Towards a Democratic Central America
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1. Introduction

There is an urgent need for the wars now being waged in Central America to be halted. They have already caused rivers of blood. The freeing of Nicaragua from the dictatorial rule of the late Anastasio Somoza claimed some 50,000 lives in the years up to 1979. About the same number of people have been killed in El Salvador in subsequent years—about 1 in 100 of all Salvadoreans. The numbers who have died in Guatemala, principally at the hands of a series of military dictatorships of the extreme right, will almost certainly never be known. Three decades of military rule, it is guessed, have claimed the lives of about 85,000 people. The tide of violence and militarisation has been rising in Honduras as the government of that country chose to play host to increasing numbers of United States troops. These troops are deployed in order to try and intimidate the government of Nicaragua, and so that they may be on hand if, as seems likely, the government forces in El Salvador are overcome by the guerrilla insurgents. The number of refugees and displaced persons runs into millions.

The Central American wars have caused the waste of billions of pounds of treasure. The cost of physically waging the wars has been more than doubled by the indirect losses caused by them. Last year all the six Spanish-speaking republics of the isthmus registered falls in their gross national products as crops, factories, roads and railways were destroyed and the rich sent their fortunes out of the country to the United States, Europe and other safe havens.

The present struggles have aggravated the already chronically serious social disorders in the region. Six out of ten people in Central America are illiterate and only two out of ten can read and write with any fluency. One hundred and twenty children out of every thousand die before they reach their first birthday. A similar proportion die before they reach their fourth birthday.

Seventy out of ten Central Americans suffer from malnutrition and live on a weekly income of the equivalent of £1.30 per week.

The right to life and the rule of law are to all intents and purposes ignored in Guatemala and El Salvador. Only in Belize, Costa Rica and Nicaragua do there exist governments committed to working for greater social justice for their populations. Nicaragua is in the throes of working out an effective electoral system consonant with the pledges of the ruling Sandinista front to uphold political pluralism and a mixed economy. In the four remaining countries the system of political democracy ranges from the farcical—as in Guatemala—to the dubious—as in Panama.

War and the social conditions are intimately linked. There is relative peace in Belize and Costa Rica because their populations, however poor and impatient they may be, trust that their existing government—or subsequent ones—will tackle their societies' problems. There is war in El Salvador and Guatemala because sections of society have lost hope in their rulers.
2. The Role of the Superpowers

The social crisis has been exacerbated by the rivalry between the United States and Soviet governments. The Soviets have extracted whatever propaganda advantages they can from United States actions in Central America. United States support of right wing extremism in Central America has served to blur the issue of Soviet aggression in Afghanistan, and the Soviets have doubtless been content to see the way United States policies in Central America have driven wedges in the relationship between Washington and the governments of Western Europe. The Soviets have also been happy to see how United States support for the fraudulent electoral processes in Guatemala and El Salvador have devalued faith in electoral systems generally. Indeed the United States policy in Central America has often seemed to be designed to provide proof for the arguments of the most sectarian Leninists and those who scoff at the ideals of representative democracy.

Moscow has, however, been cautious in the actions it has undertaken itself. Weapons and military equipment from the Warsaw Pact countries, particularly East Germany, have been despatched for the defence of Nicaragua. But Moscow's participation in support of the guerrillas in El Salvador and Guatemala has been nugatory. This is hardly surprising given that many of the guerrilla groups in those two countries sprang from political factions opposed to and contemptuous of the Soviet Union and of the local Moscow-line communist parties.

Cuban support

Havana has been more active, providing moral and political support for the Central American left and passing on to the left some of the subsidy it receives itself from the Soviets. Cuba has never been the all powerful bogeyman that the United States government has often portrayed it as being. The Cubans have failed to persuade the Salvadoran and Guatemalan insurgents to sink their differences and unite, and Havana has warned publicly and privately that if Nicaragua were to be invaded by United States forces the Sandinistas could not rely on Cuban military assistance. Since the United States invasion of Grenada last October the Cubans have been trying to perfect the defences of their own island lest Cuba itself be Ronald Reagan's next target.

United States intervention

Insofar as Central American politics have been shaped by any outside influences they have been shaped by the policies of the United States. United States ambitions in Central America date back to the middle of the last century. In the 1840's, with no safe land route available to link the eastern states of the United States with the Pacific, passengers and goods could circulate either round the tip of South America via Cape Horn or across the isthmus at Panama or Nicaragua. Many chose the Nicaraguan route. United States ambitions of the day were so strong and Nicaraguan politics were so incoherent that the young republic found itself with a president briefly in 1850, who was a United States soldier of fortune, William Walker. Walker made no secret
of his desire to incorporate Nicaragua into the United States and to re-establish slavery within its borders on the model of the slave states of the southern United States. The happily ephemeral regime of Walker was awarded diplomatic recognition by Washington.

Though Nicaragua was never to be the site of a trans-isthmic canal as had been foreseen, in the 20th century United States forces were to occupy Nicaragua on two occasions. When they finally left they relinquished power into the hands of the dynasty founded by General Anastasio Somoza García. This first Somoza used a ruse to capture and assassinate in 1933 Augusto César Sandino, the nationalist leader who had waged war against the United States occupation forces. The present government of Nicaragua is named after Sandino. After the assassination of the first Somoza by a Liberal in 1956 his place was taken by his sons Luis and Anastasio who ruled with the National Guard and United States support until the overthrow of Anastasio in 1979. The extent of United States commitment to the Somoza clan may be judged by the fact that until a few days before Anastasio Somoza’s flight from Managua in July 1979 the State Department was seeking a continuing role for Somoza’s cronies and the National Guard in the revolutionary government.

The United States acquired similar hegemony over Panama. The French had attempted to build a trans-isthmic canal in Panama when Panama was a neglected, outlying province of the Republic of Colombia. United States engineers were to complete the canal but only after the government in Washington had helped a group of Panamanian nationalists to declare their independence from Colombia in 1903.

From Panamanian independence until 1979 the United States exercised effective sovereignty over the Panama Canal Zone. A strip of land 16 kilometres wide along the route of the Canal. It was to become the home of the United States Southern Command and a key element in United States military strategy in the Caribbean and Latin America. In the 1970s, in a decision of great foresight and wisdom, Henry Kissinger as Secretary of State oversaw the birth of a new relationship with Panama under which the Zone was abolished and the Canal itself entrusted increasingly to Panamanians who are due to control it completely by the end of the century. Meanwhile United States Southern Command remains in Panama in bases which, it is agreed, the United States forces should still control.

United States intervention in the other countries of the isthmus was never as direct as it was in Nicaragua and Panama. The United States government backed the overthrow of the reformist government of President Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954 and continued a close relationship with right wing extremist regimes which succeeded Arbenz. Though relations between the Washington and Guatemala City cooled a little during the presidency of Jimmy Carter, the Reagan government has clearly signalled its desire to return to the cordial entente with the military of previous years.

In Honduras, the poorest of the Central American republics, United States banana companies played an important role in politics throughout this century. Washington took no exception to the military regimes which controlled the country and favoured its businessmen during the greater part of the 20th century.

The United States traditionally had almost as little to do with El Salvador, where Washington is presently most deeply committed, as it had with Belize and Costa Rica. It was German and British immigrants who helped to establish the Salvadoran coffee industry, as the Germans had similarly done in Guatemala. After the Second World War the United States took over the training of the Salvadoran military who had previously been trained by a Chilean military mission. For more than four decades the United States maintained friendly
relations with successive fraudulently elected military regimes. There was no complaint from Washington in 1972 when José Napoleón Duarte, the Christian Democratic leader who was to become a close ally of the United States, was robbed of victory in presidential elections. As was the case in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras, generations of military and civilian dictators of the right were tolerated, and very often encouraged and even installed, by the United States whose president is today inveighing so forcefully against the supposed lack of democracy in Nicaragua.

Where pluralistic democracy is flowering in Central America today, viz. in Belize and Costa Rica, that state of affairs appears to have little to do with any encouragement from the United States.

**Economic Factors**

It may be tempting to think that the present crisis in the isthmus has to a large degree been brought on by the world recession. The world slump has certainly depressed the demand for and the prices of the raw materials through whose export Central America earns its living in the international market place. The terms of trade have certainly deteriorated for all the Central American countries. Yet before recession hit the world a decade ago the members of the Central American Common Market (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica) had experienced a prolonged period of high economic growth.

Between 1950 and 1967 the economies of Central America grew by about 5 per cent a year. Throughout the 1970’s trade among the members of the Central American Common Market grew at a phenomenal rate of more than 10 per cent a year, despite the oil shock. In 1977 and 1978 the average annual rate of growth of Central America’s intra-zonal exports was no less than 31.8 per cent. The new prosperity generated so rapidly within the Central American area certainly did not trickle down to the neediest.

The raw capitalism of the Somozas and the other right wing despots made it inevitable that the new wealth was creamed off by the existing plutocracy and part of the middle classes. There was little if any advance in the standard of living of the mass of Central American people.

**The Challenge to Europe**

The economic history of Central America over the past three decades give the lie to those free market theorists in the Thatcher government and elsewhere who claim that the main thing that Central America needs today is a new opportunity for economic expansion. The region certainly does need economic expansion, but when it comes it must be accompanied this time by positive policies of income redistribution. Only by the establishment of effective economic and political policies and more particularly by strategies of democratic socialism are the social problems of malnutrition and illiteracy going to be cured.

The democracies of Europe must take a hand in helping the emergence of democracy in Central America. They must do it for three reasons:

i. out of solidarity with the people of Central America,

ii. in order to defend their own ideals of democracy, which one way or another are being destroyed in Central America,

iii. out of self interest lest the Soviet Union and the United States strike in Central America the spark which would eventually lead to a nuclear war that the superpowers would fight across Europe itself.
3. The Countries of the Isthmus

Despite the historic links which traditionally bound the five northernmost republics of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, which in colonial times were all governed by the Spaniards from Guatemala) conditions in these countries today are very diverse. Costa Rica would be at peace if it were not for the Washington-supported Nicaraguan counter revolutionaries. Panama, part of Colombia till 1903, was never part of the political confederations which attempted, with little success, to maintain the ideal of Central American unity in the 19th century. Panama has often tended to keep its distance from its northern neighbours. Belize, a former British colony and since 1981 an independent Commonwealth country, maintains a Westminster style of government and very different social and political traditions from those of its neighbours. An overall European strategy aimed at assisting social change and stopping the war in the isthmus must take account of the different circumstances of the Central American nations.

Belize

The small community of 150,000 Belizeans, who were granted full statehood in 1981, constitute the most direct British responsibility in the region. As a signatory of the Lomé agreement Belize also maintains an important economic relationship with the European Community.

Belize is defended by nearly 2,000 British troops from the threat of invasion from Guatemala whose regimes have on dubious grounds claimed sovereignty over the territory. British forces are there because with such a small population — little more than 2 per cent of the population of Guatemala — and with neither the money nor the expertise to field an effective defence force, Belize is on its own defenceless.

The British commitment to defend an independent Belize was unwillingly entered into by a British government and Margaret Thatcher has expressed impatience with the continuing responsibility. The responsibility is ineluctable, however, at least in the absence of some effective Commonwealth or other multilateral guarantee for Belizean defence.

Since independence there have been a desultory series of talks involving British, Belizean and Guatemalan negotiators who have sought to put an end to the outstanding territorial dispute. So far however, and despite its virtually total international isolation in this matter, the Guatemalan military have refused even to recognise the independence of Belize. Today, as for decades past, the Guatemalan claim to Belize serves as a convenient rallying cry for that hollow and demagogic nationalism resorted to by the generals in Guatemala City. The Belizean card has been played time and again, despite the fact that the indigenous majority in Guatemala have little grasp of, or interest in, the claim.

Following the poll in July 1984 for an assembly in Guatemala which is charged with the task of writing a new constitution it is entirely possible that the reference to Guatemalan sovereignty over the whole
of Belize which figures in the present, much abused, constitution will be dropped. If this happens it could be a step towards an end to the territorial dispute and security for Belize behind firm boundaries. Given, however, the military penchant for violating the Guatemalan constitution whenever the generals deem this appropriate it is clear that some Guatemalan paper guarantee would be little enough surety for the Belizeans. Perhaps the only surety is to be found in the eventual eclipse of the military by the forces of the left who have declared their willingness to abjure the claim to Belize.

In the meanwhile Belize as a small democracy must be protected and helped by Britain and its European partners. Protection and help must in particular be forthcoming if, as seems likely, Belize becomes a refuge for large numbers of Central Americans fleeing from the disorders in their own countries. As it is, an estimated 10,000 refugees have come to Belize and make up some 7 per cent of the population at a time when the country is in severe economic difficulties and can scarcely find jobs for its own citizens.

Britain and its European partners should also warn off those hawks in the United States government who have been eyeing Belize as a possible base for their forces. If a duly elected Belizean government feels the country's interests are best served by welcoming United States troops on its soil — and there is no indication that the present government of George Price wishes any such thing — then it should be free to invite them. Belize's interests would, however, not be well served if its government were pressed by Washington to accept United States troops as part of some Reagan strategy against the left in Central America.

Guatemala
Guatemala, with 7,500,000 people the most populous of the Central American states, is likely to be the scene of a civil war which will outdo in savagery anything so far experienced in Central America, even in El Salvador. Since the United States-supported putsch in 1954, control of the country has been in the hands of a succession of military and civilian figures who at best defended the status quo and who at worst pushed the country farther back into terror and bloodshed.

On July 1 elections were held for a constituent assembly of eighty-eight members. Well before the poll the ruling general, Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores, warned future assemblymen that they should not get ideas above their station, try and form a provisional government or appoint a provisional president. He was in charge and would stay in charge at least until elections next year. The whole operation on July 1 owed more to Lewis Carroll than to constitutional theorists. Except on the question of the territorial claim to Belize, Guatemala is in no want of a new constitution. Any new constitution is at least as likely to be violated in the future by the military as the old ones were. A new basic law is being drawn up where the rule of law does not exist, where human life is cheap and justice even cheaper.

Moreover the July poll was a mockery of democracy. In the climate of state-sponsored violence no party of the left or centre-left could have put up candidates. They would have run the immediate risk, the virtual certainty, of assassination. The field was therefore left open to the groupings of the right. There was a Christian democratic party which out of fear of the military was attempting to camouflage whatever reformist principles it may once have had; the personal following of a newspaper owner, whose ideological leanings were near as much of a mystery as the source of his finance; and two extremist parties of the right who claimed fascist roots and expressed warm regards for Major Roberto d'Aubuisson of El Salvador. The Christian democrats and the newspaper owner came top of the poll with about a fifth of the votes each. More votes were registered as blank or spoiled.
than were won by any single party. As the voters went to the poll the United States embassy in Guatemala City announced that on average 42 people were kidnapped and 124 people murdered every month. The embassy figures almost certainly erred by underestimating the monthly carnage.

After having been criticised by the Carter government the Guatemalan military find themselves discreetly courted by the present United States administration. President Reagan publicly praised Mejía's predecessor General Efraín Ríos Montt as an aspirant to democracy, a reference which could in no way be supported by the facts of his murderous dictatorship. The United States has offered helicopter spares to the Guatemalan army, despite British protests about the possible use that could be made of Guatemalan military helicopters against Belize.

The voting exercise seems to have been of a piece with similar polls this year in El Salvador from which the left was also excluded, both polls being designed to give a spurious patina of democracy to highly repressive regimes ultimately controlled by the military.

The electoral fraud in Guatemala – for such it must be termed – overlays a centuries old struggle between the Spanish-speaking urban ladinos who hold a monopoly of power and the pre-Colombian indigeneous majority whose cultures are despised and who occupy the bottom positions in society.

In the early 1980's it seemed at one moment as though the indigenes would join with ladinos of progressive persuasion in an uncontrollable guerrilla challenge to the Guatemalan oligarchy. With help from the then military dictatorship in Argentina and from Israel, the government routed the disorganized, divided guerrillas and today they present no possible threat to Mejía. The legacy of horror and bitterness that the war against the left has established bodes ill for Guatemala's future. The lid has been screwed down on the pressure cooker. Until the Guatemalan people begin again to organise a challenge to military rule Britain and its European allies have no alternative to condemning and isolating the Guatemalan rulers. Financial aid and trade concessions, provided as they are by taxpayers and the unemployed of Europe, should not be given to a Guatemalan régime to use for the benefit of rich Guatemalans.

El Salvador

The best thing that can be said about the situation in El Salvador is that it cannot turn out to be worse than that of Guatemala.

In the past five years tens of thousands of people have lost their lives and the outlook for a peaceful and democratic El Salvador seems as distant as it ever was.

In 1979 a coup d'état was mounted against the regime of General Carlos Humberto Romero, the latest in a line of military men who had governed the country through fraud and violence since 1932. Initial hopes that the military-civilian junta which took over in 1979 would start social reforms and democratisation were confounded. In January 1980 the democratic socialist Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR), led by Guillermo Manuel Ungo, and a fraction of the Christian democrats left the junta in despair, convinced that the top military figures would never permit the reforms they as civilians considered were necessary.

The MNR, a fellow member with the Labour Party of the Socialist International, and the dissident Christian democrats later threw in their lot with the Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (FMLN), a grouping of five separate guerrilla organisations. Since then war has escalated.

The government forces, in practice free of control by civilian politicians, have received equipment and training from US troops inside El Salvador and in Honduras and Panama. Since 1979 the government
forces have tripled in size to something over 40,000 men. They have not been able to achieve anything better than a stalemate with the insurgents.

For their part the guerrilla groups have been unable to achieve any operational unity and appear to be almost as effective rivals as they are comrades. Rivalry last year reached murderous lengths within the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL). In April the second-in-command of the FPL was hacked to death in Managua by followers of the FPL commander who later shot himself.

The extreme sectarian nature of much of the FMLN and their internal rivalries is one of the principal causes of their inability to inflict a decisive defeat on the government forces. The FMLN is nowhere near earning the respect and support of the civilian population that allowed the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, divided though they themselves were, to achieve victory in 1979.

At the most elementary political level the FMLN, like the guerrillas in Guatemala, have been unable to explain to the population at large how their actions in wrecking crops and equipment in the people's name differ from similar actions carried out by the government forces in defence of the oligarchy. The differences among the guerrilla groups and the delicate relationship between the civilian members of the FDR Revolutionary Democratic Front and the FMLN guerrillas bode badly for the future.

On June 1 the Christian democratic leader José Napoleon Duarte was installed as president after the March elections in which the left did not participate. He is confronted by major political problems. The legitimacy of his election is highly questionable, his ability to act will be narrowly circumscribed by the fact that the elections threw up a right wing majority in the legislative assembly and he does not control the army. Basic reforms like agrarian reform are likely to remain stalled at the behest of extremist right-wing groups such as Major Roberto d'Aubuisson's powerful ARENA party.

The FDR/FMLN continue to offer immediate negotiations to put an end to the war. Since assuming the presidency Duarte, who during his presidential campaign left the door open to negotiations, has assumed a more intransigent position. Whether this is out of fear of ARENA and the right wing extremists, or whether it is due to pressure from those in Washington who are counting on a military victory in El Salvador, or whether both considerations are involved is still far from clear.

With the prospect of continuing stalemate there can be no ultimate solution to the Salvadoran crisis without talks. European governments and political parties must support the efforts of the Contadora Group and President Luis Alberto Monje, the democratic socialist leader of Costa Rica, to persuade the government to meet the insurgents.

If Mr Reagan achieves another term in office many United States citizens feel that the logic of his rhetoric will push him to commit more troops in much greater numbers to El Salvador. The US president must be left in no doubt about the strength of European reaction to any such move, whatever reservations European democrats may have about some of the methods and objectives of Salvadoran guerrilla groups.

Honduras

Honduras emerged from two decades of military rule three years ago after elections in which the middle of the road Roberto Suazo Córdova was elected president. It has been Honduras's misfortune that Suazo's term in office has coincided with rapid militarisation of Honduran society at the instance of the Reagan government and a sharp increase in violations of human rights. Over the past four years United States military assistance to the Honduran forces has quintupled to more than $40,000,000. There are now 1,700 United States troops permanently stationed in Honduras. Naval
and military bases have been built, airfields constructed and radar installations put up so that the country can serve as a forward base for the United States. From Honduras the United States forces has been able to help military attacks on Nicaragua and intervene more quickly in El Salvador and Guatemala whenever that is deemed necessary by Washington. The United States Congress has found that much military expenditure by the Reagan government in Honduras has been illegal.

Suazo is allowing the anti-Sandinista insurgents, led by former members of the Somoza National Guard, to use Honduran territory to mount their attacks on Nicaragua. The incidence of kidnappings, "disappearances" and intimidation by police and military in Honduras has risen. Happily Honduras is not yet such a police state or military dictatorship that protest and action against these developments has become impossible. At the end of March the chief of the armed forces, General Gustavo Alvarez, who had been arrogating to himself powers and decisions that properly belonged to Suazo was ousted.

His successor General Walter Lopez had declared his intention of seeing that human rights are better respected. Since March there has been greater resistance on the Honduran part to accept the unilateral decisions by the United States government about military matters in Honduras. This unwillingness probably had less to do with a desire on the part of the Honduran military to seek peace than their distress at seeing so many Salvadoran troops being trained on Honduran territory. Diplomatic blunders by United States officials led them to ignore Honduran sensitivity about El Salvador within which Honduras fought a war – the so-called "football war" – in 1969. The Honduran government may also merely be wanting to obtain more dollars for its services. At any event Honduras has given the first signs of pulling back from involvement in the wars.

As one of the poorest countries in America the last thing that Honduras needs is increased military spending. European democrats, including the European Liberals to whose international organization Suazo’s own Liberal Party is affiliated, have an opportunity to influence politics for the better. Suazo should be encouraged to help along the efforts of the Contadora Group to find a peaceful solution to the Central American crisis now that the Honduran establishment seems to have realised the folly of their country becoming thoroughly militarised.

**Nicaragua**

The largest country of Central America has been struggling towards democracy since the Sandinistas, leading a coalition of almost every section of Nicaraguan society, overthrew the Somoza regime in July 1979. The Somozas had so alienated their countrymen that at the end they had no allies left. At the time of the overthrow the Sandinistas themselves were divided into three factions. Two of these, the Proletarian Tendency and the Protracted People’s War or GPP, were attracted to Leninism while the third, the Terceristas, were more pragmatic and less sectarian.

The roots of sandinismo, the life and work of the Nicaraguan nationalist insurgent who took up arms against the United States forces of occupation in the 1920’s, contain a much stronger dose of pragmatism than those of the FMLN in El Salvador. Sandino was a nationalist first and indeed was deserted by the Salvadorean Farabundo Marti (after whom the Salvadorean insurgents have named their front) because the latter thought he was too much of a bourgeois.

That tradition of nationalism, together with the universal repudiation of Somoza, has made the Sandinistas more tolerant politicians than those of the FMLN. They have maintained much of this toleration despite the fact that the Reagan government has conducted a fierce military and
propaganda campaign against them. The Sandinistas have resisted United States pressure to call off elections which are to be held on 4 November despite the fact that Nicaragua faces attack over both its borders and is being squeezed economically by every means the United States can devise.

An important section of the opposition has declared its unwillingness to take part in the elections. Nevertheless in the absence of any last minute disaster, there will be sufficient opposition from Liberals, Conservatives and the extreme left to allow the forthcoming poll to compare favourably with the much trumpeted elections held in other parts of Central America.

Conditions for elections are certainly not perfect in Nicaragua. The Sandinistas have often appeared capricious in their use of state power to curb the opposition. That opposition, for its part, has sometimes been in league with an armed insurgency. Since the first day of the revolution sandinismo as a creed has become inextricably mixed up with the organs of the state, notably the army and the police. It is difficult to see how if the opposition were to win the elections they would be able to assert their authority over these two bodies. Nevertheless Sandinistas have continued to profess their desire for political pluralism and the survival of a mixed economy. Sectarianism and Leninism is certainly not far to seek in Nicaragua but the desire of some Sandinistas to follow Leninist custom has been tempered by the realisation, often repeated to them by figures in the Socialist International, that they would lose a large share of the support and popularity they enjoy in Europe and the rest of the world if they were to model their society on Russian, Czech, Polish or even Cuban practice. Meanwhile the Sandinista government has nominated the coordinator of the ruling junta, Daniel Ortega, and another junta member Sergio Ramirez, to stand for the presidency and vice-presidency in November. Both men are Terceristas.

Militarily the Sandinistas have discreetly cut back on their commitments to the Salvadorean FMLN insurgents while still offering them base facilities in Managua. While the Sandinistas in doing this have taken cognisance of United States pressure, the Nicaraguans have also been influenced by the killing and suicide last year within the ranks of the FPL in Managua.

It is clearly in the interest of the Labour Party and of democratic socialists everywhere that sandinismo should survive and develop in a spirit of freedom and pluralism. It can be in the interest of no one that Nicaragua go back to being ruled by the successors of Somoza who are directing the "secret war" against Nicaragua with the help of the United States. Nor must the Soviet Union and its allies be allowed to become the sole or even a major international prop to the Sandinistas. For this not to happen demands a greater effort from Europe than has so far been forthcoming. Sweden under Liberal and Social Democratic rule has set an example of a sort of economic and political support the rest of the democracies of Europe should be giving to Nicaragua. A European effort must be directed not just to offering defensive help to the Sandinista forces in their battle with the counter-revolutionaries or "contras". It must be directed, too, to financial and economic help for a country which is being obliged by the United States to spend too much of its resources on defending itself.

Democrats in Europe must surely be more outspoken in their opposition to United States military attacks on Nicaragua. (They might also well spare a word of censure for the clumsy diplomacy of the Vatican who have shut their eyes to clergy taking an active part in right wing politics but who now are attempting to isolate catholic priests who have accepted positions in the Sandinista government.)

The Sandinistas and the Soviets could at the same time be told that any attempt to foist Leninist sectarianism on Nicaragua could have very serious consequences for
Nicaragua’s relations with the rest of the world.

Costa Rica

Outside San José the Costa Rican government and the United Nations have built the United Nations Peace University which has this year opened its doors for the first time to undergraduate students. The decision to site the university in Costa Rica says a great deal about the country.

The country successfully operates a pluralistic democratic system, the ruling party presently being the PLN or National Liberation Party, one of the more conservative members of the Socialist International. The army was abolished in 1949. Public order is kept by a Civil Guard and a Rural Assistance Guard. Costa Ricans with a touch of smugness, pride themselves on their predominantly white ancestry and the absence of the sort of gulf between rich and poor that is to be found in countries such as Guatemala. The country has a tradition of giving asylum to political refugees and served for several years as a political base for Sandinistas as they fought against the Somoza dictatorship.

Today the government is being pressed by the United States to arm itself and join in the drive against the left in Central America. United States arguments have gained weight among some Costa Ricans as they have observed the Leninist tendencies to be found in some sectors of the Sandinista government and as border incidents have become more common. The United States embassy has persuaded the Costa Rican Guards to accept heavier weapons from the United States and to send increasing numbers of guardsmen to train with other Latin American military at the United States Army School of the Americas in Panama. (This has resulted in some diplomatic contortions by all concerned. As the School of the Americas is debarred from instructing policemen the Costa Ricans are classed as military as far as the School is concerned. As far as Costa Rica is concerned they are not military as there is no Costa Rican army).

Costa Rica also serves as a base for ARDE, one of the Nicaraguan counter-revolutionary groups, and for one faction of the anti-Sandinista Miskito Indians commanded by Brooklyn Rivera. United States pressure has made sure that their activities have been allowed to continue.

The Reagan government has not however been able to persuade Monje to accept the presence of United States troops on Costa Rican territory. The purpose of their intended stay was to construct roads along the Costa Rican border with Nicaragua. The intensive United States campaign to get Costa Rica to arm and strike against Nicaragua seems to have been counterproductive. Monje dismissed one foreign minister who appeared to be trying to run his own pro-Reagan foreign policy. During his visit to Europe in the summer Monje, reflecting the widespread Costa Rican alarm at the prospect of being sucked into the Central American maelstrom, sought European help in establishing a definitive Costa Rican neutrality.

Costa Rica is being hard hit by the debt crisis, part of which was caused by the weak financial discipline of Monje’s predecessors in office. It is clearly imperative in this context that Costa Rican democracy should not be endangered by excessive demands by the International Monetary Fund for austerity. Nor should the Costa Ricans be pressed to expand human and financial assets on some re-armament programme at the behest of Washington. At the forthcoming meeting of European Community ministers in Central America special recognition should be given to Costa Rica’s unique role as a democracy among the Central American republics. Such a special role clearly merits special financial treatment by the Community governments. Development funds which may once have been earmarked for Guatemala could with profit be channelled to Costa Rica and Nicaragua.
Panama

Compared to more troubled republics to the north Panama can be thankful for a number of advantages. There is no war going on on its territory and it has had rudimentary, though very dubious, elections in which every major current of political opinion from right to left was represented. As has already been noted, Panama is confident enough of its own internal situation to join with the other three members of the Contadora Group in an effort to bring peace to the rest of the isthmus. The extreme tension that existed between Panamanians and the United States over the question of the control of the Canal has been very largely dissipated by the Carter-Torrijos Treaties of 1978. Under these treaties, which came into force in 1979, the Panama Canal Zone controlled by the United States was abolished. The United States retained certain military bases and ultimate control of the Canal till the year 2000 but meanwhile the day-to-day management of the waterway is being progressively handed over to Panamanians.

The problems of Panama are more chronic than acute. Hundreds of thousands of Panamanians who under a more advanced social system could be enjoying a modest prosperity live in squalor. Successive Panamanian governments have so mishandled the farm sector that Panama despite its low population density is unable to feed itself. Great economic reliance has been placed on the international banking sector (or to put it more crudely and accurately, on the attraction of the funds of drug traffickers, tax avoiders and the like). In addition, Panama allows owners of vessels registered under its flag to flout norms of safety and respect for trade unions. The world depression cast a long shadow over Panama and that shows no immediate sign of lifting.

Politically the consolidation of the power of the Defence Forces, epitomised by the dubious victory of their candidate Nicolás Ardito Barletta in this year’s elections, can do nothing for the development of democracy. The legacy of General Omar Torrijos who ruled Panama for a decade, negotiated the treaties with the United States and gave Panamanians a new sense of national pride, had its negative effects insofar as it helped to institutionalise military control of Panama. The power of the Panamanian military has also been bolstered by the Carter and Reagan governments which had wanted to ensure a stability in Panama that they did not trust would emerge under civilian rule.

Panama could best be helped by Europe if it was made clear to the Defence Forces that European governments would be more likely to aid Panama if the military left politics to civilians.
4. Conclusion: The Role of Europe

For millions of Central Americans life presents the daily challenges of finding enough to eat, escaping violent death and avoiding the attentions of dictatorial governments. The isthmus is in desperate need of three things – peace, democracy and development. As things presently stand there is little or no chance of achieving any of them.

In three countries of the area, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, war is a daily reality. Honduras is being pressed to become a forward base for United States military operations, as Panama already is. Only in Belize and Costa Rica are there situations which border on normality as it would be understood in the developed world with respect for human life, the rule of law and a pluralistic political system, Belizeans and Costa Ricans are constantly worried lest they be pulled into the maelstrom in which their neighbours are already struggling.

The actions of external powers, the United States on one side and the Soviet Union in loose alliance with Cuba on the other, are making progress towards peace, democracy and development all but impossible. The government in Washington, taking a narrow and fearful view of its “vital interests” in the area, is continuing to arm and encourage the military forces of the extreme right. In civilian politics it has given wavering support to the right of centre forces such as the Christian democrats in El Salvador. Such forces have no great record of success in dealing with the problems of Latin American society.

The Soviets have indulged in ritual condemnations of United States actions in Central America but have generally been circumspect in their own activities. Such a set of policies has achieved less than nothing. Moscow's verbal bellicosity has justified the fears and strengthened the reactions of the right in the United States and in Central America itself while doing nothing to hasten the pace of social change.

The Cubans have taken a more constructive stance in many ways in that they have given training and encouragement to those dedicated to overthrowing the dictatorial regimes of the right. In particular the Cubans have constantly counselled unity among the forces of the left. When such counsels have been heeded, as in the case of Nicaragua before the overthrow of the Somoza dynasty, victory has come remarkably quickly. All too often however the government in Havana has been seen to be identified with a Leninist ideology intolerant of political pluralism. Such Leninism suffers two practical drawbacks. It serves to stoke the fires of United States hostility to change in Central America. No less importantly it has proved difficult of implementation in the Third World. Leninism has brought neither independence nor prosperity to Cuba itself which continues to rely on large subsidies from the Soviet Union. Nor did it to Grenada, as the killing of Bishop and his comrades by a particularly sectarian clique in the Grenadian government and army testified.

Four Latin American countries, Mexico, Panama, Colombia and Venezuela, have been attempting to halt the fighting in Central America through joint diplomatic initiatives in their Contadora Group. The Contadora process is certainly a praiseworthy initiative. It has hitherto been consistently sabotaged by the United States. Its sponsors may not by themselves be strong or influential enough to achieve the political solutions that the isthmus needs.
European Political Activity

In such an impasse there is clearly a greater role for the democratic governments of Europe. As spokesmen for the Reagan government never tire of repeating to Europeans critical of United States policies in Central America, Europe has a comparatively small stake, political, military or economic, in the isthmus. This is a qualification rather than a disqualification, as Reagan supporters would argue, for an enhanced European role in the affairs of the area. European politicians may be expected to look on the problems of the region with greater equanimity than Washington strategists who have hitherto given the impression of something approaching hysteria at the prospects for an area just over their southern horizon.

A louder European voice in debate on the future of the area should be welcome to a broad spectrum of democratic opinion within Central America itself. The modern democracies of Europe come to the scene without the embarrassing heritage that the United States bears. Washington carries the burden of its continued military interventions in Central America and the Caribbean, be they the occupations of Nicaragua in the early part of the century, crushing of the constitutionalist movement in the Dominican Republic in 1965 or the invasion of Grenada last year.

Politically it has thrown its support behind the forces of reaction in Central America, supporting the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954, treating the Somoza dynasty as a staunch and valued ally in Nicaragua, defending a series of military regimes in El Salvador and accepting and embracing the corrupt rule of generals in Honduras. The United States record in the region rules it out as a credible champion of democracy in Central America. If pluralistic democracy is to be established in the isthmus it cannot be a task for the United States to undertake.

No one would pretend that the democratic governments of Western Europe have distinguished themselves as champions of democracy in Central America. But, in recent years at least their sins have for the most part been ones of omission rather than ones of commission.

European governments have a major political asset in the fact that they subscribe to many of the same ideologies as those of Central America. Whereas the notions of Christian democracy, socialism, liberalism and social democracy and the different variations of Marxism-Leninism are virtually entirely absent from the political scene in the United States such notions are the bread and butter of European politics. The shared ideologies have been manifested in international organizations such as the Socialist International, the Liberal International and the Christian Democratic World Union whose activities have brought together into often very close co-operation politicians in Western Europe and Latin America.

In the past few years the record of European political activity in Central America has been modest but positive. The European Community has expressed its support for the efforts of the Contras Group. The Socialist International has played a key role in maintaining contact with the government of Nicaragua and in supporting the emergence of a democratic and pluralist regime in Managua. In many different ways and on many occasions the Socialist International has restrained hotheads in Washington from taking even more damaging action against the Sandinistas than they have taken. In El Salvador, for instance, the fact that Guillermo Manuel Ungo’s Frente Democrático Revolucionario (FDR) is a member of the insurgent guerrilla front while his party the MNR is a member of the Socialist International has facilitated contacts between the Salvadoran guerrillas and democratic socialists around the world.

In their own way the European Christian democrats have helped the cause of pol-
itical pluralism in Central America. While they have committed the error of exaggerating the democratic credentials and the importance of the Christian democratic government of President Duarte in El Salvador they have, at the same time, provided support and aid to the Christian democrats of Guatemala who, unlike Duarte, had been virtually boycotted by the United States government.

When European governments acting in co-operation with Latin American governments have taken initiatives the results have at times been spectacularly positive. The decision of President François Mitterrand to join with the Mexican government in 1982 to declare that there could be no peace in El Salvador without reference to the insurgents did little more than state the obvious. The effect of stating the obvious, however, has been to improve the chances for some eventual talks on peace between government and insurgents in El Salvador.

**The aims of the European Community**

Given the urgency of finding an end to the Central American crisis the contribution Western Europe can make must not be underestimated. At the level of the European Community the formal support that the Ten have given to the Contadora Group will be made more explicit when ministers of the Community gather in Central America for talks with their Central American counterparts.

This meeting will have served its purpose if it results in increased co-operation between Latin Americans and Europeans in the search for an end to the Central American crisis.

The European Community should have among its aims the following:

i. the establishment in Central America - preferably at San José - of a permanent office headed by a senior and experienced official able to report on the situation in the isthmus week by week to Brussels and able to offer assistance, when requested, to the Contadora Group.

ii. the channelling of larger quantities of the Community's food surpluses to the refugees and other Central Americans in need. Where possible, this should be done through European voluntary agencies so that local government and army officials in El Salvador and Guatemala, in particular, are not given the opportunity for their own enrichment (it is clearly ludicrous that the Soviet Government is subsidised by the Ten through sales of Community farm surpluses while Central America starves).

iii. the use of the voting power of the Ten in the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Inter-American Development Bank so that European monies are not used for the benefit of repressive, anti-democratic regimes. The Community must see that the Nicaraguan Government gets the international financial assistance that it merits.

iv. the continual presentation to the governments in Washington and Moscow of the Community's views on the development of political and economic democracy in the isthmus, and

v. the continuing support of the Institute for European-Latin American Relations recently established with all-party support in the European and Latin American Parliaments and with the assistance of the European Commission.

The role of the European Community in Central America will become even more important if, as seems very possible, Spain and Portugal join the Ten in 1986. Both the Spanish and the Portuguese have given notice that they will seek to strengthen European connections with Latin America after they accede to the Community.

Nor must the contribution of European
countries outside the Community be disregarded. The Swedes and Norwegians have followed events in Central America very closely and in Pierre Schori and Bernt Carlsson the Swedish foreign ministry has two figures with special experience of the region.

Reagan’s puppet
From a Conservative government in Britain little can be expected. Under Margaret Thatcher the British government has never taken serious issue with Washington’s assessment of the situation. Whitehall has mounted small protests on secondary issues as, for example, when the Reagan government expressed its willingness last year to resume arms supplies to the military regime in Guatemala or when British vessels were in danger after the mining of Nicaraguan ports at the instance of Washington this year. For the most part however Britain has been content to accept and tacitly endorse United States government policies. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office acted as Ronald Reagan’s agent when it opposed funds from the European Community’s Programme for Central America being destined to Nicaragua. Nothing leads one to hope that this state of affairs can be altered.

One of Margaret Thatcher’s most surprising decisions has been to countenance the continuing chaos at the Overseas Development Administration (ODA). Timothy Raison, Junior Minister responsible, has presided over a Ministry which at the beginning of the year was shown to be unable to build a bungalow in the Falkland Islands for less than £133,000. The ODA is now allowing some of its much reduced funds to go to El Salvador to help a policy of forced sterilisation of poor women. British money which might have been used on something useful for Central Americans is, under Raison’s fiat aiding a shameful, not to say criminal, traffic in human misery. It is an attempt to curb the threat to the Salvadoran establishment represented by poor Salvadoreans.

What Labour Must Do
All the more reason therefore for the Labour Party to prepare with special care the policies towards Central America that it intends to carry out once it returns to power. Such policies must be founded upon a commitment to work closely with socialists in other member countries of the Community in the shaping of an active programme of support for the forces of change and democracy in Central America.

As a member of the Socialist International the Labour Party is committed to supporting the democratic socialists who are fighting for democratic values and the rule of law in Guatemala and El Salvador. Consequently a Labour government in Britain would be morally obliged to give diplomatic and material aid in response to appeals from its sister parties in the two countries.

As far as Nicaragua is concerned a Labour government should be ready to respond to any call from a democratic government in Managua for arms for the country’s defence against external aggression. There is no reason why the Labour Party today should not here and now announce its decision to be ready.

Britain is the only European country with military units stationed in Central America. The 2,000 British soldiers must not be withdrawn from the defence of Belize until some stability has come to Central America or a credible international defence force for Belize is put together. This country more than any of our neighbours has an interest in the establishment of peace and democracy in the isthmus. A Labour government must be among the leaders of a European effort to bring new hope to the Central Americans.
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