

Claiming Honduras as our own

**SPECIAL
REPORT**

THE RISE & FALL OF A DEMOCRACY

by Leyda Barbieri

Until July, 1979, when Nicaragua's Sandinista revolution sent shock waves through Central America, Honduras was unknown territory. Today all that has changed. Honduras has become the nerve center of U.S. military operations in the convulsive Central American region. The appeal of its strategic location is clear. Honduras occupies the heart of the Central American isthmus, with a long Caribbean shoreline. To the south it commands the Gulf of Fonseca, which U.S. officials have long charged is a primary route of arms transfers from Nicaragua to the FMLN guerrillas in El Salvador. The administration's attitude toward Honduras seems to be summed up in the unguarded comment of Special Forces Captain Michael Sheehan to a *New York Times* reporter in August, 1981: "This dump is the center of the world now."

An editorial in the daily newspaper *El Tiempo*, a lone dissenting voice among Honduras's otherwise stridently conservative press, complained two years later that "in the history of Latin America, there has never been a comparable mobilization for war by the United States toward the subcontinent. When the Marines landed at the beginning of the century to enforce the imperial will, there were scarcely 50 *yanki* soldiers who marched through Tegucigalpa. When the famous Tacoma Pact obliged Honduras to accept a hundred-year-long banana company concession, 250 Marines arrived. Now, the nineteen-ship battle fleet brings 16,000 soldiers to Central American waters, with incredible firepower—supersonic aircraft, missiles, and heavy artillery. Added to the 5,000 U.S. troops already occupying Honduras, they outnumber the Honduran Army." A second editorial in the tense summer of 1983 lamented that "we have lost everything, including our honor."

As well as playing host to the greatest concentration of U.S. military forces in Central America, Honduras also enjoys the sad distinction of being the region's poorest country—second only to Haiti in the Western Hemisphere. A Gross Domestic Product of \$2.5 billion in 1980 for a population of 4.7 million yielded a per capita income of \$640. Honduras has finally shaken the "banana republic" epithet, but the Honduran economy is still dominated by a narrow range of agricultural commodities. In 1980, just

four products—coffee, bananas, meat, and timber—continued to account for 63 per cent of the country's export earnings. Agriculture employed 57 per cent of the Honduran work force in the same year.

Manufacturing in Honduras accounts for just 15 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product, and the industry that does exist tends to be concentrated in export-oriented assembly plants which bring little benefit to the local economy. Most of the light industry is of recent origin, set up in the 1960s at the height of interest in the Central American Common Market or enticed from the United States to the Cortes Free Zone under the generous provisions of the Honduran Law of Industrial Incentives. A modern infrastructure has yet to develop in Honduras; in fact, its capital city is one of the few in the world not served by a railroad.

The emphasis on exports has produced severe imbalances in the rural areas, where three out of five Hondurans live. Government credit policies have done little to stimulate basic grain production, and in 1980 Honduras was obliged to import \$51 million in foodstuffs from the United States.

The basic indicators of the quality of life for the Honduran population, especially the peasantry, make depressing reading. Illiteracy runs at 47 per cent. CONSUPLANE, the government's economic planning agency, estimates that three-fifths of the peasant population, with a monthly income of less than \$25, live below the poverty line. Health care in particular is dismal, with only 5,230 hospital beds to serve Honduras's entire population. Infant mortality is 87 per thousand live births, and 76 out of every hundred children suffer from some form of malnutrition.

THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Yet Honduras appears to belie the conventional wisdom that grinding poverty will inevitably lead to revolution. Until very recently there have been no traces of a guerrilla movement. Instead, 80 per cent of the Honduran population went to the polls in November, 1981, and, in scrupulously clean presidential elections, resoundingly endorsed the less conservative of two civilian candidates.

The present relative lack of violence in Honduras is due in part to the fact that the extremes between the rich and poor have not grown here as they did elsewhere in Central America. Though there is a considerable inequality of land tenure (the 1974 census reported that 64 per cent of land-

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owners owned 9.1 per cent of cultivable land), Honduras has no Somozas, no "Fourteen Families." Honduran military leaders have been more benign than their counterparts in El Salvador or Guatemala, though since 1981 widespread human rights violations by intelligence and security forces have become part of the country's political landscape.

Geography is also largely responsible for the lack of violence. There was never a lack of land in this sparsely populated country. The humid and fertile flatlands of the Caribbean proved a magnet to the giant U.S. fruit companies. In 1950 the United Fruit Company (Castle and Cook) owned 630,000 acres of Honduran land. So completely did they dominate Honduran affairs for the first half of this century that Honduran presidents could—quite literally—be bought and sold by the *banañeras*.

When the seventeen-year-long dictatorship of Tiburcio Carias Andino ended in 1949 and his successors belatedly modernized the Honduran economy, there was no entrenched local elite waiting in the wings to monopolize political power. Foreign investors had controlled all the most important sectors of the economy. Their departure left a virtual power vacuum among local civilian elites, and the stage was set for the Army to become the dominant force in Honduran political life. By 1957 the Honduran Army was effectively in charge. Once on top, it behaved with considerable shrewdness and, though occasional doses of repression were administered, managed for the most part to coexist with Central America's largest and best-organized labor and peasant movement.

Paradoxically, Honduras was the last country in Central America to legalize labor unions. The turning point came in 1954, when a strike of United Fruit Company plantation workers spread throughout southern Honduras. Instead of meeting the strikers with violence, President Juan Manuel Galvez called in mediators from the AFL-CIO, who persuaded United Fruit that it was in their best interests to accept "free and democratic" unions purged of radicals. The Inter-American Regional Organization of Labor (ORIT), the Latin American offshoot of the AFL-CIO, came thereafter to dominate the Honduran labor movement through the main union federation, the CTH. (The AFL-CIO has enjoyed a similarly close relation with the peasant federation ANACH since its founding in 1962.) For the first time there was pressure on peasant small-holdings and on traditional communal forms of land ownership. A militant and well-organized peasant movement was formed in response.

The reform-minded government of Ramón Villeda Morales (1957-63) met the peasant movement with a two-track policy. While the AFL-CIO promoted ANACH to supplant the more radical FENACH, Villeda introduced an Agrarian Reform Law in 1962, closely modelled on previous legislation in Venezuela and Costa Rica and very much in the spirit of the Alliance for Progress. The National Agrarian Institute (INA) distributed modest plots to peasant families and opened up new land-colonization schemes. Even so, the effort was inadequate to quiet the countryside. Throughout the 1960s the peasant movement remained in ferment, carrying out continual large-scale land invasions in which Christian Democrat leaders were prominent.

The Honduran elite, seemingly unable to develop a modern industry-based economy, sought refuge from its do-

mestic failings in war with El Salvador. The origins of the conflict lay in the chronic inequities of land tenure in El Salvador, as a result of which 600,000 Salvadorans had migrated to underpopulated Honduras in search of land. That pressure for land aggravated simmering resentment in the Honduran Army, where it was believed that the Central American Common Market had unfairly favored the Salvadoran economy over that of Honduras.

But what began as an exercise to rally national unity ended in traumatic defeat. The four-day "Soccer War" of 1969 exposed the Honduran Army's military incompetence, its rampant corruption, and its poor command structure. Political forces shifted rapidly in the wake of the rout. A sweeping overhaul of the Armed Forces coincided with the widespread desire of both business and labor that Honduras "enter the twentieth century." Disillusion with the traditional political parties—Liberal and National—was rife. In a postwar spirit of patriotic reconciliation, the military entered into overt alliance with large parts of both urban and rural labor. Business too, though mainly the more future-oriented entrepreneurs and technocrats grouped in the private enterprise federation, COHEP, joined the "Political Plan for National Unity."

This novel tripartite alliance laid the foundation for a three-year period of reforms under the government of General Oswaldo López Arellano. Having led one coup in 1963 as a harsh conservative, López Arellano had now come full circle. Seizing power in December, 1972, he announced Honduras's first-ever National Development Plan and the nationalization of the vital timber industry. But the centerpiece of his regime's program was agrarian reform, which López Arellano declared to be a "fundamental task."

For two years an interim decree encouraged the distribution of both national and private lands to peasants. It was replaced in 1975 by a more comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law that aimed at distributing 600,000 hectares of land to 120,000 peasant families. Only in the first year did the agrarian reform even remotely approach the law's goals. By 1979 barely a fifth of the targeted land had been distributed. According to estimates from the peasant union FUNACAMH, there are currently 200,000 landless families in Honduras.

Reformist ideas in the military were fading fast by this time. The tripartite alliance had lacked clear direction, and COHEP had withdrawn its support for the agrarian reform early on. More important, the military had grown greedy. The fall of López Arellano in 1975 after the "Bananagate" scandal, in which the Honduran economy minister was shown to have received \$1.25 million of a \$2.5 million bribe from United Brands, opened the way for a corrupt clique of military officers closely linked to the big landowners and most conservative businessmen. By the late 1970s, Honduras had gained an unsavory reputation as a key point in international drug trafficking, and there was scarcely a member of the high command who failed to become a millionaire. The repressive government of Colonel Juan Alberto Melgar Castro distinguished itself with the 1975 Massacre of Los Horcones, in which a number of peasant leaders and two foreign priests, one of them a U.S. citizen, were killed. Two years later that government was responsible for the brutal destruction of the Las Isletas banana cooperative, an operation commanded by a young

officer named Lieutenant Colonel Gustavo Alvarez Martínez. Within five years he would be commander-in-chief of the Honduran Armed Forces.

Overwhelmed by charges of corruption and administrative incompetence, the Melgar Castro regime was overthrown in 1978 by a three-man junta headed by General Policarpo Paz García. It looked as if Paz García would offer more of the same until an event intervened that had no place in the calculations of the Honduran military: the 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua.

THE RETURN TO DEMOCRACY

Until recently, U.S. policy toward Honduras could best be characterized as "benign neglect." As one leading scholar of Honduran affairs has argued: "Two months after the Nicaraguan revolution, the Department of State recognized the geo-political centrality of Honduras.... A clear line of thought began to develop in Washington about Honduras' new regional role: it can be traced from the later days of President Carter to the present administration."

The strategy outlined was multifaceted. First, it called for a swift return to democratic rule. "The vital thing," noted one foreign diplomat in a conversation with the *New York Times*, "is that no one be able to question the legitimacy of the next government." Second, the military would be strengthened, both as an institution within Honduras and as a U.S. ally or bulwark against turbulence in neighboring countries. U.S. economic aid would also increase. In Fiscal Year 1980, Honduras received from AID \$41.2 million, a full 18 per cent of the Latin American total. Finally, there would be unswerving political support from the United States for the new Honduran government.

Syndicated columnist Jack Anderson offered a perceptive view of administration policy in March, 1980: "The president seems determined to add still another sorry chapter to the chronicle of Yankee imperialism in Central America. The administration apparently has chosen Honduras to be our 'new Nicaragua'—a dependable satellite bought and paid for by American military and economic largesse."

The Honduran Armed Forces had little quarrel with this new role. Like their counterparts in El Salvador and Guatemala, they were sobered by the precipitate collapse of Somoza's National Guard. They also recognized that public opinion was anxious for the Army to return to the barracks. In light of the sliding economy, exacerbated by corrupt and inept management, it seemed no bad thing to hand the government over to civilian rule. If the reward was the fortification of the *real* power of the military behind the scenes, then so much the better.

With Constituent Assembly elections planned for April, 1980, General Paz García met with Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs William Bowdler in Washington. He made three promises: that the elections would be open and honest; that no military officer would run for the presidency; and that the Constituent Assembly would limit itself to rewriting the Constitution.

Paz García saw immediate rewards. In April, 1980, the Carter administration reprogrammed \$3.53 million of Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and increased International Military Education and Training (IMET) grants for FY 1980 to \$450,000. In addition, Honduras was permitted to lease ten U.S. Army UH-1H helicopters under special U.S. loan procedures. The Honduran Army also set about putting its

own house in order, getting rid of its most corrupt senior officers and any officers tainted by ideas of social reform.



At this point the United States was providing no known support to Somoza's former National Guard or to *contras* encamped along the Honduras-Nicaragua border. For the Sandinista authorities the *contras* were more of a nuisance than a threat. Under Carter the U.S. preferred that Honduras's role in regional military operations focus more on the Salvadoran border. Since the 1969 conflict the two countries remained technically at war. Demilitarized segments of their borders—*bolsones*—had become Salvadoran guerrilla strongholds. By October, 1980, the two countries had signed a peace treaty that mainly benefited the Salvadorans, even though El Salvador was in the throes of civil war and Honduras was securely on the road to democratic rule. The Salvadorans' main gain, pushed privately by the Carter administration as its policies hardened in the pre-election months, was access to the *bolsones* in pursuit of the guerrillas. The first fruits of renewed cooperation between the two armies were macabre. Fleeing refugees on the Rio Sumpul and the Rio Lempa were slaughtered by Salvadoran troops as Honduran soldiers prevented the refugees from entering Honduras on their side of the river.

The Army remained in full political control of the country. When the time came for the new Constituent Assembly to select a provisional head of state to oversee the eighteen-month interlude before presidential elections, the civilian parties chose General Paz García. At the same time, political and business leaders alike began to woo the hard-line Colonel Gustavo Alvarez Martínez, now clearly emerging as future chief of the Armed Forces.

Alvarez's ascendancy coincided with a growing unease within the military at the prospect of an independent civilian government. The Western press reported widely that prior to the November, 1981, elections, both major candidates—Liberal leader Roberto Suazo Córdova and National party chief Ricardo Zuñiga—were called in for meetings with the high command. In those meetings a deal, or *entendimiento*, was struck. There would be no

civilian investigation into corruption. This, said the Army, "played into the hands of the enemies of the country." The military further insisted on the right of veto over cabinet appointments and refused to contemplate any civilian interference in military affairs. A *Miami Herald* story reported that this included exclusive right to determine policy toward the tense Nicaraguan and Salvadoran borders.

With the *entendimiento* in place, the military gave its blessing to the scrupulously clean election of November 29, 1981. The narrow and surprising Liberal victory of April, 1980, turned into a landslide for Suazo Córdova. Liberals enjoyed a 44-34 majority in the new Congress. The small centrist Innovation and Unity party (PINU), with its power base in the urban middle class, took three seats, while the Christian Democrats—banned from running in the previous year's Constituent Assembly election—took one seat. The party's sole deputy would come to act, in the words of one report, "as a virtual one-man national conscience."

The almost euphoric election was, to *Tiempo* editor Manuel Gamero, "a vote against corruption, against the presence of the military in power. It was in favor of a change of political style, in favor of neutrality in the regional war." In an interview two years later, Gamero was despondent: "It has brought Honduras just the opposite."

THE ECLIPSE OF PLURALISM

Until the November, 1981, elections there was probably more continuity of policy between the Carter and Reagan administrations toward Honduras than toward any other Central American country. But the end of that year brought a marked escalation of U.S. policy goals in Honduras. In November the administration upgraded the Tegucigalpa embassy from Grade 4 to Grade 2 and replaced Ambassador Jack Binns with John Dimitri Negroponete, formerly deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs and a member of Thomas O. Enders's staff in Cambodia. Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Enders set the tone for future U.S. policy with an announcement on December 14 that Cuba had successfully unified a National Directorate of revolutionary organizations in Honduras committed to armed struggle. Local observers, cognizant of a historically splintered and isolated revolutionary movement in the country, found this hard to swallow.

At the same time—though the American press failed to break the story until nearly a year later—the U.S. National Security Council approved covert operations against Nicaragua and began to study military options against the Sandinista government. Honduras would be the operational center and Negroponete would oversee the "secret war." Honduras, already the possessor of the most powerful air force in Central America (of Caribbean Basin nations, only Cuba and Venezuela have larger ones), would now become the continent's largest recipient of U.S. military aid after El Salvador. It would also witness the largest military maneuvers ever held in Central America (Ahuas Tara I in February, 1983, and Ahuas Tara II beginning in August, 1983).

The enlistment of Honduras as a buffer state against Salvadoran guerrillas, as a springboard for *contra* activity against Nicaragua, and as a base for extending the U.S. military infrastructure has drawn Honduras further into the

regional conflict rather than insulating it from the neighboring upheavals. Perhaps the most disturbing feature of current U.S. foreign policy in Honduras is that it appears to ride roughshod over Honduran domestic politics.

The Reagan administration has only peripherally addressed the desperate state of the Honduran economy; and as long as the appearance of democratic rule is upheld, U.S. policy-makers appear to have a cavalier disregard for the impact of their policies on a social order that has only recently embarked on the painful transition away from military dictatorship. As one journalist put it: "The U.S. role depends on Suazo Córdova's presence, not Alvarez' prominence."

For Christian Democrat Deputy Efraín Díaz, the pecking order of power is clear: "Negroponete, Alvarez, and Suazo work in coordination. Initially, we thought that there were two governments. But progressively Alvarez and Suazo came to be one, and of course the influence of North American politics through Negroponete is the last word, to such an extent that we feel our government has lost its autonomy." The absolute compatibility between U.S. foreign policy goals, which bear an ever-greater military component, and the interests of the fiercely anti-Communist current that now controls the Honduran Armed Forces—embodied in General Alvarez—has meant the effective eclipse of Liberal civilian politicians in the two years since the 1981 elections. For *Tiempo* editor Gamero and others in Tegucigalpa's small liberal community, pluralism has become increasingly risky. "To cast the problems of the country in East-West terms," he says, "means branding all dissent against the military, any talk of economic reforms, as Communist."

THE MAN AT THE TOP

"Everything you do to destroy a Marxist regime is moral," Armed Forces Commander Gustavo Alvarez Martínez told reporters in July, 1983. Local and international human rights commentators note that the same uncompromising sentiments that dictate Alvarez's attitude toward Nicaragua seem to guide his treatment of dissent at home. The general has frequently expressed his admiration for the methods used by the Argentine military during its so-called "dirty war" on terrorism, which claimed thousands of lives in the mid-1970s. In Honduras, reported *Newsweek*, he successfully "helped create a powerful national-security council which he dominates; he established a nationwide civil-defense network, and he cracked down on leftists, matching terror with some frightening tactics of his own."

From 1958 to 1962, Alvarez underwent officer training in Argentina; he also spent time at the Officers' Academy in Peru and at Fort Benning, Georgia. That training left its mark. As Alvarez worked his way up through the ranks with a mixture of iron discipline and harsh conservatism, his name remained largely unsullied by charges of corruption.

Changes in the command structure of the Honduran Army began in 1980. Many senior officers who resisted closer ties to the Salvadoran military because of their bitter memories of the 1969 war were relieved of their command. Alvarez, a leader of the school that believed anticommunism a greater imperative than past rivalries, became head of the Public Security Forces (FUSEP), which gave him control of the secret police (DNI). At the same time,

the intelligence-gathering functions of the military were given greater prominence, and Alvarez inaugurated the police's new crack urban counterinsurgency unit, the Cobras. In building an efficient domestic security network, Alvarez relied heavily on the counsel of Argentine military and police advisors, who also took the primary role in training shock forces of Nicaraguan *contras* until U.S.-Argentine relations cooled with the Falklands/Malvinas war. Reports of torture in Honduras grew more widespread, and the extrajudicial elimination of criminals and suspected "subversives"—which had formerly been recorded in the north—now made its appearance on the national level.

Charges against Alvarez were not confined to his liberal civilian opponents. They also came from senior figures in the military and shed light on Alvarez's fascinating climb to power. Three months into Suazo Córdova's term of office, the new president abruptly designated Alvarez a brigadier general—rare in Honduran military history. The move was engineered by Alvarez himself and required a modification of Army regulations. It threatened the stability and unity of the Armed Forces. Alvarez's two principal rivals, Colonel Leonidas Torres Arias, head of military intelligence (G-2), and Colonel Hubert Bodden Caceres, commander of the 1st Infantry Battalion, placed troops on alert, infuriated at having their own ambitions slighted and at what they saw as unwarranted civilian interference by Suazo Córdova in military affairs.

Alvarez reacted swiftly, dispatching both challengers into diplomatic exile as military attachés to Argentina (Torres Arias) and Taiwan (Bodden). At the same time, the old collegiate leadership of the Armed Forces gave way to a more centralized command structure in which Alvarez, still aware of rumblings of dissent within the officer corps, surrounded himself with loyalists. By August 31, 1982, Torres Arias had resurfaced in Mexico City, accusing his former boss of "a plan of physical extermination of all the opposition" and charging him with "leading Honduras into an abyss of internal destruction, preparing the people for the possibilities of a war [with Nicaragua]." As former head of military intelligence, Torres Arias certainly had access to such facts. Alvarez, who in December, 1983, was promoted from brigadier general to division general, has now consolidated his power to a degree not seen before in Honduran history.

THE NATIONAL SECURITY STATE

On assuming his position in January, 1982, Alvarez began to build important civilian alliances in keeping with his belief that Honduran political life had to be insulated from what he called "alien ideologies." Dr. Ramón Custodio, the physician who heads Honduras's independent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, charges that this desire to control dissent has led to a systematic assault on many of the key institutions of Honduran society. He argues that it may explain a series of scandalous electoral frauds in the students' and teachers' unions and the National University over the summer months of 1983. In consort with the ruling Liberal party, the military sponsored the formation of so-called Civil Defense Committees. In an October, 1982, statement the Honduran Bishops Conference claimed that the committees present an "enormous danger" for civil and political liberties, adding that they "did not know of such [committees] being organized in

any country that boasted of being democratic."

Alvarez rapidly consolidated his relations with the influential private sector of San Pedro Sula, with its new conservative chief Mario Belot, and with the powerful business leader Miguel Facusse, head of the Quimicas Dinant conglomerate. (Hondurans often refer to the ruling Negroponte-Alvarez-Suazo Córdova "triumvirate," but Facusse may be a fourth power of equal importance.) Next came the appointment of another anti-Communist Alvarez confidant, Oswaldo Ramos Soto, as rector of the National Autonomous University (UNAH). By January, 1983, this alliance would give birth to the Association for the Progress of Honduras (APROH), a key axis of military-private sector power in contemporary Honduras.

In the same month, APROH received its legal title from President Suazo Córdova at a ceremony in San Pedro Sula. General Alvarez was named the organization's president and Miguel Facusse its vice-president, with Ramos Soto as secretary-general. Leaders of the AFL-CIO-affiliated labor union (CTH) and peasant federation (ANACH) also sit on APROH's board. For many Honduran politicians, APROH denoted "a clearly fascist project." In an interview in August, 1983, APROH's executive secretary, Benjamin Villanueva, a former economy minister in a military government, refuted those charges, describing APROH's purpose as "fighting Marxism-Leninism with ideas, while General Alvarez fights it in other ways." APROH found a ready ally in CAUSA International, a front group for the Reverend Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church, which held a series of opulent anti-Communist "seminars" for Honduran business and media leaders. CAUSA pledged to contribute one dollar for every ten raised from APROH's membership. The resultant check for \$50,000 was returned when CAUSA's involvement provoked a statement of condemnation from the Honduran Catholic bishops in April, 1983. They warned of the "serious dangers to the psychological, religious, and civic integrity of anyone who yields to its influence." Though embarrassed by the CAUSA episode, APROH assumed ever-greater influence on the Honduran political scene in the course of 1983. In November, after the U.S. invasion of Grenada, the organization declared itself in favor of a military solution to the Central American crisis.

The Honduran Congress, controlled by the party in power, had no say in any of this. Deputy Efraín Díaz told a news magazine in December, 1982: "The fact that the people turned out for the elections and that 80 per cent of them voted—which should signify popular power through the ballot box—has been turned into a myth, an illusion." The ineffectiveness of Congress, he continued, has produced a constitutional crisis: "The present Congress is simply a rubber stamp for what the Executive Power wants." Requests from the Christian Democratic party or from the small centrist PINU for commissions of inquiry on the presence of Nicaraguan *contras*, the state of human rights, and Honduras's rapid military buildup have been brushed aside, their sponsors derided as "antipatriotic."

Thus, ironically, the traditional political parties have been seriously weakened by two years of "democracy." The ruling Liberal party has lost much of its vigor. For years, and until his death in 1979, the *caudillo* Modesto Rodas ran the party. Most local observers consider Suazo Córdova merely a pale imitation of his predecessor. But

Suazo's accession benefited a new generation of conservative technocrats with close ties to the military rather than the old-guard Rodistas. The Liberals are also prey to repeated accusations of internal fraud, most recently in the August, 1983, party elections. The victim of these practices has been the Liberals' small social democratic sector, AL-IPO (of Tegucigalpa), which seems condemned to remain on the sidelines as long as it aspires to change the Liberal party leadership from within.

The National party, meanwhile, is in disarray after defeat. Its Mayor Daley-type *caudillo* Ricardo Zuñiga Augustinus, who led the party to a crushing electoral defeat in 1981, has fallen from grace, and the party looks in vain for a successor. Once widely considered "the civilian wing of the Armed Forces," the National party now expresses outrage at the abuses of the Liberal-military regime. Its deputies have complained that "Honduras is being run by a government that either believes it is backed by a power without limit, or does not recognize the limits of that power." It is guilty, they say, of "flagrant violations of the Constitution."

The most glaring instance of Congress being sidestepped came last June with the establishment of the new Regional Military Training Center (CREM) at Puerto Castilla on Honduras's Caribbean coast. For the Reagan administration the training of 1,500 Salvadoran troops at Puerto Castilla was an expeditious means of avoiding the congressional ceiling of fifty-five U.S. military advisors in El Salvador. Instead of being debated in the Honduran Congress, the installation of CREM was negotiated bilaterally between the Pentagon and General Alvarez.

The controversy over the base suggested that even the highest circles of the Liberal party were excluded from Alvarez's confidence. Until the last moment, when CREM was presented to Congress as a *fait accompli*, Foreign Minister Edgar Paz Barnica and Minister of the Presidency Carlos Flores Facusse convincingly denied all knowledge of the plan. The flouting of congressional authority was too much for the president of the body. Liberal Deputy Efraín Bu Girón declared that "military leaders violated the constitution when they signed [the] pact." Yet the congressional vote on the base revealed the limits of its indignation: Only the three PINU votes and the Christian Democrat's abstention went against the scheme.

OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights violations in Honduras are in no way comparable in scale to those committed by the neighboring governments of El Salvador and Guatemala. Nonetheless, in comparison with the record of previous Honduran governments, they are unprecedented and have had a dramatic impact on public sentiment in the country. Debate over increased human rights violations by intelligence and security forces led to the creation in 1981 of the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights and in 1982 of the Committee of the Families of Detainees-Disappeared. Both private organizations have been active domestically and have become well known internationally. A third independent source documenting violations of human rights is the Honduras Documentation Center, which bases its information on articles published in Honduras's four daily newspapers.

The Christian Democrats, through their deputy, Efraín Díaz, have been very critical of abuses against individuals

committed by the security apparatus. Pressures by the Christian Democrats and the other small opposition party, PINU, to create a committee in the Honduran Congress to investigate cases of the disappeared and violations of constitutional rights led to the formation of the Commission of Constitutional Guarantees and State Security. The commission, made up of three Liberals, one National party deputy, and one PINU deputy, lacks assistance, staff, or money to do its job.

Fundamental to any case-by-case study of human rights violations in Honduras is the understanding that all military, police, and security forces fall under the direct control of the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces. Civilian authorities exercise no effective control over these bodies. Most observers trace the recent upsurge in human rights violations to a brief period in 1981-82 in which both local guerrilla groups and units of El Salvador's FMLN carried out acts of violence against the Honduran government. The two years since have been marked by a consistent pattern of human rights abuses, including disappearances, extrajudicial killings by both government security forces and freelance death squads, physical and psychological torture, the denial of habeas corpus, and some infringements of press freedom.

Americas Watch, the Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights, and the Washington Office on Latin America concluded in late 1983: "Since the Suazo Córdova Government came to power in 1982 approximately 80 persons have disappeared after allegedly being abducted by the security forces. The Government of Honduras offers no explanation or information regarding the fate of these people or their current whereabouts." Interviews with missing persons who later reappeared revealed several patterns. "Most of the disappeared were abducted by heavily armed men driving unmarked vehicles" and "taken to clandestine detention centers used for interrogation and torture." The techniques applied in the interrogations are generally "highly sophisticated and brutal."

It was not until the first reappearances that the military and security forces admitted that they were guilty of abductions and illegal detentions. But, said secret police (DNI) chief Major Juan Blas Salazar, such actions were "necessary to preserve our democratic system."

The spate of disappearances appears to have abated since the summer of 1983, but political murders have increased sharply, and many of the victims have been individuals involved in labor or peasant organizations and leftist political groups. These killings mark a new trend. In February, 1982, the first mass grave ever to be found in Honduras was located at La Montanita, just outside Tegucigalpa. Subsequent investigations uncovered two more clandestine cemeteries. Also in 1982 two new right-wing death squads made their appearance. One called itself the Honduran Anti-Communist Movement (MACHO), the other the Anti-Communist Liberation Army (ELA). Other right-wing paramilitary groups are believed to be operating in the eastern department of Olancho.

The Honduran police and military habitually justify human rights abuses by invoking national security interests and the need to contain "Communist subversion." Without a doubt, FUSEP and the DNI have felt their freedom of movement enhanced by the degree of public anxiety in Honduras over the intentions of the Sandinista government.

The anti-Nicaraguan feelings fanned by most of the Honduran press have been exacerbated by the intemperate threats of some Sandinista leaders to "bring home the cost of the war" to neighboring Honduras for giving shelter and logistical support to the CIA-backed *contras*—if necessary, by supporting guerrilla units inside Honduras. But over the last two years the Honduran Army's response has been wildly disproportionate to the challenge posed by a tiny revolutionary movement in their country.

On July 19, 1983, a band of some ninety-six guerrillas affiliated with the Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers (PRTC), a small leftist group with chapters in several countries of the region, crossed from Nicaragua into the Honduran province of Olancho. General Alvarez announced that these formed the advance guard for two thousand Cuban and Nicaraguan-trained terrorists who were to infiltrate Honduras. But the incursion appeared to be a desperate operation doomed from the start. By mid-September it was dismembered by the Honduran Army, with up to forty guerrillas—allegedly including the group's leader, José María Reyes Matta—killed.

Scattered press reports of the incident suggest that the local peasant population was unaware of the group's existence, supporting previous indications that Honduras's tiny revolutionary organizations operate with little base of popular support on the margin of the country's large organized mass movement.

A plethora of tiny, fragmented, and divided Marxist groups have sprung up in Honduras in recent years. Though a unified directorate of politico-military organizations exists in name, there is little evidence that it has had any success in coordinating the actions of its members. The main constituent organizations are: the Morazanist Front for the Liberation of Honduras (FMLH); the Popular Movement of Liberation (MPL "Cinchoneros"); and the People's Revolutionary Forces (FPR "Lorenzo Zalaya").

OPPOSITION POLITICS

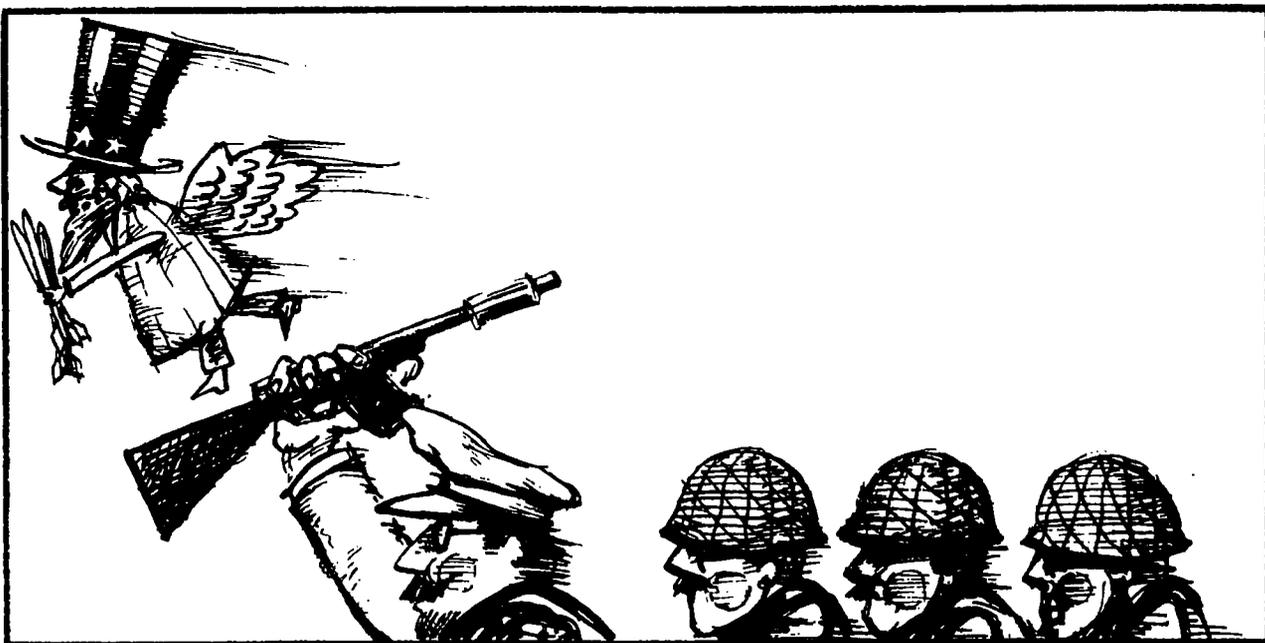
While the armed revolutionary Left has been notably unsuccessful in unifying its work, the mass movement is in

no better shape. In 1981 attempts were made to bring together in a broad electoral coalition several left-of-center political parties. But the Honduran Patriotic Front (FPH)—an attempt at grouping the two Communist parties (one loyal to Moscow, the other to Beijing), the Socialist Party of Honduras (PASOH), and the Christian Democrats—proved short lived.

A spectacular sequence of actions by the armed Left between May and August, 1982, was ineffective politically. Some of these, such as the dynamiting of two power plants in the capital, were evidently symbolic actions carried out in support of the FMLN in El Salvador. Others, more keyed to local politics, culminated in the August, 1982, seizure of the Chamber of Commerce in San Pedro Sula by MPL "Cinchonero" guerrillas and the taking of a hundred hostages. Antiguerrilla demonstrations outside the San Pedro Sula siege suggested public repudiation of the armed Left. The MPL failed to gain any of its ransom demands and, as the Honduran government stood firm, flew out to Cuba emptyhanded. Meanwhile, the military's swift and brutally efficient destruction of guerrilla safe houses in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula over the summer of 1982 demonstrated that the Armed Forces were willing to meet incipient terrorism with the full weight of counterterror.

On one side, then, was the vitiation of congressional politics; on the other, an ineffective and sectarian Left. This unusual panorama means that much of the onus of dissent in Honduras falls on individuals in key positions, such as Human Rights Committee President Ramón Custodio, former Minister of Labor Gautama Fonseca, newspaper editor Manuel Gamero, ALIPO brothers Jorge Arturo and Carlos Roberto Reina, Christian Democrat Deputy Efraín Díaz, and PINU Deputy Enrique Aguilar. The political institutions of opposition are fragile, and thus the principled stand taken by these few public figures is crucial. For the moment, these men carry great weight; by virtue of their high profile internationally, they also enjoy a certain measure of immunity.

There are signs too that the Catholic Church will come



Robert Durham

to take on a more vigorous role of opposition to government policies. The Honduran bishops traditionally have kept a low profile, and the social role of Honduras's Church has been much more modest and conservative than that of its Salvadoran and Nicaraguan counterparts. But the mounting repression against priests and religious workers—the most recent case being the unexplained death of American Jesuit Father James Carney in Olancho in September, 1983—and the degeneration of the political situation in the last two years help explain the more activist position that the Church has adopted recently.

An October, 1982, pastoral letter marks a turning point in Church attitudes. It condemned the "general situation of fear and lack of freedom" in Honduras and harshly criticized "terrorism, disappearances, mysterious discoveries of cadavers, assaults, robberies, abductions, and individual collective insecurity," which it said "appears to have increased in the past two years."

On July 13, 1983, the Honduran bishops called for "peace" in the region. In December they issued yet another statement, warning Hondurans that "dialogue is the only way to avoid confrontation" between Honduras and Nicaragua. Archbishop Hector Enrique Santos recently affirmed in a Sunday homily that "justice in Honduras is upside down." "Peace," he asserted, "is the fruit of justice."

RECESSION AND NEGLECT

The grounds for dissent can only increase as the Honduran government and the United States administration fail to address seriously the chaotic state of the Honduran economy. The Honduran economy is crippled by low prices for its main agricultural exports, high import costs, rock-bottom investor confidence, rampant corruption, capital flight (\$600 million over the last three years), high interest rates, overambitious public investment programs, an overvalued currency (the *lempira*), and a critical shortage of foreign currency. Negligible GNP growth rates of 2.2 per cent in 1980 and 0.3 per cent in 1981 were followed by negative growth for the last two years.

The social consequences of imported global recession and domestic neglect are tragic. "Tegucigalpa's narrow streets are jammed with beggars," reported the *New York Times* in July, 1983. By the end of 1983, unemployment was estimated to be 20 per cent. In addition, 60 per cent of those who have jobs are regarded as underemployed; prominent among them are agricultural field hands who work a day or two a week.

Disaster has been staved off, though in no sense avoided structurally, by relatively generous inflows of aid from the United States and international financial institutions. This flow of aid, jointly devised by the World Bank and the U.S. administration, depends on "the magic of the marketplace." The Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), which allocated \$35 million to Honduras, operates on the expectation that countries of the region will "review their economies with a view toward removing distortions that inhibit exports." The injection of foreign aid is designed primarily to keep the country solvent and attract further international loans from skeptical bankers. This will supposedly wean Honduras away from import substitution industries to "export-led industrialization" aimed at U.S. markets and corporations.

Escalating external indebtedness is put forward by these agencies as the only answer to economic problems. But this requires a renegotiation of the national debt—which by 1983 had risen to an estimated \$2.137 billion. Renegotiation, in turn, demands a clean bill of health from the International Monetary Fund. And the price of the IMF's injection of \$150 million is, as always, a program of domestic austerity.

As in the political and military spheres, the prescription for Honduras's ills came directly from the U.S. embassy. Four days after Suazo Córdova's inauguration, Ambassador Negroponte handed him a package of economic recommendations that came to be known as "Reaganomics for Honduras." The package aimed to stimulate private investment and boost exports while deregulating the economy. In line with U.S. embassy and IMF demands, Economy Minister Gustavo Alvaro's *Plan de Accion* called for an increase in consumer and income taxes, a generous tax-exemption scheme for foreign multinational corporations, an end to price controls for essential staples, and a 10 per cent cut in government spending. The spending cut resulted in a layoff of 10,000 public-sector employees.

Honduras is now on the familiar slippery Latin American debt slope. In 1983, debt servicing accounted for 18.8 per cent of export earnings. For most Hondurans there is no improvement in sight.

THE U.S. PRESENCE

Anyone acquainted with the tranquil Honduras of former times would be rudely shocked today. U.S. military personnel are everywhere—in the airport, in Tegucigalpa's few luxury hotels, in the capital's narrow streets. There is now a permanent military presence of at least 270 men, the largest U.S. contingent in the region outside the Panama Canal Zone garrison. About 125 of them are soldiers of the Army's Special Forces and supporting units at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, engaged in training special anti-guerrilla units from El Salvador. About 75 are military advisors training Honduran troops in infantry tactics. Sixty specialists are in Honduras to operate a radar station, and a half-dozen more run the military group, administering military sales.

This does not count the 5,500 men taking part in various stages of the Ahuas Tara II military maneuvers, concentrated in eastern Honduras. According to Pentagon officials, they have the express purpose of intimidating the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, which the Reagan administration believes to be "the source" of the Central American problem. It is a view with which the Honduran military command readily concurs.

Though the slogan of the incoming Suazo Córdova government was "The Internationalization of Peace," the last two years have been marked by an escalation of verbal hostilities against Nicaragua by General Alvarez and other senior Honduran officers. Believing war with the Sandinistas to be inevitable, Alvarez has spoken often of the need for a preemptive strike against Nicaragua. Thus far he has been restrained by some sectors of the Reagan administration, but Alvarez has been "hard at work searching" for ways to reactivate the defunct Central American Defense Council (CONDECA). On November 12, 1983, the *New York Times* reported that CONDECA had been "studying the legality of joint military action against Nic-

aragua" with direct U.S. participation.

The six-month-long Ahuas Tara II exercises were only the spectacular climax of a four-year military buildup by the United States in Honduras. Military aid levels have increased, with a dramatic reorientation in 1984 away from military sales and toward pure military grants.

Year	MAP	FMS	IMET	Total
1980	—	3.53	0.45	3.98
1981	—	8.40	0.53	8.93
1982	11.00	19.00	1.30	31.30
1983	27.50	29.00	0.80	37.30
1984	40.00	—	1.00	41.00

MAP = Military Assistance Program (grants)
 FMS = Foreign Military Sales (loans)
 IMET = International Military Education and Training

An impressive \$7 million infrastructure has also taken shape under Pentagon tutelage. Its centerpiece is the Regional Military Training Center (CREM) at Puerto Castilla. News of the center—*la base*, as everyone calls it locally—broke in U.S. newspapers as early as February, 1983, but was not confirmed by Reagan administration officials until April. Honduras was apparently chosen as the location for CREM after both Venezuela and Panama rejected the plan. The agreement was signed when General Alvarez visited Washington in May. The president of the Honduran Congress accused the military of violating the Constitution by allowing foreign forces to enter the country without congressional approval. Soon thereafter General Alvarez convinced the Congress to approve the CREM plan, informing the latter that the training center was necessary to stop an alleged Cuban-Nicaraguan plot, code-named *Plan Tijeras* (Scissors Plan), to infiltrate terrorist columns into Honduras. This was effected by a semantic compromise: The program would train "students," not soldiers, and there would be no "offensive weapons" in CREM. At the end of June, however, hundreds of Salvadoran "students," who had been fighting leftist guerrillas in their country, arrived for antiguerrilla training in Puerto Castilla, Honduras. CREM held its first student graduation ceremony on September 8 to coincide with Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's visit to Honduras. The graduates were the first of 1,200 Salvadoran troops to be trained in counterinsurgency warfare for the new quick-reaction *Batallon Arce*. Also to be trained at *la base* are three 350-man battalions of *cazadores*, or hunters.

The third major U.S.-manned military installation is a \$5 million sophisticated AN/TPS 43-type "tactical air transportable radar" system left in Honduras after Ahuas Tara I. The radar is located on a hill called Cerro de Hule some twenty miles southwest of Tegucigalpa and manned by a contingent of sixty Americans. The radar has a range of some 230 miles. It could be used for its ostensible purpose of surveillance of alleged arms shipments by air from Nicaragua to El Salvador and—more plausibly—to monitor anticipated increases in U.S. military overflights of the region, whether for supply, espionage, or, eventually, combat missions.

With Ahuas Tara II, U.S. forces have installed a TPS-63 radar station atop Isla El Tigre (Tiger Island) in the Gulf of Fonseca. U.S. officials refuse to specify the radar's capabilities and insist it is to support air control.

On May 7, 1982, the Honduran government agreed to amend a 1954 bilateral military agreement permitting the United States to upgrade and use three airfields at Palmerola, Goloson, and La Mesa. Since then five airfields have been improved or constructed, all of them to accommodate C-130 transport planes. The airfields are strategically located in different parts of the country. Port Lempira is close to the Nicaraguan border. Port Trujillo faces the Caribbean and the southern United States and is near Puerto Castilla, where the U.S. Special Forces are training Salvadoran and Honduran troops. Palmerola is an hour from the capital and was the command center for Ahuas Tara II. San Lorenzo sits in the Gulf of Fonseca bordering El Salvador and Nicaragua. El Aguacate is in the midwestern region bordering the Mosquitia. On June 20, 1983, the retiring U.S. Army chief of staff, General E. C. Meyer, told the *Washington Post* that the Pentagon was studying proposals to enlarge a total of six Honduran airfields for use by C-130 troop transports. Meyer added: "My own view always has been to build on whatever strength we had in the region, and I believe Honduras is a strength."

A \$7.5 million AID grant to construct a highway through the Honduran Mosquitia would improve surface communications near the airstrips at Mocerón and El Aguacate, from which Nicaraguan *contras*, as well as Honduran Army forces, are allegedly operating.

Yet even these levels of military hardware and more future Ahuas Tara exercises and installations do not seem enough for General Alvarez. In August the *Miami Herald* reported that Alvarez had requested some \$300 million in additional military assistance to be spread over five years. According to Honduran military officials, the aid would cover artillery, transport aircraft, communications equipment, and coastal patrol boats. It would also include jet combat aircraft, perhaps the U.S.-built F-16.

All the installations that the U.S. has built in Honduras are described as having tactical uses to modernize the defensive capabilities of the Honduran Armed Forces. Yet the inescapable conclusion is that they could also provide the infrastructure for a sustained U.S. combat presence in the region. General Paul F. Gorman, the new commander of the U.S. Southern Command in Panama, has recommended to the Reagan administration the benefits of using Honduras as a long-term U.S. military headquarters.

Whether as a center of operations for the deployment of U.S. forces in a Central American war, which seems ever-more imminent, or as an adjunct to existing permanent installations in Panama, Guantanamo, Puerto Rico, and Florida, Honduras is the key to Reagan administration policies in the region. General Alvarez, bolstered to a position of power by U.S. policies, would agree to U.S. military intervention in Central America. The hour—to paraphrase former Secretary of State Haig—is late. While there is still time, the effects of administration policies on Honduras should be studied closely. Such policies are, in the words of Representative James Jeffords (R-Vt.) as he addressed the Congress last July, "counterproductive to our stated intent of fostering democracy and a return to civilian rule in Honduras." [WV]