

Colombian president's emergency tour in pursuit of Central American peace

by Valerie Rush

Emergency around-the-clock consultations on Central America were set into motion this month by Colombian President Belisario Betancur in coordination with his colleagues from Venezuela, Mexico, and Panama. The unprecedented series of presidential and ministerial contacts was prompted by the deteriorating relations between Honduras and Nicaragua, and by the potential for that conflict to escalate into a new "Cuban Missiles Crisis."

During a 50-hour "marathon for peace" April 8-10, Betancur consulted with Presidents Luís Herrera Campins of Venezuela, Miguel de la Madrid of Mexico, Ricardo de la Espriella of Panama, and Luis Alberto Monge of Costa Rica. The Colombian president also sent a representative to meet with the presidents of Nicaragua and Cuba, receiving endorsements of his peace efforts from those countries.

Betancur has also held out a hand to the United States, urging it to join with its southern neighbors in seeking a nonmilitary solution to the crisis in Central America. At the beginning of his emergency tour, Betancur sent a letter to Ronald Reagan inviting the U.S. President to share in the task of "disarming the sowers of extermination and death, while taking up the tools to reconstruct this suffering zone."

During a press conference held in Caracas on the first leg of his tour, Betancur angrily responded to reporters who attempted to maneuver him into a denunciation of U.S. policy. He stated that he would not be pushed into attacking the United States, and the Colombian foreign ministry issued a statement emphasizing that "the possibility of bringing the U.S. into the talks has not been rejected."

Goals for keeping the peace

The presidential talks initiated by Betancur centered around three fundamental efforts:

1) to create the framework for immediate *bilateral* talks between the governments of Nicaragua and Honduras, under the sponsorship of the four "Contadora" nations of Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama. (The first emergency meeting of those four countries was held on the Panamanian island of Contadora last January.) The Contadora proposal for bilateral contact is intended to counter a U.S.-Honduran proposal currently before the Organization of American States (OAS) for a Central America-wide forum, a proposal which would accomplish little more than a free-for-all of charges and counter-charges;

2) to demand an end to superpower arms supplies to the region, along with withdrawal of all foreign advisers. The Contadora presidents have all been emphatic that the solution to the crisis in Central America lies in regionally mediated negotiations outside the artificial straitjacket of "East-West confrontation";

3) to establish the basis for talks between the Salvadoran government and rebel forces in that country leading to a cease-fire and ultimate end to the warfare.

Following the presidential summits, the Contadora foreign ministers gathered in Panama April 11 for a reported 14-hour session, in which details of the next steps in the initiative were worked out. At this writing, the four ministers are touring the five countries of Central America to put the negotiation process in motion. The OAS has postponed all debate on the U.S.-Honduran proposal pending the outcome of the Contadora effort, noting that it is up to the Contadora countries to "determine the best approach for achieving peace in the region."

Kissinger, Israel push for war

The Contadora approach of coordinating "regional solutions to regional problems" holds great promise of not only cooling out the threat of war in Central America, but also setting the precedent for a similarly unified approach to the other great crisis afflicting the continent, the unpayable debt burden. In statements throughout his trip, Betancur noted that themes of economic cooperation for the continent had figured prominently in his talks. De la Madrid made a striking reference to the need to extend barter arrangements in the continent, given the lack of foreign exchange for normal trade arrangements (see quotes below).

It is precisely the threat of such coordinated action which has operatives such as Henry Kissinger (through his joint direction of the State Department with George Shultz) and Ariel Sharon pulling out all the stops to sabotage the Contadora peace efforts and set up a "Cuban Missiles Crisis" scenario instead. This conforms to the program sent to the White House by the so-called "Linowitz III" commission on U.S.-Latin American relations last fall. The commission, established by David Rockefeller and Cyrus Vance, told the White House that the Central American troublespot should be handled on the basis of direct negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union, on the model of how the 1962

Mexico and Colombia: 'A new stage in relations'

Below are statements made during President Betancur's diplomatic trip.

Colombian President Belisario Betancur, upon arriving at Cozumel, Mexico, April 9: "Just as Mexico, Colombia looks upon the crisis in the Central American isthmus with deep concern. [It is] a crisis whose roots must not be sought in the game of East-West confrontation, but in the excruciating reality of these peoples, who stand up to cancel their past, and glimpse a future of social change, economic progress, and national consolidation."

Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid, after meeting with Betancur at Cozumel: "The critical circumstances which the Latin American countries are passing through tell us to strengthen our communication and seek new perspectives in our relations. We can, upon practical and possible bases, seek programs of economic complementation and integration, accelerate technological collaboration, and seek formulas which save foreign exchange in our trade. We can coordinate our positions in international matters, both of a political nature and an economic one."

Excerpts from the communiqué issued by **Betancur and de la Madrid** from Cozumel: "The two heads of state examined the situation of Latin America, indicating the usefulness which broadening and intensifying the relations among peoples and Latin American governments represents for the region. The two presidents declared . . . that it is indispensable to take advantage of the economic situation of the zone, to start up specific programs of cooperation which permit the Latin American countries to mitigate the negative effects of the international crisis in the economic area, and establish a new stage in their cooperative relations for development."

Betancur's statement to the Caribbean island-nations as he stopped at the Colombian island of San Andres, April 9: "With the peoples of the Caribbean, we are involved in the arduous task of affirming our identity and defending our rights on the international level; with the peoples of the Caribbean, we are in a war against underdevelopment, which is the true enemy."

missile crisis was resolved.

It was the British press which characteristically set the terms of the new outcry. The *Daily Telegraph* charged in an April 11 editorial that Nicaragua was committed to undermining El Salvador. "If they succeed in this, the Soviets will then be in a position to install submarine, naval and rocket bases in the Gulf of Mexico and on the Pacific. This would entail major changes in the deployment of the United States' air, naval and land forces, to defend its own soft underbelly."

A day later the *New York Times* news service "leaked" purported U.S. Defense Department plans to set up a military base in Honduras, prompting Nicaraguan Defense chief Humberto Ortega to threaten retaliation against Honduran armed forces in the event of Honduran incursions into Nicaragua.

It fell to the *Washington Post* to highlight "rumors" that the Soviet Union was planning to place missiles on Nicaraguan territory to counter U.S. emplacement of Pershing missiles in Europe. It reported that Nicaraguan Defense Minister Humberto Ortega had shown himself open to the idea. Indicating that a big campaign is on the way, a source at Kissinger's Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University commented that he couldn't understand "why there hasn't been a larger outcry on this yet."

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Interamerican Affairs Thomas Enders told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 12 that the Soviet Union and Cuba had been warned that "a serious situation" would develop if they increased military aid to Nicaragua. He specifically referred to the possibility of Nicaragua's accepting a squadron of Soviet MiGs. He chose a "red line" which is one of the likeliest next developments if the Contadora effort fails: Nicaragua has virtually no air force. In any conflict with Honduras, Honduras's U.S.-and Israeli-supplied airforce would devastate Nicaraguan population centers.

The pervasive Israeli role in the conflict was further highlighted with London press revelations that "a secret U.S. document" has turned up which details plans for an Israeli-advised "development program" along Costa Rica's border with Nicaragua, which would be modeled on Israel's provocative "West Bank settlements" fortification scheme. Powerful forces inside the Costa Rican government led by Foreign Minister Fernando Volio, and at the service of Ariel Sharon's gun-running interests, are backing the formation of an insurgent "southern front" against Nicaragua from Costa Rican territory. Volio has been leading the opposition to pro-dialogue forces in the Costa Rican government anxious to work with the Contadora group.

The success of the Betancur initiative in establishing a credible regional framework for addressing urgent questions of common concern could dramatically alter relations in the Americas in favor of social and economic progress. It is the best chance yet for Mr. Reagan to fight free of the Watergate atmosphere swelling on the Potomac around his Central American policy.