

INSHORT

By Joel Bleifuss

Red threat, real profit

When the U.S. sent 3,200 soldiers down to Honduras last week it was ostensibly at the request of President Jose Azcona Hoyo, not the more powerful Honduran military. It is common knowledge that the U.S. Honduras has long been the major beneficiary of the U.S.-contra war against Nicaragua. Less well known is the fact that the Honduran military has helped maintain that flow of U.S. military and economic aid by giving qualified support to the contras and not antagonizing the Sandinistas. This policy is examined in "Honduras: The War Comes Home," a 27-page, three-part report in the current issue of *Report on the Americas*, a publication of NACLA (North American Congress on Latin America).

Trump or sluff: Victor Meza, of the Honduran Documentation Center in Tegucigalpa, in his article "The Military: Willing to Deal" reports that the Honduran military governs itself internally by a 52-member military parliament called the Superior Council of the Armed Forces. This parliament, says Meza, uses the contras as "the ultimate trump card in relations with Washington. The decision to permit the counterrevolutionaries to deploy freely in Honduran territory and maintain a network of encampments along the Nicaraguan border is the armed forces' exclusive responsibility; civilians can do little but reinforce the military strategy with diplomatic activity." When the U.S. balks at increasing aid or meeting other demands, the Honduras military restricts the contras' movements.

Nicaraguan contacts: The Honduran military has also helped "diffuse tensions" through an established "network of underground contacts" with the Nicaraguan government. According to Meza on Jan. 27, 1986, two high-ranking army officers held secret talks with Nicaraguan military officials along the Honduran border. That same day, back in Tegucigalpa, Jose Azcona Hoyo was being sworn in as president. These contacts may even have led to cooperation between the Honduran and Nicaraguan military. On March 17, 1986, the Honduran military apparently allowed the Sandinistas to enter Honduras in pursuit of the contras. And on May 30, 1987, the Honduran military prevented contras fleeing Nicaraguan troops from crossing back into Honduras.

Breakdown after talks: In October and November 1986, Nicaraguan and Honduran military officials held a series of meetings in Panama. The Nicaraguans were then apparently granted permission to chase the contras into Honduran territory without reprisal. But, according to Meza, "on the night of December 4 a mysterious incident occurred: a Sandinista contingent attacked an observation post, killing two Honduran soldiers. In one of the most dangerous incidents between the two countries, the Honduran Air Force retaliated, bombing two Nicaraguan villages, Wiwili and Murra, on December 7."

No-win war: Last Wednesday, as the president was crying "Invasion!," Honduran army spokesman Col. Manuel Suarez Benavides told the *New York Times*, "We have no concrete information that Sandinista troops have crossed our border. What I can say for certain is that no Honduran military units are engaged in combat in that area or anywhere else." The military appears intent on avoiding a full-scale war. For no matter who wins such a war, the Honduran military loses. A Nicaraguan win would damage the military's public image and thus weaken its control over Honduran society. On the other hand, a Honduras-assisted contra victory means that the U.S. would divert much of the aid it now sends Honduras to support a contra-controlled Nicaragua. Consequently, says Meza, the military has tried to follow a policy that "many describe as 'cynical pragmatism'—maintaining the latent threat of war without letting it become a reality." It is a profitable policy. In fiscal years 1982 to 1987, the U.S. poured more than \$1.16 billion in military and economic aid into Honduras.

Central America is (not) falling

As President Reagan was readying troops for a Central American adventure, sensible voices were being heard in Congress. Said Democrat Rep. David Obey of northern Wisconsin, "Right now, members are trying to ascertain the facts before we respond to Chicken Little."

Another rat graduates

As Ronald Reagan's ship of state begins to sink, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officials continue to jump (In Short, Sept. 16, 1987). According to a source at the EPA, Marsha Wil-

The peace process



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Invasion: The Nicaraguan side of the story

MANAGUA—Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega termed the sudden dispatching of 3,200 U.S. troops to Honduras March 16 as the "gravest threat" Nicaragua has faced in its long confrontation with the U.S. Although President Reagan said the action demonstrated the "seriousness" with which the U.S. views the Central American situation, the old bogey of a direct invasion suddenly became a real possibility.

Nicaragua took the message accordingly. The moment word reached Managua that Washington "did not rule out any option" in responding to a purported Sandinista "invasion" of Honduras, the entire country went on alert.

Most radio stations hooked into a central radio link-up to await the latest bulletins. Correspondents and individuals called in to the stations to express their readiness to encounter "any eventuality." Spontaneous rallies were held in towns and

cities around the country. The mood of crisis deepened. Hospitals were readied to receive casualties, while revolutionary slogans and songs filled the airwaves.

Though it all ran a strong sense of *deja vu*. Almost exactly two years before a similar scare occurred during a large-scale Nicaraguan offensive in precisely the same border region. At first Honduras downplayed that incident, with President Jose Azcona even deciding the crisis should not interrupt his holiday on the beach. Although the Honduran position changed after Washington played up the "invasion," the 1986 Holy Week incident quickly faded in importance.

Last Wednesday Honduran military authorities and even the Foreign Ministry declined at first to confirm the "invasion." By mid-afternoon confusion reigned as to whether Washington jumped the gun in responding to an "urgent request" for U.S. help from Azcona. Confirmation that Tegucigalpa had indeed asked for U.S. troops did not come until late evening.

Early Wednesday afternoon a rela-

tively calm Daniel Ortega said he had talked with Azcona three times during the previous 24 hours, explaining in detail the border operation and even requesting a personal meeting. Ortega said he also contacted the other three regional presidents and proposed that an international commission inspect the border.

What actually happened? This major Sandinista offensive had never been secret. Ortega announced it on International Women's Day, March 8. As on previous occasions, he stressed the need for "combat readiness," despite signs that cease-fire talks would be renewed on the highest level.

While the border incident captured the most attention, the offensive was actually occurring throughout the country. It had nothing to do with Honduras, but everything to do with taking full advantage of the contras' increased vulnerability in the wake of the U.S. cut-off in their aid.

With aid suspended, the contras have been forced to fall back close to supply caches they had stored in several parts of Nicaragua. The remote border area near San Andres

de Bocay is the most critical of these areas. It is their "rear-guard," a window for their activities. From there units penetrate into Nicaragua and supply flights land on small airstrips. And it is to there that the rebels retreat.

According to a European military analyst based in Managua the Sandinista objective was to encircle and trap the contras in precisely that area. It is highly likely the Nicara-

guans did briefly cross into Honduras to cut off the contra retreat. The analyst believes the Sandinistas decided not to repeat the error of a similar operation last May, when they avoided crossing the Coco River and thus failed to trap the rebels.

"In this way the government could essentially reestablish the military edge they held until last year," the analyst said. That advantage was re-

moved largely due to U.S.-dispatched Red-eye missiles that the contras have used to deadly effect on superior Sandinista air power.

For Nicaragua, the military gains were paramount. But the sense of urgency also boosted revolutionary morale among the Nicaraguan population, and strengthened Managua's hand heading into the cease-fire talks.

—William Gasperini

Radioactive milk shakes up Mexico

MEXICO CITY—What do you do with nearly 17,000 tons of Chernobyl-contaminated powdered milk? If you're the Mexican government, the answer is easy—you put it on a boat and send it back to Ireland.

Not so easy is answering questions about the several thousand tons of powdered milk missing from the original shipment. Missing tons that have probably filtered onto the Mexican market through a combination of government corruption and pilfering by employees of CONASUPO, the government's basic foods distributor.

The saga of the Chernobyl-contaminated milk began June 3, 1987, when three Cypriot ships arrived at the Mexican port of Veracruz. Shipping records show the three boats were carrying 16,958 tons of powdered milk and 22 tons of butter that had been sold by the Irish Dairy Board to CONASUPO. The milk powder sat in Veracruz warehouses until December when the Public Health Secretariat (SSA) tested it for radioactivity. SSA was acting on reports that Mexican navy cadets had drunk CONASUPO milk and fallen ill.

Homeless turn to courts in search of rights

The National Coalition for the Homeless thought it had won a major battle last year when Congress passed a billion-dollar bill to fight homelessness. But the coalition then had to sue to get the Department of Education to release \$5 million the bill had targeted for homeless schoolchildren.

"As homelessness has exploded into a national problem it's become an issue that should be addressed by the federal government on a national level," says Maria Foscarinis, the Washington counsel for the National Coalition for the Homeless. For advocacy groups like the coalition, that means lobbying Congress to pass new laws, and suing Uncle Sam to enforce current law. Armed with last year's bill, known as the McKinney Act, recent right-to-shelter decisions from several state courts, Depression-era laws protecting the poor or mentally ill, and even portions of the Napoleonic Code, the focus of homelessness litigation is shifting from state to federal courts.

"It's an expanding field in the

sense that after you establish the right, you're back in court enforcing it," says Foscarinis. "We're planning to press ahead on both fronts." Although most of the federal suits so far have sought to enforce existing statutes, Foscarinis foresees a time soon when the federal courts may force Congress to pass a homeless-rights bill. But that approach has proved controversial among advocates for the homeless.

"Getting people off the street isn't so much a matter of their abstract rights as who's going to pay," says Gary L. Blasi, who is both the director of homelessness litigation for the Los Angeles Legal Aid Foundation and a director of the National Coalition for the Homeless. Blasi explains the recent flurry of federal litigation not as a bona fide movement, but as a localized response to a single piece of litigation.

"It's the state cases where the action is," says Blasi. "I don't know of any serious litigating lawyer who thinks that there is the chance of a snowball in hell of this federal judiciary establishing a right to shelter."

Despite the recent victories in federal courts, a reversal of the 1974 Burger Court decision finding no

Environmentalists charge that the missing milk was filtered onto the Mexican market through a combination of corruption by government officials and petty pilfering by Veracruz warehouse workers. But since the government shows no inclination to provide a detailed accounting, the fate of the missing milk may never be known.

Meanwhile, the Irish government is silent. A spokesman for Ireland's Honorary Consul says Mexico has not made a formal complaint. And in Dublin, the Irish Dairy Board pleads ignorance. Virtually the only trade between the two countries is Ireland's sale of powdered milk to Mexico—39,100 tons totalling \$33.6 million in 1987.

No one has yet explained why milk from Ireland was contaminated and not milk from other European nations. The contaminated shipment of powdered milk was originally reported to have come from Northern Ireland. But the British Embassy in Mexico City issued a denial that offers some explanation. "Well, it rained in Ireland after the Chernobyl disaster," an embassy spokesman told one reporter. "In Britain, it didn't."

—Mike Tangeman

explicit constitutional right to shelter is unlikely under the more conservative Rehnquist court.

But Peter B. Edelman, a professor at the Georgetown University Law Center, argues for building a case state-by-state.

"If you can find states that are willing to declare an entitlement to shelter under their own law, then down the road the Supreme Court might pick up on that," says Edelman.

If a federal right to shelter is established, advocates for the homeless hope to work toward establishing the right to permanent shelter. But that will not be easy. Most of the federal suits have been brought by non-profit legal services whose budgets have been slashed under the Reagan administration. Furthermore, advocates say, the Reagan judiciary is uninterested in establishing and protecting the rights of homeless people.

"It's really a matter of luck," says Foscarinis. "A lot depends on what judge you draw. Judges are more conservative, much less willing to go out on a limb, to cover cases that are not explicitly spelled out in the statute."

—Jonathan Gill

liams, the former director of the Office of Solid Waste (the EPA entity that writes regulations controlling the disposal of solid and hazardous waste), recently left her \$72,000 a year position and went to Browning Ferris, the nation's No. 2 toxic waste dealer. Last fall Browning Ferris and Waste Management (waste dealer No. 1) pleaded guilty in Ohio to felony charges of price-fixing and trade restraint. They were each fined \$1 million. Still pending are about two dozen federal grand jury investigations of the two companies.

Election rigging in Korea

Two Catholic priests have filed a lawsuit charging the Chun Doo Hwan government with rigging South Korea's December elections. The priests, both of whom were members of groups that monitored the election, maintain that in many instances the government computers announced final vote totals for districts where the counting hadn't been completed. They also note that the election results didn't necessarily correspond to the televised results. In some cases the number of votes for candidates decreased as time passed. Furthermore, in the course of its coverage, the state-controlled television network changed the total number of voters who participated in the election 25 times. The two priests claim that the election results were planned in advance by the government's Election Management Committee.

Chernobyl fallout

In the summer of 1986, 35,000-40,000 more Americans died than usual. In a normal year, 31.7 percent of the nation's deaths occur during the May to August period. But in 1986, 33.1 percent of that year's deaths occurred in the summer. The *Economist* of Britain reports that Dr. Jay Gould, of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, believes these "extra" deaths may have been caused by the April 1986 Chernobyl disaster. He discovered that the greatest rise in 1986 summer deaths—a 5 percent increase—was found in the Pacific states of Washington, Oregon and California. That was also the area of the U.S. that received the most radioactive fallout from Chernobyl. Milk produced in that region had higher-than-normal concentrations of radioactive iodine-131. (At its post-Chernobyl peak, milk in Washington state contained about 1,850 percent more iodine-131 than it did in 1985.) Nuclear industry experts contend that exposure to low levels of radiation is harmless. Although occasional doses of low-level external radiation like X-rays may be relatively safe, radioactive material that is inhaled or ingested can be dangerous. According to Dr. Ernest Sternglass of the University of Pittsburgh, after radioactive material enters the body it travels to specific areas, where it continues to emit radiation. Iodine-131 for instance ends up in the thyroid. Such internal radioactive contamination damages the body's ability to manufacture the hormones and white blood cells that fight disease. The people who would be most affected by a radiation-induced weakening of their immune systems are those already suffering from life-threatening illnesses. Dr. Gould found that when comparing May-August 1985 to May-August 1986, the number of people who died from pneumonia rose by 18 percent, the number of people who died from all infectious diseases increased by 23 percent and the number of people who died from AIDS was up by 60 percent. In the September-December 1986 period those comparative figures dropped dramatically, but still remained significantly higher than January-April 1986.

Nuclear humbug

If you suffer from radiation poisoning, you should have bought Survivor, the "personal, consumer-oriented, radiation warning receiver, designed to be the first line of defense for the average citizen." Marketed by Threshold Technical Products of Cincinnati, this \$185 device works like a smoke detector, plugs into a wall socket and, if you choose, fits in a coffee cup. The company maintains that using this "home radiation detector may save your life—and your family." And Survivor promotional literature anticipates your doubts: "[You say] 'The nearest nuclear power station is hundreds of miles away; therefore, I don't have to worry.' WRONG. You do need to be concerned. It is possible to be exposed to radiation in your own home. How? Do you live near a major interstate highway or near a transcontinental rail line? If the answer is YES, then you can be living in a high-risk area for a nuclear accident."