

CENTRAL AMERICAN PEACE PLAN

Where Does It Stand?

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By Georgie Anne Geyer

ON EARLY August 1979, barely days after Sandinista soldiers had marched triumphantly over Nicaragua, Tomas Borge met in the lobby of Managua's Intercontinental Hotel with a small group of leading Latin American diplomats. Borge, the hardest-line member of the hardest-line Marxist group of the Sandinistas, already was the powerful minister of the interior. The conversation was historic. In talking to the tense little group, Borge outlined the Sandinistas' plan to revolutionize all of Latin America—but to do it gradually, so that few people would be alarmed.

"The fewer problems we have, the more Latin America will be attracted to us," he said in a low, husky voice. "The more problems we have, the less." He would not shoot all the old *Somocistas*, he said, because he did "not want to turn the rest of the Latin American revolution against us."

Exactly eight years later, in August 1987, a Central American Peace Plan was put into effect. The roar of diplomatic trumpets heralded the plan as being one that would "democratize" and liberalize Nicaragua, and turn off that "Latin American revolution" centered in Managua. The plan's patron and designer, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, was almost immediately rewarded for it with a prestigious Nobel Peace Prize. The plan also led almost immediately to a U.S. freeze on funds

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If it has done anything at all, the Arias Plan has clarified the totalitarian intent of the Sandinistas.

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for the approximately 15,000 anti-Sandinista Contras fighting on Nicaragua's northern borders.

But gnawing questions persist in practical minds. Is it possible that a Marxist government, clearly bent upon the kind of "revolution without borders" that Borge openly outlined in 1979, is willing to live and let live where democratic neighbors are concerned? What is really happening in this all-important area of the world, which presents America with its first neighborhood war, fueled by an antithetical and antagonistic outside ideology?

Crucial, but not widely known, is the fact that Arias and the presidents of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador took action in August 1987 because all of them were convinced, and even terrified, that the United States was not going to move—that Congress would not support the Contras any more, thus leaving all of Central America vulnerable to the Sandinistas' huge army.

So Arias devised a cunning 11-point plan calling for national reconciliation in all countries, for democratization and plurality, for free elections, for the

cessation of aid to "irregular" forces, and for commitments not to allow national territories to be used for the destabilization of other governments. The U.S. administration immediately called the plan "flawed," because none of the 11 points called for the removal of egregiously large outside military forces—such as the Cubans, Soviets and Bulgarians—from Nicaragua.

Still, at first, it looked even to skeptics as though the plan might work, if only because the Sandinistas had so exhausted their land that they might be forced to change. Meanwhile, Salvadoran Christian Democratic President José Napoleon Duarte immediately opened goodwill talks with his own Marxist guerrillas, and Guatemala started to do the same. Honduras, from which the Contras launch their attacks, began to talk about closing down Contra camps.

THE Sandinistas already had set up a rigid single-party system, in which the army serves the party and not the state, and in which the remaining "free-enterprise" businesses are stringently controlled by the state. But in the fall of 1987, many North Americans and Central Americans wanted to believe that the Sandinistas would turn out to be a kind of social-democratic left if only given the chance.

And the Sandinistas, at least in the beginning, seemed to begin to move toward democracy. They allowed the Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa* to reopen, Radio Católica to rebroadcast and some exiles to return. But in the end, the swallows of peace did not return to Capistrano after all, as it became increasingly obvious that these changes were easily reversible.

Even as Arias was returning from the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo, a

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NOT FOOLED — The Contras, knowing that the Sandinistas will not abide by the peace plan, have continued to request military aid from the United States.

high-level Nicaraguan defector—Maj. Roger Miranda, the leading aide to Sandinista Defense Minister Humberto Ortega—had official Washington agog with his revelations. The Sandinista regime intended to form a 600,000-man army, he said. In a country of only 3.5 million people, that would mean that roughly one of every two males in the country would be in some form of military service.

He also said that the Sandinistas were going to get a squadron of Soviet MiGs; that the Ortega brothers had \$1 million in foreign bank accounts; and that in case of an American invasion, the Sandinistas were going to regionalize the conflict, even going so far as to bomb Costa Rica in order to create chaos and insurrection.

Now, there is something odd about the Sandinistas, and it has to do with the fact that they really mean what they say—and that far from caring about economic development for their people, what they really enjoy is strutting

in military glory across the world stage. What's more, men such as Borge are serious men who studied Marxism-Leninism in the '50s and deliberately embraced it.

Every time Congress is just about to believe that the Sandinistas really are social democrats at heart, they reinforce what Borge said in 1979. So it was with Miranda's revelations, which were so dramatic that they seemed questionable to many people. Defense

THE democratic nations of Central America launched the peace plan when they became convinced that the United States was no longer going to support the Contras.

Minister Humberto Ortega wasted little time in confirming Miranda's story—which, in effect, meant that tiny and formerly inconsequential Nicaragua had plans to become the second-most-militarized country in the area, after Cuba. And when his brother, President Daniel Ortega, tried to play down Humberto's statements, he only made it worse. Even if there were elections,

Ortega said, in the hypothetical event that the Sandinistas lost, what they would give up "would be the government, but not the power." In short, any idea that Sandinista Nicaragua wants peace with its neighbors under any peace plan could not have been more convincingly disproved.

The Soviet role in Nicaragua remains both strange and ominous. In a remarkable interview on the second day of the American-Soviet summit last December President Reagan told four reporters that he had discussed Nicaragua with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, pointing out to him the similarities with Afghanistan in terms of a Soviet withdrawal. But as a matter of fact, even at that moment the Soviets were increasing military and economic aid to Nicaragua. The stories about the Soviet cut-back on oil shipments to the Sandinistas in the spring of 1987 turned out to be important "disinformation."

Meanwhile, the Contras began new offensives, despite America's ambivalence about providing further aid, and the mood of ordinary Nicaraguans rapidly went from passive anger to desperate rage. Even *The New York Times*, which has tended to support the Sandinistas, said in a front-page story, "Public art and government billboards do not express the exhaustion, apathy and bitterness that appear to affect the Nicaraguan people deeply, and to have made this holiday season heavy with suffering and poverty . . . today, eight years later, the Sandinistas are on the defensive. The Nicaraguan economy has crumbled. The armed challenge from the American-backed Contras is sharpening, and popular support for the government appears to have declined markedly, although there appears to be no immediate threat to the Sandinistas' hold on power."

There are economic problems as well. The U.S. dollar exchange rate for Nicaraguan cordobas was 14 to 1 in 1979; now it is 30,000 to 1. A year ago, a 60-word telegram sent from Nicaragua to Panama cost \$635.

The peace plan, then, has done something—it has clarified, as nothing has before, the complete totalitarian intent of the Sandinistas. There really is no room for mystery any more. What, then, comes next?

The Contras, as imperfect as they are, have provided several invaluable services, and Congress should continue to provide aid. The Contras have pressured the Ortega brothers to make at least a semblance of change, if not real change. Most important, the Contras have protected other Latin American countries from Sandinista subversion by turning the Sandinistas' expansionist revolutionary impulses inward.

But in the long run, the Sandinistas are not going to go away. No one should underestimate the possibility of a brief American invasion to get the wildly unpopular Sandinistas out. That might even come in this President's last term, for what does he have to lose now?

As Judge William Clark once said about Reagan and his particular passion about Nicaragua, "You must understand that Nicaragua is the key to everything for him, for if he allows communism to take hold in this hemisphere, he cannot fight it anywhere." □