

Military backing for Contadora proposed

by Mark Sonnenblick

General Manuel Noriega, chief of the Defense Forces of Panama, has made a striking proposal to bolster the moribund Contadora peace process by bringing military leaders of the region into talks to attain peace in Central America. When, on May 20, he formally unveiled an idea he had been privately discussing for two years, prospects seemed bleak for the Contadora Peace Accords to be signed by the June 6 deadline set by the 13 Central and South American nations involved.

Noriega considers the armed forces to be bulwarks in the protection of national sovereignty. For example, a few months ago, he set up a bilateral military agreement with Colombia for joint actions in fighting the drug traffickers who infest the region.

As Noriega spoke, Soviet First Latin American Department chief Vladimir Kazimirov was having a friendly disagreement in Moscow with Assistant U.S. Secretary of State Elliot Abrams. While the Soviets and most of official Washington are noisily arming opposing warring surrogates in Nicaragua, they have been working together to sabotage Ibero-America's efforts for a regional solution to the Central American problem.

General Noriega said that if the Contadora Group were to make use of advice from the military, "It would get out of its stagnation. . . . We could go on for another 10 years making Contadora into a tribunal of juridical concepts without any results at all, while some countries like Costa Rica, Panama, and Honduras are faced with the effects of the [refugee] migration bomb, which grows larger every day."

Speaking with customary directness, he explained, "Violence is not diplomatic, not strictly political, not strictly ideological; violence is armed, and if it is armed, it should have solutions from experts in war matters." While on a one-day visit to San Jose, Costa Rica May 20, Noriega told the press, "For that reason, we spoke of reinforcing Contadora with a military advisory group which would not reduce the importance of Contadora's diplomatic and political leaders, but would reinforce their actions."

Noriega directed fire at those who see the "death" of Contadora. He stressed that Contadora is the only solution to the region's crisis, since "after Contadora would come chaos; and there is no other table at which to sit down and talk." Among the targets of his criticism was Guatemalan President Vinicio Cerezo, a Christian Democrat, who proclaimed on

May 18, "The dialogue between the Central American countries by means of Contadora has failed." He said Contadora should be replaced by a Central American Parliament so that "the problems could be discussed among their own protagonists."

Within 24 hours of Cerezo's pronouncement, Panamanian President Eric Delvalle told Guatemala that he would not attend the May 24-25 summit meeting Cerezo had called of Central American Presidents, including that of Nicaragua, to set up that parliament—since this would now seem to imply a withdrawal of support for Contadora. The Guatemalan vice-president responded to Delvalle's cancellation by reiterating that peace "could only be achieved by the Central Americans."

The Presidents of El Salvador and Costa Rica promptly disclaimed that their attendance at the Guatemala summit meant a withdrawal of support for Contadora. El Salvador's Napoleon Duarte said in Brazil, "Contadora cannot die in case Nicaragua does not sign the peace accords."

A military component to Contadora is compatible with Peruvian President Alan García's recent efforts to set up an economic fund to rebuild the region's productive sectors, wounded by austerity imposed by the International Monetary Fund as well as by warfare. García has called Contadora "a stepping stone" to joint regional action on the debt problem.

Deployed against Noriega's and García's efforts for peace are those planning a Central American Vietnam. A 12-page Defense Department report, "Prospects for Containment of Nicaragua's Communist Government," assumes: "1) The Nicaraguan government would sign a Contadora agreement [and] 2) The Nicaraguans would circumvent and violate the agreement. . . ." An unstated assumption is that International Monetary Fund austerity policies would continue to undermine democratic governments in the area. The report concludes that it would take 100,000 U.S. Army troops, plus major Navy and Air Force commitments, to stop Nicaragua three years hence.

The report, by Assistant Secretary of Defense Fred Iklé, stinks of Henry Kissinger's proposal to draw U.S. troops out of Europe to stick them into Central America.

Along similar lines, a *Washington Post* op-ed by Jeane Kirkpatrick May 19 argues that since the Sandinistas are "swindlers," the United States should not "acquiesce to an agreement which will not be fulfilled." Citing Thomas Hobbes, the proponent of the "law of the jungle," she concludes, "covenants without swords" are not to be relied on.

Certainly, the Nicaraguans cannot be trusted. The Sandinistas—like the contras—are more committed to narco-terrorism than to ideology. Denying them maneuvering room is the challenge that confronts those who refuse to accept the endemic war in Central America spreading to the whole continent. Peru and Panama have accepted that challenge, and are seeking real solutions. The United States and the Soviet Union have not.