

## **IN CENTRAL AMERICA: A CHANCE FOR THE U.S. TO REGAIN CONTROL OVER POLICY**

**The Central American leaders' plan to demobilize approximately 12,000 Nicaraguan freedom fighters (Contras) based in Honduras is a serious setback for United States security concerns in Central America. This decision, made in Tela, Honduras on August 7 by Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, could eliminate the Contras as a viable anti-communist fighting force, thereby removing what has proved to be the best obstacle to the Sandinistas' expansionist and revolutionary goals.**

**The Tela agreement is seriously flawed. Despite attempts by Salvadoran President Alfredo Christiani to get an agreement to disarm and demobilize the Marxist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), which is trying to topple his democratically elected government, the Central American leaders did not require that the FMLN be disbanded. They agreed only that the FMLN and the Salvadoran government engage in peace negotiations and initiate a cease-fire. The consequence is that communist terrorism against the democratic government of El Salvador likely will continue unchecked.**

**The Tela agreement also rewards the Sandinistas without first knowing if they are going to allow free and fair elections on February 25, 1990, as promised at the Tesoro Beach accord in El Salvador last February. This week's agreement, in fact, removes all incentives for the Sandinistas to democratize Nicaragua. With the Contras disbanded, Daniel Ortega will face no penalties stronger than mild complaints from his Central American neighbors and rhetorical denunciations from Washington if he fails to allow democratic elections.**

**Undercutting the Contras.** The task now at hand for the Bush Administration and its new Latin American team under Assistant Secretary of State Bernard Aronson is to regain control of U.S. policy in Central America. The White House lost control of U.S. Central America policy in August 1987 when Ronald Reagan was persuaded to work with then-Speaker of the House Jim Wright to develop a multilateral negotiated solution to the Nicaragua problem. Ever since, Washington's Nicaragua policy has been made in San Jose, Tegucigalpa, and the other Central American capitals and undercut support for the Contras. As many in Washington predicted, the Wright-Reagan policy, and that which followed, consolidated communism in Nicaragua and laid the groundwork for more terrorism and destabilization in El Salvador.

While the Sandinistas have been promising wide-ranging reforms to bring peace and democracy to Central America, they have done little to fulfill the promises. In the 1987 Arias Plan, for example, Ortega promised to end support for regional rebel groups, grant full amnesty and protection for the Contra forces, and allow for a free and open press. He has kept none of these promises. In a meeting of Central American leaders in El Salvador last February, the Sandinistas agreed to move their national election date up by one year and to initiate a wide range of political and social reforms in preparation for the election. However, according to representative from the Sandinistas' democratic opponents, the National Opposition Union (UNO), reforms have been merely cosmetic and will guarantee a Sandinista victory. These series of broken promises provide little assurance that the agreement signed by Ortega in Tela will not be broken as well.

**Anti-U.S. Axis.** The consequence of broken Sandinista promises has been not only a defeat for the cause of democracy in Nicaragua, but a tremendous setback for U.S. security in the region. There is now an emerging anti-U.S. axis developing between Cuba, Nicaragua, and the military dictatorship of General Manuel Antonio Noriega in Panama. This bloc increasingly threatens U.S. security interests in the Western Hemisphere by supporting communist revolutionary activity, terrorism, and narcotics trafficking. They threaten the security of the Panama Canal, the consolidation of democratic regimes in the region, and a stable Mexico on the southern border of the U.S.

Nicaragua poses a serious threat to the stability of Central America. The Sandinistas aid the FMLN militarily and host the FMLN's headquarters outside of Managua. Since the Tela agreement does not require that the FMLN be disbanded, as the Contras will be, it will do nothing to promote peace, stability, and democracy in El Salvador.

To regain control of U.S. policy in Central America, George Bush needs first to declare that the U.S. will continue to sustain the Contras as long as U.S. security interests are threatened by the Sandinistas and a communist dictatorship remains in place in Managua. Specifically, he should demand that the \$49 million of humanitarian aid that Congress agreed to provide last March be continued until the Sandinistas have lived up to previous agreements and hold free and fair elections next February.

In addition, the U.S. should:

- ◆ ◆ Pledge that U.S. aid to Honduras will be curtailed if Honduras blocks U.S. aid to the Contras or expels them from its territory.

- ◆ ◆ Insist that any United Nations role in disarming or demobilizing the Contras be accompanied by an equal U.N. effort to disarm and demobilize the FMLN.

- ◆ ◆ State that the Sandinistas' support for the FMLN, Honduran terrorist groups, Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega, drug cartels, and other forces hostile to the U.S. is a threat to U.S. vital interests. This statement should be a first step in redirecting U.S. policy away from an almost exclusive preoccupation with the issue of democracy in Nicaragua to a policy that places equal emphasis on the danger to U.S. security of a destabilized Central America. As such, the U.S. should consider Nicaraguan attempts to subvert its neighbors and aid communist insurgencies as a direct threat to U.S. security interests in the region, requiring, if severe enough, unilateral U.S. action.

- ◆ ◆ Call on Moscow, as proof of Mikhail Gorbachev's "new thinking" in foreign policy, to cut off its military aid to the Sandinistas and to press Ortega to stop trying to undermine Nicaragua's neighbors.

Michael G. Wilson  
Policy Analyst