and ears of the Commission would be provided by those Western nations with the will and the means to defray the costs. Countries that have been mentioned so far in this regard include Sweden, Canada, Spain and the Federal Republic of Germany.

In the days following the signing of the Accord, Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs dispatched emissaries to Central America to offer his support. In Mr. Clark's view, the Canadian Forces have vast experience in monitoring and control operations in areas of conflict and could, therefore, contribute to the success of the peace process.

Early in December, Mr. Clark met the presidents of the five