

19 April 1987

Central America's Arms Buildup: The Risks of Guns Without Butter

J By JAMES LeMOYNE
Special to The New York Times

SAN SALVADOR, April 16 — As Central America undergoes the most rapid military buildup in its history, with forceful American participation, civilian government leaders and diplomats are concerned about prospects for weak governments that must deal with the vastly strengthened armies in their countries.

Such worries are justified, they say, in a region where the army has often left the barracks to occupy the presidential palace and where army officers are essentially a separate elite, better organized and more unified than most civilian administrations.

"There is always the implicit threat here that the army will overthrow you one day," said one of the most senior and experienced officials in the Honduran Government.

"They don't overthrow us because it's not in their interest right now and because the United States has told them not to," the Honduran official added. "But what the United States is basically doing here is paying our army not to have a coup. Who knows what will happen when you are no longer here to stop them?"

Strength or Professionalism

American officials say such fears are exaggerated. They say that under United States influence the incidence of abuses by the military in El Salvador and Honduras has fallen sharply and that both the army and the police act and fight more professionally.

United States influence has been strong. American military assistance to its clients in the region jumped from \$14.2 million in 1981 to \$212 million in 1986, and the security forces of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala more than doubled from 1981 to 1986.

"You can't support these governments without supporting their armies," said a Western diplomat in Honduras.

But strong misgivings about the military buildup were repeatedly expressed in interviews in the last month with Honduran, Salvadoran and Guatemalan political leaders, who said the armies in their countries had never been more politically sophisticated or stronger than they are today.

"The army is essentially a separate political party — the institutional party," a Salvadoran political analyst said. "All other sectors — businessmen, the Government, the opposition parties and the American Embassy — go to the army to bargain and work out deals."

A Guatemalan political leader said: "The army is not subordinate to civil authority, it is parallel to it. Civilians go to the army with their hats in their hands."

In Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Panama, civilian political leaders all say that finding a way to take power away from the army and integrate it into a civilian-dominated society is a major obstacle. Several American officials agreed with that assessment.

"I would say that the biggest long-term threat to civilian government in El Salvador is the army, not the guerrillas," a senior Western diplomat in San Salvador said.

The Reagan Rationale: Response to a Threat

The military buildup, along with the election of civilian governments, has been strongly supported by the Reagan Administration, which calls the buildup a necessary response to a potent leftist rebel threat in El Salvador and the Soviet-backed strengthening of the Nicaraguan Army, now easily the largest in the region.

"You can call it buying influence if you like, but what it is is common sense," said a senior American military adviser when asked to explain the rationale behind American military assistance.

"When you get down to it, we are here to protect American national interests and we have to rely on local armies to help us do that," he added.

The Salvadoran security forces — police and armed forces combined — grew from 16,850 men in 1981 to more than 57,000 in 1986. Similar but less abrupt growth has occurred in Honduras with American aid, and in Guatemala, where the army promoted its own development largely without American assistance after the Carter Administration cut off military aid 10 years ago to protest gross human rights violations by a succession of military regimes there.

The Reagan Administration has sharply increased United States military spending in the area from a few million dollars a year in 1979 to more than \$212 million a year today and has spent tens of millions more to pay for American maneuvers and installations

in Honduras and Panama.

In Honduras the Administration has used constant military maneuvers to create a sprawling, modern air base at Palmerola that houses more than 1,000 American servicemen, as well as to build or improve at least seven other airstrips. At least one is used by the Central Intelligence Agency to supply the Nicaraguan rebels, the contras.

In addition, the Administration has sent hundreds of American advisers and C.I.A. operatives to oversee the training, arming and management of Central American client states' armies and police over the last six years.

C.I.A. agents arrange special visas for trips to the United States by the Central American women who are companions of military officers, play host to parties for key commanders and bring them gifts such as stereo equipment to reward friendship, according to United States and Central American officials.

When a captain in the political intelligence unit of the Salvadoran treasury police became the subject of frequent accusations of torture last year, the C.I.A. deputy chief of station took the captain on a vacation to the United States, in what was described as a cooling-off period, to persuade him to stop beating people with a hose and threatening them with death, according to three Salvadoran and diplomatic officials.

American Policy: Competing Goals

Critics charge that the buildup of local armies reflects the contradictory goals of United States policy in the region — to create stable, democratic governments while at the same time strengthening armies that have historically been antidemocratic, brutal and corrupt.

It is a tension between ideals and security interests that has dogged American policy since the Kennedy Administration, which backed economic and political development under the Alliance for Progress and counterinsurgency measures under the tutelage of the Green Berets and the C.I.A.

When American interest and spending waned, the American-trained armies and police either took over or strongly influenced their governments.

Continued