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First of Three Articles

Honduras Wary of U.S. Policy

Support for Nicaraguan Rebels, El Salvador Raises Concern

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The United States and Honduras have reached a crucial stage in their relations as the Reagan administration strives to keep pressure on Nicaragua's leftist government from Honduran bases and Honduran leaders grow wary of getting in too deep.

The Hondurans' hesitation, chiefly among military officers, has cast a shadow over U.S. policy in Central America, which has placed Honduras at the center of efforts against Nicaragua and leftist insurgents in El Salvador.

For the most part, the Reagan administration appears to be listening to new Honduran demands with half an ear, concerned more with how Honduras fits into U.S. goals in the region than with Honduras' own objectives.

This article examines the role of Honduras in U.S. policy. Subsequent articles Monday and Tuesday will

look at the country's importance to rebels fighting the Nicaraguan government and at the political process in Honduras.

When leftist Sandinistas took power in neighboring Nicaragua in 1979, and leftist guerrillas gained strength in El Salvador, official Washington scrambled to befriend neglected Honduras, rediscovering old alliances and forging new ones. Honduras, worried that it was the left's next target, was happy to oblige.

Honduras now is the staging area for U.S. military exercises and clandestine operations against Nicaragua. It is a rest-and-recreation stop, a training field, intelligence center and supply base.

About 1,300 U.S. military and 150 diplomatic personnel are stationed there, and the number grows to around 5,000 during the nearly nonstop military maneuvers. The exercises have cost the United States at least \$100 million, and further millions have gone

into housing, two radar stations, a field hospital and into building or improving eight airfields—most of it allegedly temporary construction for the exercises. There is also a U.S.-built Regional Military Training Center, which Washington hopes to make permanent.

An airfield at Aguacate in central Honduras, improved for what the administration said then was support for the Big Pine 2 exercise in 1983, has become the main base for anti-Sandinista airdrops to guerrillas in Nicaragua, according to a knowledgeable rebel official.

Another airfield, at Palmerola, northwest of Tegucigalpa, expanded with U.S. military construction funds, has become headquarters for a 1,200-man semipermanent U.S. military presence, including a field hospital and a U.S. air reconnaissance squadron that flies regular missions in support of Salvadoran Army troops.

Officially, relations between the United States and Honduras could hardly be warmer.

But Honduras, as it has for decades, wants to be more to the United States than a stationary aircraft carrier. In the words of one knowledgeable State Department analyst, Honduras is "squeaking in an effort to get some grease," asking for more economic and military aid, staking out some independent policies and demanding a written U.S. defense commitment.

The most dramatic demonstration of its new demands came last September, when Hondurans barred Salvadoran soldiers from the Regional Military Training Center set up with U.S. funds at Puerto Castilla on the Atlantic coast expressly to train Salvadorans without increasing the number of U.S. advisers in El Salvador. About 5,000 Salvadorans went through courses under U.S. trainers from June 1983 until Honduras, which has a longstanding border dispute with El Salvador, insisted that no more Salvadorans be trained there.

A ranking U.S. official in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa said agreement looks likely before the end of next month, when new U.S. money must be committed, to resume training Salvadorans under a compromise acceptable to the Honduran military command. Resolution of other demands also is probable in the long run, U.S. and Honduran sources said, because senior Honduran military officers share U.S. concern over the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and have become dependent on U.S. leadership and financial aid.

"If the United States stopped aid, I don't know how long the ammunition would last," said a Honduran who strongly opposes his government's extensive cooperation with U.S. policies. "It is a total dependency."

Honduran and U.S. sources with access to the military emphasized, for instance, that the government so far has done nothing to stop or scale down Big Pine 3, 11 weeks of joint military maneuvers that began Feb. 11 and are scheduled to involve up to 4,500 U.S. soldiers with M60 tanks and M113 armored personnel carriers.

But they added that the armed forces commander, Gen. Walter Lopez, appears resolved to halt or reduce Honduran support of anti-Sandinista guerrilla forces based here unless the U.S. Congress endorses administration policy by approving renewed CIA funding for the rebels.

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