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Reagan's Military Buildup

Despite election-year risks, the administration digs in deeper in Central America.

Sometime this week, small units of the U.S. Army's 193rd Infantry Brigade will leave their base in Panama and head north to Honduras. Their destination is a remote, densely forested area along the border with El Salvador, where the Americans will join with Honduran soldiers in a series of small-scale training exercises. But just across the border, El Salvador is infested with leftist guerrillas. The rebels use the Honduran outback for sanctuary, and their supply lines snake through the area toward Nicaragua. Under the auspices of a training mission, the Americans and Hondurans may manage to disrupt the guerrillas' backyard at an opportune time for some of Washington's hard-pressed friends.

The operation along the Salvadoran border is part of a bold new military buildup in Central America by the Reagan administration. In recent months the Pentagon has erected a network of airstrips, supply depots and training camps all over Honduras (map). From that base, the administration plans to step up its covert war against Marxist Nicaragua by equipping antigovernment rebels with helicopters and naval mines and perhaps with T-28 ground-attack planes. Already Nicaragua's major ports have been mined to interfere with its foreign trade and to block what Washington thinks will be a major influx of Soviet-made arms this year. The administration hopes that by raising its military profile, it can deter any counterattack. Last week more U.S. power was projected into the region when the aircraft carrier America and three escort ships were ordered to leave Puerto Rico for the Caribbean coast of Honduras.

Reconnaissance: The new facilities in Honduras also enable the Americans to play a more active role in the Salvadoran conflict. From Panama and from an air base at Palmerola in Honduras, U.S. reconnaissance planes fly over El Salvador looking for guerrillas. Recently a U.S. Army intelligence battalion was sent to Palmerola, and last week Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger

told NEWSWEEK that the unit's OV-1 Mohawk observation planes were flying "intelligence missions" over El Salvador. Some administration officials also hope that Honduran units will play a more aggressive role in attacking rebel bases and supply lines.

In an election year, Ronald Reagan might have been expected to pull his punches in Central America. But the administration's policy in the region just isn't working out. The Salvadoran Army has nearly used up both its ammunition and its morale. Washington is afraid that the country's leftist guerrillas will stage some sort of spectacular to steal the spotlight from the Salvadoran presidential election on March 25. Reagan's "secret war" against the Sandinistas is faring even worse. The contras, the Honduran-based rebels sponsored by the United States, have made little headway. Nicaragua has responded to their attacks, however, with a military buildup of its own aimed at both the contras and their hosts in Honduras.

Reagan is losing another sort of battle on Capitol Hill. Congress still refuses to come up with more military-aid money for El Salvador and for the contras; the Republican-controlled Senate rebuffed the White House again last week. With the Lebanese fiasco fresh in their minds, some administration officials worry that a balky Congress may yet contribute to another foreign-policy defeat for the president.

Spectres: Some of Reagan's more jittery advisers have proposed desperate remedies. Recently the administration rejected a plan to arm the Salvadorans with Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. And two weeks ago, NEWSWEEK has learned, the president turned down a proposal for U.S. personnel to participate directly in the Salvadoran fighting. The plan came from Gen. Paul Gorman, head of the U.S. Southern Command (box, page 38) and from CIA officials in Central America. They suggested that unmarked AC-130 Spectre gunships flown by the CIA should patrol the skies over El Salvador, using rapid-firing cannon to break up rebel troop concentrations.

According to two senior administration officials, Jeane Kirkpatrick, the hawkish U.S. ambassador at the United Nations, led a spirited attack on the proposal, arguing that Americans should not pull triggers in El Salvador. Sources said Reagan himself vetoed the plan. But U.S. warplanes still could join the fighting later on. Some administration officials fear that American air power may be needed to prevent the loss of El Salvador to leftist guerrillas. Once the U.S. presidential election is out of the way, the planes may be sent into action.

So far, El Salvador's guerrillas are far from winning a decisive victory over the government. But the armed forces will use up all of their U.S. aid money by March 23 and will be out of ammunition by the end of the month. Two newly trained battalions have no radios, and 19 newly trained pilots have no aircraft. Last month the guerrillas said they would not attempt to block the presidential election. But now that foreign reporters are flooding in to cover the vote, the rebels may try to grab some favorable publicity by attacking the threadbare Army.

Even if the election comes off smoothly, the outcome may not be to Washington's liking. The leader among the eight candidates still appears to be José Napoleón Duarte, a moderate Christian Democrat. But archconservative Roberto D'Aubuisson, the alleged godfather of the Salvadoran "death squads," seems to be hanging on in second place. Many Salvadorans assume that D'Aubuisson will end up in a runoff with Duarte later this spring. Washington's most vivid nightmare is that D'Aubuisson will somehow engineer a victory in the end. "We're having a harder and harder time buying bullets for the present government," says a top U.S. official. "It would be just about impossible to buy any for a D'Aubuisson government."

D'Aubuisson denies the charges about his involvement with the death squads. But an anonymous Salvadoran informer has supplied some U.S. congressmen and The New York Times with detailed information about D'Aubuisson's role in right-wing atrocities. The source was identified by NEWSWEEK as retired Col. Roberto Eulalio Santivañez,

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