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WHAT CENTRAL AMERICANS ARE SAYING ABOUT CENTRAL AMERICA

"If the Salvadoran guerrillas had popular support, they would already have won by now."

Msgr. Arturo Rivas y Damas
Archbishop of San Salvador

Many North Americans have commented on and written about Central America. Many of our important strategic and economic interests are bound up in the area. Beyond this, most Americans profess a sincere desire to see peace and democracy come at last to the people of the region.

But in the course of this debate, the voices of Central Americans themselves have sometimes been drowned out by the din of competing views continuously aired in the U.S.

THE SOVIET ROLE

President Roberto Suazo Cordova of Honduras recently described Central America as a region of economic inequality with a history of violent solutions to political and social problems.¹ This legacy of inequality is being exploited by dedicated Marxist-Leninists aided by outside powers, namely Cuba and the Soviet Union.

The Soviets, while able to find willing accomplices, are feared and mistrusted by most Central Americans. Besides the traditional wariness of interference in this hemisphere by extra-hemispheric powers, there is also alarm over the element of Communism.

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Carlos Rangel, a respected intellectual from Venezuela (one of the Contadora countries trying to mediate the Central American conflicts) had this to say about the nature of Communism:

"The Communist Empire will remain aggressive as long as a non-Communist country exists. Communist government is not interested in coexistence. It needs to expand. It needs to annihilate those enemies it creates on its borders as soon as it gains power."²

Former Costa Rican Foreign Minister Fernando do Volio commented in July 1983 on the Soviet presence:

"I am extremely puzzled about the great international commotion over U.S. fleet maneuvers in Central American waters, since nothing is being said by the same international community about these 14 [Soviet] ships and other ships that have arrived in Nicaragua over many years - 4 years - with war materiel. This has altered the military balance and created an international communist threat to the entire region"³

SUPPORT FOR OTHER TERRORIST MOVEMENTS

If Soviet and Cuban machinations were confined to Nicaragua, the problem would be serious enough. Unfortunately, the Sandinista leadership has, in a number of public statements, indicated its intention to export its revolution. These statements are too often ignored.

Eduardo Ulibarri, editor in chief of La Nacion, Costa Rica's largest daily, commenting on the work of the Contadora Group, said that even its members (Colombia, Venezuela, Panama and Mexico):

"have been very reluctant to come to grips with two important factors in this regional ideological struggle: the nature of the Nicaraguan regime and the Soviet-Cuban intervention in the area -- either through military and civilian advisers in Nicaragua or through the organizing, supplying and controlling of local surrogates devoted to Marxist-Leninist control."⁴

Journalist Michael Kramer quoted two Sandinistas in a New York Magazine article:

"Those who dismiss the Sandinistas' extraterritorial revolution rhetoric are deluding themselves. When Comandante Bayardo Arce says 'We will never give up supporting our brothers in El Salvador,' he means it. And Sandinista defense minister Humberto Ortega is equally serious when he says: 'Of course we are not ashamed to be helping El Salvador. We would like to help all revolutions.' In practice, such words have translated into supplying the Salvadoran guerrillas with whatever they need. (And the guerrilla high command operates from a headquarters in Managua)"⁵

Finally, consider the following from Interior Minister Tomas Borge:

"This revolution goes beyond our borders. Our revolution was always internationalist from the moment Sandino fought in La Segovia."⁶

Borge was praising the role of internationalists in the Sandinista takeover. In the same speech, he denied exporting revolution, in spite of clear evidence of Sandinista support for the Salvadran terrorists.

COMMENTS FROM THE SALVADORAN REBELS

The attempt to imitate the Nicaraguan revolution is being made in El Salvador. Cayetano Carpio, the late commander of the Popular Liberation Front (the FPL, one of five movements united at Fidel Castro's insistence to form the Faribundo Marti Liberation Front, or FMLN) echoed the theme of region-wide revolution when he said:

"The Central American peoples' struggle is one single struggle ... All the Central American nations will become one single revolutionary fire if U.S. imperialism carries out its aggressive plans against Nicaragua and El Salvador."⁷

Carpio has been repudiated by his erstwhile colleagues since his mysterious suicide, but he was described last December in a recent FPL communique as a:

"genuine representative of the Salvadoran patriots who ... undertook the difficult work of providing the Salvadoran people with an authentic political/military, Marxist-Leninist vanguard to lead them in the struggle to destroy capitalism and establish socialism through the strategy of a prolonged peoples' war."⁸

No criticism of the goals of the guerrillas reads as clearly nor condemns as severely as their own words.

The anti-U.S. nature of the FMLN is also apparent from their words. Ruben Zamora, political representative of the FMLN, had this to say on the slaying of Lt. Commander Albert Schaufelberger by a left-wing death squad. Zamora was speaking at a meeting sponsored by the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) last June 21:

"[The FMLN takes] full responsibility for the death of Lt. Commander Schaufelberger, who was carrying a machine gun in one hand and a walkie-talkie in the other ... We can't guarantee that this won't happen again."

By offering aid to the guerrillas of El Salvador, Nicaragua violates one of the most respected principles of the Inter-American system, that of non-intervention. Former President Alvaro Magana of El Salvador stated:

"Armed subversion has but one launching pad: Nicaragua. ... While Managua draws the world's attention by saying that for two years they have been on the verge of being invaded, they have not ceased for one instant to invade our country."

EFFECTS OF "REVOLUTIONARY" VIOLENCE

Nicaragua

The people of Central America speak eloquently in describing the effects of revolution on their daily lives. Eden Pastora expressed his frustration at what happened to the democratic revolution he helped lead:

"Peace in Central America is inextricably linked to Nicaragua. There can be no peace in Central America if there is no internal peace in Nicaragua. There can be no peace in Nicaragua as long as the slaughter of the Miskitos, Sumos and Ramas continues; as long as there is no freedom of the press; and as long as the occupation by Cuban, German, Soviet and Bulgarian troops continues. This is what we resent in these nine commanders. We were the only people in the world capable of practicing non-alignment, because we made our revolution in the 20th century supported in the first two years by \$1.2 billion in aid from around the world. We got help from everyone: from the Gringos, Germans, Russians, French, Spanish, Swedes, Norwegians -- from all of Europe, Africa and the

Arab World... We could have practiced polydependency in order to avoid falling into a dependency on one of the two superpowers... We lost the chance no other people in the world had: The chance to make a true revolution, genuine, the prototype of a Latin American revolution."¹⁰

A number of minority groups in the country have undergone severe repression since 1979. Among these groups is the Miskito Indian population. A recently declared amnesty plan for Miskitos who have fled Sandinista repression met with this reaction from Enrique Bolanos, the head of the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP):

"The [Miskito amnesty decree] is discriminatory. It is welcome for the Miskitos because they deserve it, but it does not include others. This decree would seem to have been made by a country like South Africa."¹¹

Even flight to democratic Honduras is no guarantee of safety for the Miskito, Sumo and Rama Indians. On January 12, 1984, well after the amnesty offered for self-exiled Indians, the Honduran government "addressed the Nicaraguan government again ... to strongly protest the persecution, abuse and killing of Miskito residents in Honduras' Mosquita territory."¹²

The note was in response to a January 3 incident in which Sandinista troops crossed the border and entered the Honduran town of Quihaustara to force Miskito refugees to return to Nicaragua. This operation is itself testimony to the ineffectiveness of the amnesty.

There is other evidence as well. The Christmas Exodus of over 1,000 Miskito Indians, who left the country following their Bishop, Salvador Schlaefer, and the flight of hundreds more in April 1984 contrast sharply with Sandinista claims that there is no persecution of Indians.

The Miskito Indians and many other Nicaraguans face persecution in spite of the fact that they resisted the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza. The revolution that overthrew Somoza was broad-based and democratic. Unfortunately for the people of Nicaragua, the Marxist-Leninist element of the coalition became dominant.

Since the rise of this Marxist-Leninist faction, which includes the nine "comandantes" who hold power, many Nicaraguans who have refused to cooperate with the Sandinista regime have been harassed, arrested, and in some cases, tortured. Some have lost jobs, and others have difficulty obtaining ration cards. A Nicaraguan citizen reported the following in March, 1983:

"We all have to join [the Sandinista Defense Committees]. If you don't, they call you a contra, their term for a counterrevolutionary, and you don't get an identification card to buy basic foods at cheap prices."¹³

The Nicaraguan press is censored, rights to habeas corpus and assembly have been curtailed, and free labor unions have had their leaders harassed and their activities restricted. These restrictions include even those who risked their lives in the fight against Somoza.

Nicaraguan poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra also worked for democracy in Nicaragua and opposed Somoza. Now, four years after the Triumph, he is:

"against the perversion of the Revolution which they have engineered ... My obligation as a poet is to hold up the banner of resistance against the tremendous damage which is being done to Nicaraguan culture."¹⁴

The behavior of the Sandinistas would seem to indicate not only a lack of trust in the Nicaraguan people, but a genuine fear of democracy, as evidenced by their attempts to manipulate the preparatory phases of the November 1984 election process. Cuadra commented on this fear:

"I am excluded and isolated just as anyone who suggests an independent point of view or who defends the independence of the writer in the face of the power of the state."¹⁵

This fear extends beyond their borders. To quote Rangel again: "Democracy in Costa Rica cannot be accepted; it cannot be tolerated because it constitutes a permanent temptation for the population of Nicaragua."¹⁶

El Salvador

The effects of revolution in Nicaragua have been repression and a pattern of human rights violations. The efforts of the terrorists in El Salvador have been equally disruptive. By their own admission, they have been responsible for thousands of deaths.

Shafik Jorge Handal, head of the Salvadoran Communist Party:

"During these three years of war, the FMLN has inflicted over 15,000 casualties on the enemy armed forces. It has taken 2,350 prisoners."¹⁷

The guerrillas have also attacked the economy of El Salvador and have done so in a way that hurts the very people the FMLN purports to represent. A communique from the Salvadoran private business association, reacting to the New Year's Eve destruction of the Cuscatlan bridge, read as follows:

"Although the destruction of this important bridge might be explained by its consideration as a military target, all the Salvadoran people will suffer the consequences."¹⁸

The Cuscatlan bridge joined eastern El Salvador to the rest of the country. A Salvadoran radio station had this to say about the rebels' action:

"We think that, after all, the people are the ones who in the long run will suffer the consequences of the rebel attack -- the large number of Salvadorans, the majority of them humble people, who need the Cuscatlan bridge."¹⁹

Besides imitating the death and destruction of their Nicaraguan neighbors, the Salvadoran guerrillas demonstrated a similar disdain for the use of free elections to determine the will of the people. Although they claimed to have no plans to repeat in 1984 their 1982 tactic of trying to keep people from the polls, a rebel spokesman predicted ominously that "maybe some bridges will fall, or some traffic may be stopped."²⁰

Salvadoran rebels made good this implied threat by destroying seven power stations the day before the March 25 voting, stealing citizens' Cedulas (I.D. cards) which they needed to vote, and patrolling the roads leading to polling places. These efforts, while costing the lives of 30 Salvadoran soldiers trying to protect the people, did not keep the people from voting in large numbers.

The rebels have called for negotiations towards the goal of power-sharing as a substitute for elections. Yet the following statement from Radio Venceremos, the guerrillas' clandestine radio station, casts some doubt on the usefulness of such negotiations:

"To ask that we disarm is tantamount to demanding that we surrender. They have failed to achieve this on the field of battle, and realize they will never be able to achieve it at the negotiations table."²¹

It would seem that the rebels are not willing to negotiate their right to continue armed struggle during or even after negotiations with the elected government.

PERCEPTION OF THE U.S. ROLE

The U.S. role in the region, contrary to some reports, is not viewed as a counterproductive or imperialistic presence. Francisco Quinonez Avila, presidential candidate for the Salvadoran Popular Party, said:

"George Shultz comes to reinforce the democratization process that the Salvadoran people want and seek. His visit also supports the electoral result that our people need: honest and clean elections."²²

Senor Quinonez Avila was a member of the Salvadoran Peace Commission which met with representatives of the FMLN to get them to join the people of El Salvador in the electoral process.

The argument has been made that pressure from the U.S. to try to make Nicaragua keep the promises it made to the Organization of American States (OAS) is counterproductive and only serves to bolster Nicaraguan and international sympathy for the Sandinistas. However, La Nacion editor Ulibarri says:

"[T]here is no contradiction between pressuring the Sandinist government to change while providing military support for El Salvador. To the extent that the Sandinistas keep building a Marxist totalitarian society in Nicaragua, there will be a potential danger for the future of the area. No matter what the Sandinistas tell their erstwhile foreign listeners, Central Americans know this is true."²³

Praise for the report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America was also forthcoming. President Luis Alberto Monge of Costa Rica called the report: "an act of intervention against poverty and ignorance."²⁴

A Panama City newspaper compared the role of the super-powers in the region:

"The hope for peace held out by U.S. President Ronald Reagan has not been matched by the Russians. We truly believe that President Reagan's words are both sincere and timely. But the Soviets will continue to play at war, given their incredible fate which is to impair peace."²⁵

PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS

People of Central America who do not have access to radio time or newspaper columns have nevertheless had their say as well. A public opinion poll was commissioned by the U.S. Information Agency and conducted by the Gallup affiliate CID in San Jose, San Salvador, Guatemala City, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula.

Five hundred adults with at least one year of secondary school education were interviewed in the Costa Rican, Salvadoran and Guatemalan capitals and 700 interviews were conducted in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, all between February and October 1983.

The people surveyed live close to the turmoil in Central America, and what they say needs to be taken seriously. Results showed that the urban populations of all four countries hold similar views about the conflict in El Salvador, and perhaps more importantly, their appraisal of the major actors.

Perceptions of Nicaragua, Cuba and the Soviet Union are predominantly negative. These countries are blamed more than any others for the problems faced in Central America. They are perceived as the main external sources of instability in Central America.

People in the survey cities were asked what country, if any, posed a military threat to their country. They were then asked if there was a second country that was also a threat. In San Jose, 69% of the sample said Nicaragua was a military threat to their country. Thirty-seven percent also mentioned Cuba. In Honduras, 80% cited Nicaragua as one of the two countries posing a military threat, and 38% cited Cuba. In San Salvador, Nicaragua was mentioned by 45% and Cuba by 37%.

When asked which two countries were most responsible for creating the conditions leading to war between countries in Central America, 72% of the Honduran sample cited Cuba, and 61% mentioned the Soviet Union. In San Jose, 50% blamed Cuba and 41% the Soviet Union. Cuba and the Soviet Union were mentioned by 54% of the San Salvador sample. By contrast, only 10% of the Hondurans and Salvadorans and 26% of the Costa Ricans mentioned the United States.

Cuba is seen as an instrument of the Soviet Union in the region, and as a threat to stability and peace. The percentages were 86% in Honduras, 71% in San Jose and 56% in El Salvador. Over 50% of the sample in all survey cities hold a negative image of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

A victory by the government forces in EL Salvador is widely preferred over an insurgent victory. Over 80% of those surveyed in Honduras and 46% (a plurality) in Costa Rica held this view. Majorities (56% in San Jose, 67% in Tegucigalpa/San Pedro Sula and 60% in San Salvador) of those aware of U.S. military assistance to the government of El Salvador approve.

There is also widespread scepticism about popular support for the revolutionary forces. In San Salvador only 6% of the sample thought the insurgents had the support of a majority of the Salvadoran people. Almost ten times that number (58%) perceived them as merely a group of armed rebels.

Perceptions of the U.S. are, for the most part, positive. Although the United States is mentioned more than any other country as interfering in the internal affairs of survey countries, it is also most widely named as a country trying to solve the region's economic problems.

Twenty-nine percent (a plurality) of those surveyed in Tegucigalpa/San Pedro Sula and San Salvador cited the U.S. as a country that interferes too much in their country's internal affairs. However, 93% of the Honduran sample and 82% of the Salvadoran believe the U.S. is helping solve their economic problems.

The United States is widely regarded as trying to maintain the stability of regional governments. In Honduras, this perception was especially strong -- 90% mentioned the U.S. when asked what country, if any, was trying to keep their nation stable. Over 80% of the Salvadorans and 72% of the Costa Rican sample agreed.

Moreover, many people in Central America look to the United States as a country that would come to their aid immediately if they were attacked. Ninety percent of the Hondurans and about two-thirds (67%) of the Costa Ricans felt this way.

CONCLUSION

This is but a small sample of statements favoring genuine democracy and peaceful change in Central America. It is also but a small sample of Sandinista and rebel statements attacking these goals. The most ominous of these rebel statements was made by a FPL (Salvadoran) guerrilla quoted by a Copley news service reporter who spent 12 days with the guerrillas:

"The Mexicans should not think because they are helping us now, that they will escape revolution. We know who they are and after we have won in El Salvador and Guatemala we will give fraternal help to our Mexican revolutionary friends."²⁶

ENDNOTES

1. Panama City ACAN 26 January 1984 (Foreign Broadcast Information Service (hereinafter FBIS) 27 January 1984 p. P16)
2. Speech delivered at a Caracas conference sponsored by Enfoque magazine, 15 July 1983.
3. RPC Television, Panama, 30 July 1983
4. Eduardo Ulibarri, "Cooking Up Solutions for Central American Problems," Wall Street Journal 17 February 1984 p. 31
5. New York magazine 12 September 1983.
6. Speech at the Second Anniversary of the FSLN Triumph in Managua 19 July 1981.
7. Eulogy at funeral services in Managua for FMLN Commander Ana Maria, 11 April 1983.
8. San Salvador Radio Cadena Sonora 26 December 1983 (FBIS 28 December 1983 p. P1)
9. Madrid EFE 22 December 1983 (FBIS 23 December 1983 p. P3)
10. San Pedro Sula, El Tiempo 25 October 1983
11. Panama City Circuito PRC Television 28 January 1984 (FBIS 31 January 1984 p. P7)
12. Tegucigalpa Cadena Audio Video 12 January 1984 (FBIS 13 January p. P11)
13. Carl J. Migdail, "Nicaragua's Leftist Rulers - Defiant as Ever," U.S. News and World Report, 14 March, 1983 p. 29
14. San Jose La Nacion International 5 October 1983
15. Ibid.
16. Enfoque speech, op. cit.
17. Radio Venceremos 28 January 1984 (FBIS 30 January 1984 p. P11)
18. San Salvador El Diario de Hoy 5 January 1984 p. 13 (FBIS 6 January 1984 p. P3)
19. La Voz Panamericana 3 January 1984 (FBIS 5 January 1984 p. P9)

20. Madrid EFE 26 January 1984 (FBIS 26 January 1984 p. P3)
21. Radio Venceremos 1 January 1984
22. El Diario de Hoy 31 January 1984 p. 2
23. Ulibarri op. cit.
24. La Republica 17 January 1984 p. 2
25. Critica 19 January 1984 p. 4
26. New World (New York City) 19 March 1981