

# State pulls out stops in Central America

by Cynthia Rush

When Undersecretary of State Thomas Enders spoke before the American Legion convention in Washington on Feb. 21, he dispelled any rumors that the State Department may have been considering a "softer" approach toward Central America. He told his audience that unless the United States continued to give military aid to El Salvador, "in four or five years we'll be fighting along the banks of the Panama Canal and along the Mexican border. . . . It should be made clear to the Soviet Union and Cuba and Nicaragua that the United States may take a direct action if they try to destabilize nations in the hemisphere. . . ."

Coming when it did, two weeks before Pope John Paul II is scheduled to begin his tour of Central America, and the nations of the Non-Aligned movement meet in New Delhi, Enders's remarks were an undisguised threat to those governments and political factions in Central and South America that continue to resist the State Department's policy of regional war and depopulation. The State Department hasn't limited itself to merely issuing threats, as recent events in Panama demonstrate.

On Feb. 20, the commander of Panama's National Guard, Gen. Ruben Dario Paredes, issued a public manifesto charging that U.S. Ambassador Everett "Ted" Briggs, an Enders associate, was conspiring against Paredes's personal command and the nation's institutions by holding "unauthorized meetings" with military officers. Briggs reportedly visited a National Guard post for a meeting with officers without first asking permission. The National Guard commander noted that Briggs's activities were typical of agents of foreign "intelligence services." If Briggs continued to engage in such activities, Paredes warned him that, "this command and its chief of staff will ask the government for your withdrawal from the country."

The State Department has reason to conspire against Paredes and his associates. The National Guard commander belongs to a faction of the Guard identified with former President Omar Torrijos, which has tended to resist State Department pressures and has joined instead with Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela in backing a negotiated settlement to the

El Salvadoran crisis. These nationalist elements, represented by Foreign Minister Jorge Illueca, also favor a prominent role for Panama within the Non-Aligned movement and have supported proposals for coordinated Ibero-American action to resolve the debt issue. To the degree that this faction works with similar groupings in Mexico, Venezuela, and Colombia, it provides needed backup for the Pope's efforts to stabilize the region. For this reason, it is intolerable to the State Department.

## Kirkpatrick aids destabilization

Before the Briggs incident, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick had toured Central America, including Panama, to try to undermine and disorganize this opposition. In her early February stop-off in Panama, Kirkpatrick handed the government a letter demanding that it leave the Mexico-Colombia-Venezuela alliance and join the "San José Pact" instead. The latter is the alliance of Central American "democracies" which the State Department intends to use as the basis for assembling a regional army against Nicaragua and Cuba, provided it can drag in countries like Mexico, Venezuela, and Panama to back it politically and militarily. Kirkpatrick dedicated much time during her Central American tour to this purpose, relying on allies in Venezuela and Costa Rica for help.

In Panama, Kirkpatrick held meetings with members of the political opposition, reportedly ordering them to "get organized" and decide how they wanted her to intervene into Panamanian politics. When one politician asked her to comment on flaws in the Panamanian constitution, Kirkpatrick offered to use her expertise in political science to help write a new one.

The political uproar generated inside Panama over the Paredes accusations seems not to have fazed Ted Briggs or his supervisors. Asked to answer the charges made by the National Guard commander, Briggs claimed not to have seen the document, but commented that it was customary and not at all unusual for a foreign ambassador to meet with military representatives and members of the opposition. A spokesman for Briggs charged that Paredes's manifesto had "errors and distortions," but never denied that the ambassador held the meetings.

The self-assurance with which the State Department is pursuing its activities in Panama may be explained by the fact that it expects little opposition from the White House. The Panama Canal is an issue of great ideological significance to the White House, as President Reagan emphasized in his own speech before the American Legion convention. He tends to be highly manipulable by the State Department and the architects of the Caribbean Basin Initiative grouped around David Rockefeller and the Council of the Americas, who consistently portray the nationalists as being anti-U.S. in their effort to secure the ascendancy of their friends in the opposition.