

Central America's Uneasy Disarmament

by Tim Rogers

IN LESS THAN TWO DECADES SINCE THE BLOODY, U.S.-sponsored wars ended in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, Central America has undergone an extreme makeover of reality-TV proportions. The old images of men dressed in green fatigues and dark sunglasses, red-and-black revolutionary flags, tanks in the streets and scruffy guerrillas toting AK-47s in the jungles have since been replaced by the sunnier, tourist-friendly sights of white-sand beaches, colorful toucans, pluming volcanoes and inviting cultures.

With the various peace accords came a new wave of relative stability, cooperation and democratization, and the war-torn countries—desperate for foreign capital—joined forces to promote tourism and regional free-trade pacts with the United States and Europe.

Yet, just beneath the simulacrum of peace and integration remains a dark mistrust among the countries that share this umbilical strip of land connecting North and South America. Almost every frontier is a disputed border: Guatemala and Belize, El Salvador and Honduras, Honduras and Nicaragua, and Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Integration efforts such as the Central American Parliament and the Central American Court of Justice have proved to be failed experiments. Perhaps the most worrisome aspects of the rocky integration process and evolution toward sustainable peace are in the areas of disarmament



Soldiers march during the Nicaraguan Army's 24th anniversary celebration.

and the redefinition of the role of state security forces in the post-conflict era.

In the early 1990s, Central American nations began dramatic cutbacks on military personnel and defense expenditures. But their military demobilization efforts have always been reluctant, a reflection of economic desperation and U.S. pressures, rather than a true desire to reduce firepower. In 1990, for example, Nicaragua sold its Ukrainian-made attack helicopters to Peru to raise money for soldiers' back pay and severance. Military hardliners in Nicaragua are still grumbling about the sale, and they blame Violeta Chamorro, the President at the time, for effectively disabling the country's air force.

Following the end of the Cold War, and the subsequent cutback of U.S. military aid in the beginning of the 1990s, Central American militaries have undergone forced downsizing. Honduras' defense budget dropped from \$126 million in 1989 to around \$33 million last year. El Salvador and Nicaragua have slashed defense spending by almost three-quarters since the mid 1980s. Guatemala, which didn't sign a peace accord until 1996, only started to significantly demobilize in 2004.

On paper, demobilization appears to be working. But continued suspicions among Central American neighbors have hampered goodwill efforts to implement the demilitarization process spelled out by the decade-old Democratic

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Security Treaty, signed in 1995 by Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Implemented two years later in 1997, the treaty calls for each country to establish a “reasonable military balance.” To date, there is still no agreement on the definition of that term, and several countries appear unwilling to give up any more than they already have.

Veteran Central American defense expert Roberto Cajina explains that “reasonable balance of military forces” is a relative term based on each country’s geography, population size and national security threats. The failure to agree on a common definition, he says, has resulted in an isthmus that is unbalanced in military strength, defense spending and weapons arsenals. This imbalance has politicized the issue of disarmament in various Central American countries.

El Salvador, Central America’s smallest country, with only one coastline, spends \$112 million annually on its military—more than four times the military budget of Nicaragua, the isthmus’ largest country, which has two expansive coastlines, border conflicts with three countries, rearmed rebels operating in the interior and thick jungles that are being infiltrated by Colombian drug runners.

Staying consistent with disproportionate defense spending, even peaceful, demilitarized Costa Rica, Washington’s democratic poster-boy during the 1970s and 1980s, last year had double the military expenditures of Nicaragua and Honduras. “Costa Rican demilitarization is a myth,” Cajina scoffs.

Guatemala, with Central America’s largest military, took an important first step toward demilitarization in May 2004, when newly elected President Óscar Berger announced his government would comply with the 1996 peace accords by cutting the

military from 27,000 to 15,500 personnel, close five bases and slash defense spending by nearly 50%. The decision—although most likely out of economic necessity—nonetheless represented a dramatic change in policy from Berger’s predecessor, the democratically elected strongman Alfonso Portillo, who boldly refused to implement the required military reductions. But Guatemala’s cutback, which in effect now makes El Salvador’s 17,000-troop army the largest in the region, does not speak of establishing a reasonable military balance in the region.

Nicaragua was the first country in Central America to unilaterally decide to destroy stockpiled weapons from the 1980s. At the behest of the United States, Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolaños announced last April that his government would destroy 50% of its stockpiled surface-to-air missiles, known as SAM-7s.

Washington remains edgy about the shoulder-fired missiles falling into the hands of terrorists, and later demanded that Nicaragua destroy all of its SAM-7s. When the Sandinista-controlled National Assembly refused to authorize the destruction of all the missiles, an opportune sting operation last January in Managua uncovered a down-and-out mechanic who was allegedly trying to sell a rusty old SAM-7 missile on the black market. It was the first time a SAM-7 had turned up in civilian hands, offering solid proof to back the U.S. claim that Nicaragua was vulnerable to terrorist activity.

Jorge Iván Pineda, the accused weapons trafficker, told the judge during his oral trial that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency had set up the whole missile-sale operation with the help of Nicaraguan police agents and two former Contras, who allegedly supplied the SAM-7. Pineda

said he was offered \$1,000 for his cooperation in the montage, but was later hung out to dry by the United States. He was eventually found guilty of terrorism, and after the trial, an unidentified North American wearing a dark suit and sunglasses in the courtroom was reportedly seen complaining to the judge that the two-year sentence wasn’t stiff enough.

The Nicaraguan army, which was shaved from 90,000 soldiers in 1990 to its current 16,000, began the disarmament process in May 2004, despite opposition from former military leaders and lawmakers from the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). The army has since completed destruction of 1,000 of its 2,150 Soviet-made SAM-7s.

The missile destruction remains a sharp point of disagreement between U.S.-backed President Enrique Bolaños and the country’s two major political parties—the FSLN and the Liberal Constitutional Party, which together control the National Assembly and a majority of state institutions, including the courts.

The country’s National Federation of War Veterans and former revolutionary icons, such as Edén “Commander Zero” Pastora, all came out strongly against the SAM-7s destruction, arguing that Bolaños was putting his eagerness for Washington’s good graces before national defense considerations. The former military men are distrustful of neighboring Honduras for not taking any steps to reduce its aging fleet of U.S.-provided F-5 fighter jets—precisely the reason Nicaragua purchased its defensive surface-to-air missiles in the first place.

Despite the controversy over the SAM-7 destruction, inside military sources in Nicaragua claim the act has more to do with political showmanship than a real reduction of active

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weapons. The army is destroying weapons technology that, in some cases, is 40 years old. "They probably didn't even work anymore," said Cajina, who has worked for the last 15 years as an advisor to Nicaragua's Ministry of Defense and Ministry of the Interior.

WHILE THE REDUCTION IN ARMAMENTS may not affect Nicaragua's defense capabilities, there appear to be deeper ramifications to the issue than the country wants to admit. The fact that the Bush Administration asked Nicaragua to reduce its missiles and didn't make similar disarmament requests of other Central American countries demonstrates that the old Cold War hawks who have been invited back into the U.S. government still do not trust Nicaragua. "This should be interpreted as a vote of no confidence in the professionalism of the Nicaraguan Army," Cajina remarked.

Plus, as several former Contra leaders have noted, the real missile problem in Nicaragua is not due to the SAM-7s, which are reportedly all accounted for and under military lock and key, but the hundred-plus "Red Eye" shoulder-launch missiles that the United States provided the Contras in the 1980s. The Contras were a more rag-tag guerrilla force, and many of those missiles are now feared to be in civilian hands.

U.S. caginess regarding Nicaragua has only grown in recent months, following political maneuverings by the Sandinistas to put Daniel Ortega, former revolutionary president and Ronald Reagan nemesis, ahead as its candidate for the 2006 presidential elections, despite the chance of a Sandinista breakaway candidate [See "Democratizing the FSLN," p. 4].

Equally worrisome to the region's reluctant disarmament is the new peacetime role taken on by military

and state police forces in the crackdown on youth gangs in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras.

Aided by heavy-handed anti-gang laws, which became popular in Central American legislatures during the last few years, military and state-security forces have begun to implement repressive round-'em-up and lock-'em-down operations in capital cities from Guatemala to Nicaragua. The crackdown on the gangs has raised concerns that Central American countries may be on the verge of taking a step backwards toward the repressive top-down police practices of their recent past, only this time it's against impoverished residents of urban areas rather than the countryside.

Human rights reports have even recently warned about the return of death squads that conduct "social cleansing" operations in neighborhoods suspected of gang activity. In Honduras, authorities are investigating allegations of social cleansing, following the murders of more than 50 gang members in the capital, Tegucigalpa. Regional advocacy group Casa Alianza has documented more than 2,300 youth murders in Honduras since 1998.

The gang phenomenon in Central America has spiraled out of control in the last decade. Fueled by poverty, failing social services, desperation and families divided by immigration, Central American cities have become fertile grounds for gang recruitment. The problem also stems from U.S. immigration policies, which deport Central American gang members back to their native countries, leading to the spread of gang structures and activity. In Guatemala, there are 14,000 youth gang members, 10,500 in El Salvador, 36,000 in Honduras, 1,000 in Nicaragua, 2,600 in Costa

Rica and 1,380 in Panama, according to regional police estimates.

The response in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras has been to counter gang violence with state muscle. Guatemalan President Berger, who earlier this year admitted he has been unable to curb a wave of violence that this year has claimed the lives of 2,000 Guatemalans—including hundreds of women—deployed 4,000 soldiers and elite police commandos onto the streets of the capital in July 2004. In neighboring El Salvador last September, hard-line President Tony Saca launched operation "Super Heavy Hand," which rounded up close to 800 suspected gang members in its first two weeks alone. Salvadoran security forces have detained more than 20,000 people on gang-related charges since July 2003.

The dragnets in El Salvador and Honduras have been facilitated by anti-gang legislation that allows the police and military to arrest alleged gang members for infringements as innocent as sporting tattoos or gang-colored clothes. Similar draft laws in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama have civil and human rights activists on edge.

"The intention of these bills is very clear: to repress the poorest children, those who have already been excluded from the system," said Evelyn Palma, legal department coordinator with Casa Alianza in Nicaragua. "It is an attempt to resolve an economic and social problem by putting the victims in jail. The stigma is that we would be returning to a period of time we have already overcome."

Central America would do well to heed a familiar regional saying as it steps into the future. Loosely translated into English, the saying says, "Man is the only animal stupid enough to trip over the same stone twice." ■