

Latin Hotspot

Honduras Is Becoming A New Battleground For Central America

Its Strategic Position Lures Both U.S. and Nicaragua, Terrorism Is on the Rise We Are All Getting Scared

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TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras—Just a year ago, all was serene here in this lovely capital, where buses jump the curb to take hairpin turns around narrow, cobblestone streets. Hardly a soldier was in sight, about the loudest noise breaking the sleepy mountain air was a car backfiring, and people thronged downtown at night.

Today, the tension is razor-sharp. Police uncover a new terrorist hideout just about every week, soldiers swarm the city and cause mammoth traffic jams with roadside checkpoints, telephones used by anyone with sensitive information are tapped, and downtown is deserted after dark.

The sudden changes here illustrate how Honduras is fast turning into the new battleground for a regional war in Central America. It had been mostly spared the political violence ripping through the area—a leftist revolution in Nicaragua and the continuing battles against leftist rebels in El Salvador and Guatemala. Political experts figured that Honduras didn't have the same problems as its neighbors because it doesn't have the same lopsided distribution of wealth or history of repression.

Crucial Geography

It does have strategic position, however. Sandwiched among countries in turmoil, Honduras is being used more and more by the major players, the U.S. and Nicaragua. As a result, terrorism now afflicts its cities, and battles with leftists rage along two frontiers. The latest incident ended last Saturday, when leftist guerrillas, who had captured more than 100 officials and businessmen and held some of them hostage for eight days in San Pedro Sula, flew out of the country after dropping their demands for the release of 60 prisoners, among other things. And as tension mounts, many here fear that the U.S. and Cuban-backed Nicaragua are sucking Honduras into a deadly showdown from which it can only emerge a loser.

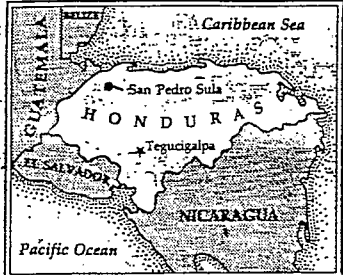
anon of Central America, a battlefield where the superpowers can fight out their battles by proxy," says Carlos Roberto Reina, a politically moderate attorney, "but our army isn't strong enough to fight the Nicaraguans, and I wonder how willing the U.S. public would be to send in the Marines. Mr. Reina is alarmed because the posturing between the U.S. and Nicaragua has taken on explosive proportions. Worried by the greatly expanded Nicaraguan army, the U.S. is asking Congress for millions of dollars to lengthen landing strips in Honduras for larger aircraft, and it is beefing up its presence here. At the same time, it is doing little to quash rumors of an impending CIA-backed invasion of Nicaragua, which the U.S. says is aiding Salvadoran rebels and is trying to infect the entire region with the Marxist virus.

In response, Nicaragua is using the U.S. presence and alleged threats of war to build up its army even more, and to make frequent forays over the Honduran border to distract attention from its own growing political and economic problems. This brinkmanship, as many see it, can lead only to war.

Heavy Toll Seen

Besides the tragic human toll of such a confrontation, there clearly would be economic and political casualties as well. Honduras is the second-poorest nation in this hemisphere, after Haiti, and its economy can ill afford the effects of increased uncertainty, let alone the increased expenses of bankrolling a war. Just as worrisome is the effect of heightened militarization on the fledgling democratic government that took over last January after a decade of military rule.

To be sure, some people here, including the military, think a war is necessary be-



cause, they say, Honduras and the rest of Central America will never have peace with the Sandinists' Marxist government in nearby Nicaragua. But military experts here think that certain ranking officers also are eager for battle because it would greatly strengthen the army's hand. The civilian government already is being hampered in its efforts to find a political solution by the army's race to fortify borders.

"The higher up you go in this army, the more conservative you get," says a former army officer who is still very close to the military. "And the guys at the top want a war with U.S. help, because they aren't ready to go back to the barracks yet."

Like some other countries in this region, Honduras has a history of on-again, off-again military rule. In the 161 years since it became independent from Spain, Honduras has had 355 armed rebellions, 126 governments and 16 constitutions. But unlike its neighbors, this desolately beautiful country never cultivated the greedy, land-grabbing

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oligarchy nor the accompanying right-wing para-military goon squads that seem indigenous to the region. There are wealthy landowners here, of course, but this Ohio-sized nation of 3.7 million people is so wild and underpopulated that just about everyone has remained poor.

Therefore, there wasn't the same violent backlash by landowners here as in El Salvador when redistribution of mostly fallow lands was started back in 1973. Although only about 43,000 of the expected 150,000 families received land before the program fizzled out, "it's one of the things that has kept violence away from Honduras by lowering their pressure cooker," says Manuel Acosta Bonilla, a former treasury and economy minister. The other factor, he says, is the development of trade unions, which are among the strongest in the region.

So, Honduras seemed blessed, in a backward sort of way, when the lid started to blow in Central America, first with the 1979 Sandinist revolution in Nicaragua, then with escalating guerrilla wars in El Salvador and Guatemala. John Negroponte, the U.S. ambassador here, says the generals then in power looked the other way as guerrillas used Honduras to transport guns and supplies to El Salvador from Nicaragua across borders that he calls "sieve-like" (the Sandinists have repeatedly denied aiding the Salvadoran rebels). Mr. Negroponte says there was a "tacit understanding" by the Honduran government that all would remain peaceful here in exchange for unmolested passage by the guerrillas.

All that changed, however, when President Roberto Suazo Cordova was installed last January to replace the military government. The Honduran army started cracking down along the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran borders, presumably at U.S. insistence, and also helped the Salvadoran army in a sweep against rebels in the northeastern sector of that country. Soon after, rebels blew out part of a power station that left much of Tegucigalpa without electricity for 48 hours, and police started finding rebel "safe houses" full of guns, ammunition and leftist literature.

A Western diplomat here says the rise in urban terrorism is clearly a response to the Honduran army's new tough-guy approach. He says the guerrillas who used to have frequent transit through Honduras now are retaliating for the curtailment of their movements. The literature found in the safe houses indicates that the terrorists are "imported, not locally grown," the diplomat says. "These guys are trying to start a shooting war inside Honduras to destabilize it. They are well organized, sophisticated and dangerous as hell."

Fearful Populace

Whatever their aim, the terrorists have rattled people here. A mother of five who lives in San Pedro Sula shakes her head with relief that her daughter just left to study at a university in Florida. A young manager of a plastics plant in the north says he has just come back from Panama, where he made a "big" withdrawal from his dollar account. "It's all in here," he says, hugging a light-brown attache case. "Two tickets to New Orleans for my wife and son. And money—just in case. I guess we are all getting a little scared."

It's even worse down by the Nicaraguan border. In Palo Verde, a tiny mountain hamlet of thatched mud huts and hungry-looking dogs, the sounds of trucks rumbling through Santo Tomas on the Nicaraguan side wait back over. Mercedes Madira says she woke up a few Saturdays ago to the crash of shells coming over from the Nicaraguan side at about 6 a.m. A bit later, she says, about 30 Nicaraguan soldiers charged into the village and kidnapped a resident.

"This happens all the time," she says in a toothless spray of Spanish. "We can't work, we can't eat and we can't live like this because we're scared. Something has to be

Entering Perceptions

Both sides in the conflict are reacting to sharply differing perceptions. Honduras and the U.S. see a Nicaragua with about 28,000 full-time soldiers and up to 80,000 reserve militia, compared with Honduras's 17,000-man force. Nicaragua will spend about \$125 million on defense this year, against Honduras's 1982 defense budget of \$45 million. Nicaragua also has an estimated 2,000 Cuban and East European military advisers. And, according to Honduras and the U.S., it is hellbent on exporting its own brand of Marxism to the rest of Central America.

The Sandinists, on the other hand, see an ever-growing and ominous U.S. presence here. U.S. military assistance to Honduras doubled this year to \$20.6 million, and the Reagan administration has asked Congress for \$21 million for the expanded landing strips. The embassy here now has about 120 employees, inordinately large for a country this size. (An embassy insider says the departments that have increased the most are the Agency for International Development and the Central Intelligence Agency.) The 40 U.S. military "trainers," as the embassy calls them, are supplemented regularly with extras, and earlier this year, their numbers reached 96—far more than in El Salvador.

But what really agitates the Sandinists is the rumor of an impending invasion. It has been reported that President Reagan approved \$19 million for a covert CIA operation to train an anti-Sandinist group to invade Nicaragua, although Carlos Flores Fausse, the minister to the Honduran president, denies that any counterrevolutionaries are at work inside Honduras. But well-placed Honduran and U.S. sources here keep whispering about a November or December invasion, and Ambassador Negroponte refuses point-blank to confirm or deny that the U.S. is financing anti-Sandinists in Honduras.

Border Raids Likely

But the former army officer says the 2,500 or so counterrevolutionaries said to be in Honduras are too few to invade Nicaragua. What they can do, he says, is to harass the Sandinists with border raids, as a group did recently in Choluteca Province. They claimed that 35 people were killed or wounded in the Nicaraguan town of San Francisco del Norte.

He says high-ranking Honduran army officers have told him that the plan is to keep Nicaragua feeling so threatened that it comes down even harder on the growing internal opposition. In the most recent outburst there, at least three people were killed in a demonstration in the town of Masaya. The more repressive the Sandinists became,

the greater the opposition, the former officer says. First you destabilize the Nicaraguans, then you get them to come charging over the border to divert attention from internal problems; and then you ask for U.S. troops to help, he says. Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, the head of the Honduran armed forces, has said he welcomes U.S. intervention if there isn't any other way to defend his country.

While the U.S. embassy here declines to comment on the plan, Tomas Borge Martinez, Nicaragua's interior minister, recently said "a real state of war exists along the Honduran border. And Benjamin Villanueva, an economist here, believes that the military is trying to prepare Honduras psychologically for a war that he says the Nicaraguans are trying to provoke. He says it's just like 1969, when Honduras fought El Salvador over a soccer game. "I hear the same sort of patriotic stuff from the radio about we have to defend our freedom and liberty," he adds.

But Mr. Acosta Bonilla, the former minister, still sees options other than war. "Let's assume the Sandinists are using the alleged presence of counterrevolutionaries to build up their army," he says. "Then why not go looking for them back there? If they are here, and get rid of Nicaragua, excuse for belligerence? Then we could see if they are sincere about trying to improve relations."

Peace Plan Offered

The Honduran government apparently tried that last March, when Foreign Minister Edgardo Paz Barrios introduced a six-point peace plan at the Organization of American States meeting in Washington. The plan called for regional disarmament and joint border patrols among border things. Mr. Paz Barrios says that he got "good response" from other South American countries but that Nicaragua said it wanted a bilateral, not international, accord. The Nicaraguan ambassador here, Guillermo Suarez Rivas, stresses, however, that his country wants to improve relations. "So far, nothing has come of the initiative."

A leading newspaper editor here says the government didn't push very hard for the peace initiative because it is afraid to annoy the army. "Considering that Gen. Alvarez has already gone to war against Nicaragua," he says, with a wry smile. He thinks that the U.S. has a two-fisted, seemingly contradictory policy of pushing for democratic elections while shoring up the military—the result, he adds, of an incoherent foreign policy for the region. And this emphasis on the military, he believes, is hampering the transition to democratic rule in Honduras. "I think this civilian government doesn't want war, but I think it's powerless to do anything because the army and U.S. are pushing us into it," he says.

All this uncertainty is helping to squeeze the last gasps out of an already ailing Honduran economy. Hit with lower prices for its main agricultural exports, a practically non-stop flight of capital out of the country and an almost-total cutoff in foreign credit, the gross domestic product will probably decline this year. Bankruptcies are rising, about 15% of the population is out of work, and Mr. Villanueva, the economist, sees little hope of attracting desperately needed foreign capital with the threat of war hanging over Honduras. "We can hardly survive in peace," he says, "but a war would be the end of us."