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Reagan's Contadoran Catch-22

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President Reagan faces a dilemma over his policy in Central America — and his aides are deeply divided on how to resolve it.

• If the United States supports a treaty being hammered out by the so-called Contadora countries, it will have to abandon efforts to help the Nicaraguan "contra" rebels. The treaty is tentatively scheduled to be signed by the five Central American countries on June 6.

• If the US does not embrace the treaty — and hard-liners within the Reagan administration oppose such a course — it will be viewed as blocking a diplomatic solution to the Central American conflict and prospects for congressional approval of contra aid will diminish. The House is expected to vote on the aid issue in early June.

At the moment Nicaragua itself indicates that it will not sign the accord being prepared by the Contadora group (Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, and Mexico). And it is not clear how the agreement will resolve such sticky issues as verification, reduction of armies, and internal democratization.

But if the Sandinista government decides to back the treaty, the US will be in a bind. "The administration's lip service to the Contadora process is now costing them," says Peter Hakim, staff director of the Inter-American Dialogue, a private group that favors a diplomatic settlement in the region. "They had not expected that signing of the agreement would occur at about the same time as the aid vote."

The internal dispute exploded this week as the Pentagon released a study stating that a Contadora peace treaty would not prevent the Sandinista regime from cheating on its provisions and continuing to foment insurgencies against

its neighbors. If Nicaragua signs the accord, the Pentagon says, the US in three years' time would have to commit 100,000 men and up to \$9 billion a year to contain Nicaragua.

The State Department quickly stated that the report was "an internal study" and had no standing as a US document. A Senate Republican leader called it a "serious error in judgment." And the White House joined the fray, minimizing the importance of the report and denying there were differences within the administration on a peace agreement.

But many lawmakers and diplomatic observers see the Pentagon study and the conflicting voices as unmistakable evidence that right-wing conservatives want to thwart any diplomatic solution, desiring instead to overthrow the Sandinista government. Democrats charge that US special envoy Philip C. Habib is actively supporting efforts to conclude a peace treaty but is meeting resistance within the administration.

A hundred House Democrats have in fact sent a letter to President Reagan urging him to support a Contadora agreement that meets the "legitimate security considerations" of the US and to start negotiations with Nicaragua in the Contadora context. One Republican, Jim Leach of Iowa, also signed the letter.

Rep. Jim Slattery (D) of Kansas says that it remains to be seen what emerges from the Contadora process but that "the administration should be more forthcoming regarding under what conditions it is willing to terminate aid for the contras." While the US would not be a signatory to the treaty, he notes, it could sign a protocol that pledged adherence to the treaty.

Those who oppose aid for the contras argue that the contras are not a credible force for bringing about change in Nicaragua and that, instead of trying to overthrow the Sandinistas, the US should work to contain Nicaragua. Rep. Lee Hamilton (D) of Indiana, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, says that US-Nicaraguan negotiations should focus on obtaining Nicaragua's commitment to stop "certain external conduct" and "in return, we will permit the Sandinistas to exist."

The administration, sensitive to charges that the contras are ineffective and poorly led, is pressing for reform of the United Nicaragua Opposition, the Miami-based political arm of the contras. Negotiations over such reform are under way.

Meanwhile, diplomatic observers are puzzled as to why Nicaragua has not rushed to back the Contadora agreement, as such a move would put Reagan on the defensive. It is speculated that the Sandinistas are distrustful of the US, remembering 1984, when Nicaragua signed a Contadora pact and the US pressed other Central American nations into objecting to it.

In the opinion of some analysts, the hard-line Marxists in the Nicaraguan leadership have no interest in stopping the conflict and being rid of the contras, who serve as justification for the regime's authoritarian policies.