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Honduras: The Price of Choosing Sides

By GEORGE MELLOAN

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras — For months now, Tass, Radio Venceremos, Radio Havana and the other propaganda organs of the international left have been shouting that the CIA and the Honduran army are assembling their combined might for an assault on hapless Nicaragua, which shares a 500-mile border with Honduras. Newsweek not long ago responded to the alarms with the obligatory cover story evoking dark memories of Vietnam. And Congress responded to Newsweek by finding time amid lame-duck chaos to pass a resolution forbidding the CIA from doing anything in Nicaragua that might further trouble the Communists who have that country in their grip.

The evidence that anything of significance was being done in the first place is, to put it mildly, unimpressive. Nicaraguan guerrillas are indeed operating from hiding places in the wild border region against Nicaragua's Marxist-Leninist Sandinista regime. They may have received some CIA aid, as the Sandinistas insist, or they may not have. Whichever way it is, both sides agree that the anti-Sandinista guerrillas operate in units of only 200 to 400 men, equipped only with small arms and maybe a few mortars. No one has a good count but they may number as many as 2,000 in all.

Not the Best Army

As to the Honduran army, it is one of the world's least prepossessing military forces, even when you consider its 100 or so U.S. advisers and the dribble of U.S. military aid it gets. It has about half as many regulars as the Sandinistas and is at an even greater disadvantage when you consider the large, relatively well-armed Sandinista militia and reserve force. It is short on transport and has no armor to go up against the Sandinistas' 25 Soviet T-54 and T-55 tanks. On a good day it can put 19 combat airplanes up, a slight numerical edge, but its lightly armed A-37s and ancient Super Mysteres probably would be no match for the Sandinistas' Soviet anti-aircraft missiles.

"We don't have the military resources, let alone the economic resources, to invade Nicaragua," says Roberto Suazo Cordova, a medical doctor whose fate it was to be elected president of Honduras at this troubled time. His testimony is persuasive. Aside from its weak army, Honduras is, like most other Latin American countries, nearly broke.

Falling demand and prices have cut its foreign exchange earnings on bananas, sugar and coffee. Its big state-owned "autonomous" enterprises have, collectively, ricked up a large foreign debt which it is trying to renegotiate. All the war talk, combined with the fact that Honduras this year came under attack from Marxist ter-

rorists, has discouraged both foreign and domestic investment. The latest terrorist assault, which occurred just a day before two other Journal editors and I spoke with Dr. Suazo, was nothing less than the kidnapping in Guatemala City of the president's 33-year-old daughter, Xiomara, who is herself a doctor.

Miss Suazo's kidnapers, the Revolutionary Movement of the People, released her last week after 14 Latin American newspapers published the group's "manifesto" denouncing U.S. intervention in the region. The episode was testimony to Marxist contempt for Honduran military might.

What then, is all the excitement about? The answer is simple enough and should be starting to become familiar to anyone who has watched the Soviet-Cuban penetration

ugees. The propaganda campaign invoking the dreaded name of the CIA most likely has two purposes.

It is designed to intimidate the Hondurans and may indeed be having some success at that; Honduran Foreign Minister Edgardo Paz Barrios recently went to Managua and promised to try to exercise better control over the use of Honduran territory by the anti-Sandinista "contras." The propaganda drive is also no doubt designed to justify a continued arms buildup in Nicaragua on the ground that the Sandinista revolution is threatened from without. Sandinista pilots are already undergoing training in Bulgaria to fly Soviet MiGs, and airport runways at Puerto Cabezas on the northeast coast are being lengthened to accommodate high-performance aircraft.

When the Sandinistas actually introduce

U.S. press since it moved to center stage in the conflict. "When we have an opportunity to speak to journalists they ask us three things: If we are going to war, what is the U.S. financing here and whether the head of the armed forces or the president is the power in this country." He cites a 45-minute NBC report that focused on those questions. "We gave a one-and-a-half hour interview; when we saw the report we were allotted 10 seconds and the remaining 44 minutes and 50 seconds were given to negative aspects."

Familiar Complaints

Such complaints are of course familiar to the press and it is rare that countries subject to this kind of press attention are entirely happy with the results. On the other hand, Dr. Suazo has a point when he describes Honduras as more of a victim than an aggressor.

For example, Honduras is being forced to try to care for, with U.N. help, some 40,000 pitiful refugees from Salvador and Nicaragua. And anyone reading President Suazo's mail would get the impression that world public opinion is all on the side of the terrorists rather than the government. "When Honduras captures a subversive, I get a big number of telegrams in my office with complaints," he says. "When Honduras should be the one getting moral support, we are being attacked."

The president's complaints raise some serious questions. He is not the first to question the objectivity of the press in the Central American conflict and the effect on U.S. opinion of innumerable articles and TV reports portraying Central American leaders as militaristic reactionaries resisting reform. Quite clearly, Central America's political institutions have not kept pace with economic development and the emergence of an urban middle class. But just as clearly, the Marxist-Leninists do not have the answers to that need, as the experience in Nicaragua is demonstrating daily.

The most serious danger is that the ill-formed American understanding of what is taking place in Central America, together with the susceptibility of U.S. opinion to Marxist-Leninist propaganda, will embolden the Soviet Union, Cuba and the Sandinistas to continue expanding their military power and their political activities, to the point where American apathy will suddenly be transformed to fright.

If President Suazo is concerned about that, he perhaps has a right to be. He is ready to see, from the experience of losing a daughter kidnapped, what it's like to be caught in the middle of the Soviet-American power struggle.

As a result of invoking itself on the side of the United States, Honduras is now feeling the full force of a Marxist propaganda and terrorism campaign.

of Central America, Honduras, which managed to stay largely on the fringe of the Central American struggles up until this year, now has involved itself on the U.S. side—partly out of fear of the Sandinista military buildup. As a result it is feeling the full force of a Marxist propaganda and terrorism campaign.

Tegucigalpa was blacked out last July when its electric power sources were bombed. In September an entire chamber of commerce meeting in San Pedro Sula was held hostage eight days by terrorists seeking release of a Salvadoran guerrilla leader; when finally convinced that the man had already been turned over to the Salvadoran army, the terrorists demanded and received safe conduct to Cuba.

Honduras earned this attention mainly by deciding to protect its sovereignty. For some three years at least, its rugged and lightly guarded borders have been violated routinely by Marxist arms and supply shipments from Nicaragua to the El Salvadoran guerrillas. The guerrillas have also used Honduran territory as a refuge from the Salvadoran army. This year, Honduras began to interdict some of the arms shipments, forcing the Sandinistas and Cubans to rely more on airlifts to El Salvador with their Soviet helicopters and other aircraft. The Honduran army also began to cooperate more closely with the Salvadoran army (which it fought in the "soccer war" in 1969) to deny the guerrillas sanctuary.

The Sandinistas regarded these territorial protections as unfriendly acts, denouncing Honduras much as they have threatened Costa Rica, a practically defenseless little country on their other border, for harboring Nicaraguan political ref-

these aircraft to the region, they will want to have the ground well prepared so that their friends and supporters in the U.S. can describe this as merely a defensive measure that need not concern the U.S.

There is a further and not insignificant benefit from the big noise being made about an external threat. It is a way of justifying the repressive measures the Sandinistas have been taking against their opponents inside Nicaragua—the Catholic Church, business groups, the newspaper La Prensa, the Indian population and some human rights organizations.

The fascinating and dispiriting thing about this game is the extent to which the Reagan administration, with a massive superiority over the Marxists in money and military power—and even in public opinion in Central America itself—is operating from a position of weakness.

It was only necessary to look at a map two years ago to see that Honduras would be a strategic key to stopping the Marxist penetration and that the effort would not have to be a very large one, consisting largely of cutting off support for the Salvadoran Marxist guerrillas. But as a recent story by the Journal's Lynda Schuster indicated, Hondurans have become very nervous about their involvement in this struggle, even though there is very little sympathy to be found here or anywhere else in Central America for the Sandinistas. If you try to analyze this nervousness here you come to one inescapable conclusion: Aside from the natural fear of terrorism and war, the Hondurans lack confidence in the U.S.

Dr. Suazo is almost bitter about the treatment his country has received in the

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