

Contras sacrificed in deal with Soviet

by Carlos Wesley

After a three-day summit in Tela, Honduras, the presidents of Central America agreed on Aug. 7 to disband the Contras, the U.S.-supported rebels fighting against Nicaragua's Sandinista government. The five Presidents of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, agreed to establish an International Support and Verification Commission within a month, and they gave the Contras three months after the commission comes into being to voluntarily put down their weapons, shut down their bases in Honduras, and return to Nicaragua. To ensure compliance, a 2,000-man United Nations armed peace-keeping force consisting of troops from Spain, West Germany, and Canada will patrol the Honduras-Nicaragua border, and will have the right to patrol other borders in the region.

The agreement spells the "death sentence for the Contras," said Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega. In exchange for the dismemberment of the Contras, Ortega's government has promised to undertake democratic reforms and to hold free elections next February.

Although the Bush administration loudly proclaims it is not completely happy with the agreement, its protests are mostly to appease its conservative constituency. In fact, the agreement was not reached until the United States signaled "a shift in its position" on Aug. 3, when a "senior State Department official" said that the administration would not oppose the demobilization of the Contras, if the Sandinistas agreed to "democratization" and guaranteed the safety of the returning rebels.

A plan presented by El Salvador, that the demobilization of the Contras be linked to the demobilization of the communist Salvadoran guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), was scuttled because of last-minute pressure from the Bush administration, say sources at the summit.

Expendable bargaining chips

While State Department spokesman Richard Boucher denied that, and insisted that the U.S. position was that the FMLN also disband, it is the case that U.S. policy from the inception of the Contra policy, has been to use the rebels as bargaining chips in its deals with the Soviet Union.

The framework for this condominium arrangement between the superpowers was first laid out by the late Soviet dictator Yuri Andropov in his famous April 1983 interview

with the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, in which he indicated that the U.S.S.R. would have no objection to ceding Nicaragua and Cuba to the U.S. sphere of influence, in exchange for Afghanistan, the Middle East, Western Europe, and pretty much everything else. Andropov's disciple and successor, Mikhail Gorbachov, signed on to the policy with the understanding that such regional arrangements be implemented through the United Nations.

On May 18, the Soviets signaled their willingness to close the deal by announcing that Moscow had halted arms shipments to Nicaragua. This was followed by a trip in mid-June to Moscow by Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Bernard Aronson.

Ortega's Sandinistas, in turn, signed on to the arrangements being worked out by the superpowers, and suddenly announced in July that they had requested that the United Nations supervise the upcoming February elections. This will be the first time in history that an independent nation surrenders its sovereignty by agreeing to U.N. supranational monitoring of its electoral process.

In exchange, the U.S. administration set about dismantling the Contras. In mid-July it told the Contras that it would stop funding their Miami operations and advised them to get ready to demobilize and resettle in Nicaragua. On July 31, Contra leader Adolfo Calero accused "senior State Department officials" of attempting to destroy the rebels.

Meanwhile, feverish negotiations continued with the Soviets. On July 29, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker brought up the issue with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. Secretary Baker praised the Sandinistas for the agreement. "We are very pleased with the steps the Nicaraguan government has taken," he said during a visit to Mexico Aug. 6. And President George Bush said in an interview published by the *Boston Globe* Aug. 9, that while he would not "want to see the compulsory demobilization of the Contras before the elections," the Central American agreement was not "totally incompatible" with U.S. policy.

But it is unlikely that this condominium arrangement will bring peace to the war-ravaged Central American region. Enrique Bermúdez, the Contra military chief said the Contras might refuse to demobilize. "If there is no dialogue, we will not be convinced of its voluntary nature, and there will be no demobilization, nor repatriation nor voluntary relocation," he said in a radio broadcast after the agreement was announced.

The likelihood is that the Contras will remain what they have always been: a mercenary army of drug traffickers, to be cynically used by the CIA as an entirely expendable bargaining chip in their greater game. Finishing touches are being put on plans for their probable next deployment. According to a report in the *Times* of London of July 22, the CIA is arming "more than a thousand former Nicaraguan Contras . . . to begin military actions to drive Gen. Noriega from power" in Panama.