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Jersey 'Town Meetings' Focus on Latin America

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HASBROUCK HEIGHTS, N.J. June 18 — On this muggy weekend morning, when beaches and backyards beckoned, 50 curious citizens came to the paneled municipal chambers here to meet their Congressman. They were interested not so much in budget deficits, Social Security or even the state's toxic waste problems, but rather in Central America.

Representative Robert G. Torricelli, a freshman Democrat of Bergen County and a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, is viewed by some constituents as the closest thing they have to a Central American expert.

He listened, as he had at 30 other "town meetings" since he took office six months ago, to questions about land reform, Cuban arms supplies and the inevitable one — the possibility of American troops being sent to defend the Salvadoran Government.

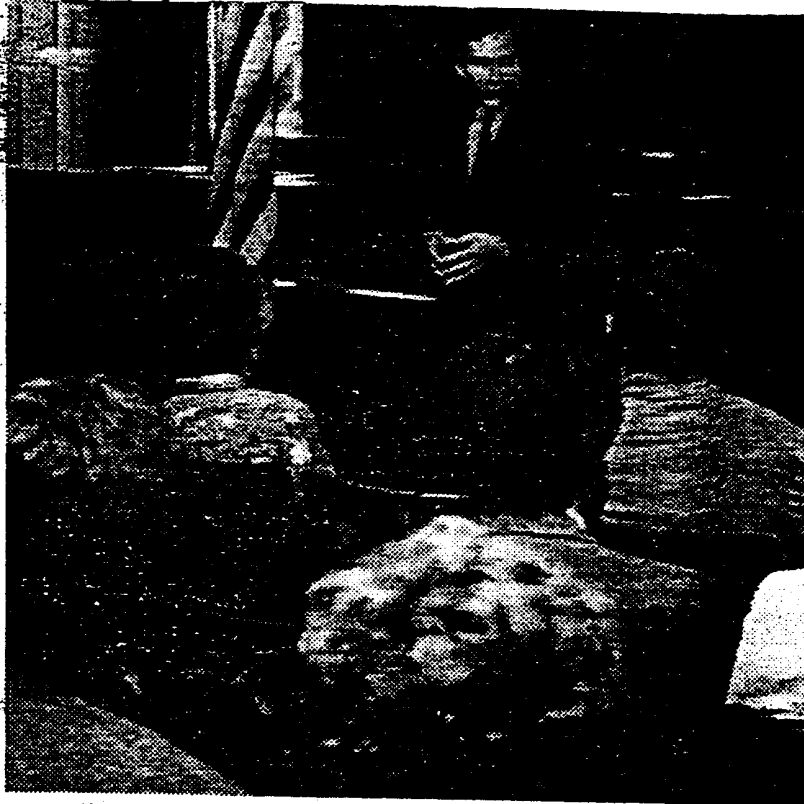
Skeptical of U.S. Policy

"We've put our prestige at stake," said Mr. Torricelli, who has voiced skepticism about the Reagan Administration's policy in the region.

"The President has said it is in our vital interest to preserve these governments," he told his audience. "If those governments fall, I don't believe the President will walk away. The only other thing to do would be to send troops."

He added, "I often tell people: 'Send a message now or your sons later.'"

Mr. Torricelli, who is 32 years old, went to El Salvador in January to help persuade the Government there to return the body of John Sullivan, a freelance writer from Bogota, N.J., who was believed to have been killed by a rightist death squad shortly after arriving in the country in 1980. The body was returned in February and a medical examination determined that he had probably been killed by grenades tied to his hands.



The New York Times / Frank C. Dougherty

Representative Robert G. Torricelli, Democrat of Bergen County, speaking to residents of Hasbrouck Heights, N.J., during a town meeting on Saturday.

Mr. Torricelli, who conveyed an easygoing manner, replied: "I want to stop communism as much as President Reagan — not only because it is bad for national security but because it is the wrong answer for the people of Latin America. Nicaragua is a perfect example — the revolution has been a disappointment. Nevertheless the answer isn't to take up arms against them."

Speaking over a cup of coffee before the meeting, the Congressman said he had been struck by the interest in Central America at his town meetings. He said he had found a number of Republicans who were disturbed by the Reagan Administration's policy in the region.

"They often think that the policy is

counterproductive, insensitive to social change and is pushing the rebels into the hands of the Russians."

Cross Section of Views Sought

Mr. Torricelli, who served in the White House under President Jimmy Carter as a counsel to Vice President Walter F. Mondale and who later worked in Mr. Mondale's law firm, said he had tried to seek information about Central America from people representing a wide spectrum of opinion, including campus and labor groups, evangelists, Cuban-American groups, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon.

The problem with official information, however, is its inconsistency, he said. "If you ask what impact the flow of arms from Nicaragua to El Salvador is having, the State Department will say it is minimal, the Pentagon will say it has some impact and the C.I.A. says it has maximum impact."