

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 12NEW YORK TIMES
23 March 1986

Nicaragua's Neighbors Are Wary

By JAMES LeMOYNE

SAN SALVADOR — It is difficult to find a Central American government official who is not highly critical of Nicaragua's Sandinistas. Still, no leader in the region was willing last week to support President Reagan's campaign to provide \$100 million for anti-Sandinista guerrillas. This public silence seemed particularly galling to United States officials who contended that Central Americans had recently confided to Mr. Reagan's special envoy, Philip C. Habib, that indeed they supported the President's position.

Central American leaders give several reasons why they must say one thing privately and be silent or ambivalent in public. Most say they are compelled to observe the long Latin American tradition of nonintervention in the affairs of other states. And even though opinion polls in Honduras and Costa Rica show strong opposition to the Sandinistas, public sentiment seldom determines policy in the region's autocratic societies. In such circumstances, it is difficult to judge the political significance of private assurances that may be denied or discarded at the first convenient opportunity.

In addition, some senior officials in the region appear to be cautious because they are uncertain of the durability of Washington's commitment to the contras, as the guerrillas are known. There also seems to be a general belief that if Nicaragua is as great a threat as Mr. Reagan says, the United States will settle the problem itself.

"They ask us when we are going to go in and clean up this mess," said one American diplomat in the region. "But when we ask them if they would back us up, they say, 'Not on your life.'"

Despite such shyness, some countries have indicated their true sentiments by quietly assisting the Nicaraguan rebels. The most obvious example is Honduras, which for almost five years has allowed the contras to train and maintain bases in its territory. According to Western diplomats, the Honduran President, José Azcona Hoyo, is willing to let the guerrillas continue receiving American aid so long as the operation is handled discreetly.

But while they support the guerrilla effort, the Hondurans are also among those most deeply worried about Washington's commitment, worry that sharpens whenever the contra cause seems to lose ground in Washington. Honduran officials have repeatedly told United States envoys that they fear they will one day be left to clean up a demoralized rebel army — not to mention having to rebuild relations with Nicaragua. "We have hammered them and hammered them that they have to support the guerrillas if they want to promote democracy in the region," said one American official. "What do they do if we quit?"

El Salvador has also been strongly critical of Nicaragua. Pointing to evidence that they sup-

port the Marxist-led Salvadoran guerrilla movement, President José Napoleon Duarte has often denounced the Sandinistas. After condemning Nicaraguan intervention in El Salvador, Mr. Duarte has found it impossible to publicly support guerrilla attacks on Nicaragua.

But El Salvador has been willing to provide help under the table. When the Central Intelligence Agency launched air and sea attacks on Nicaragua two years ago, it used El Salvador as a base, according to both American and rebel officials. In recent months several loads of weapons and other supplies for the rebels have been flown out of El Salvador, according to Western

officials. In addition, when Reagan Administration officials sought a way to put pressure on the Sandinistas just before last week's House vote on aid to the contras, they turned to Mr. Duarte. The Administration asked him to offer to negotiate with the Salvadoran guerrillas if the Sandinistas would agree to negotiate with the Nicaraguan rebels, according to Salvadoran and American officials. Mr. Duarte agreed, but his proposal for a "simultaneous dialogue" was ignored in Managua.

The Government of Guatemala has charted a more independent course. The new president, Vinicio Cerezo, invited the Nicaraguan President, Daniel Ortega Saavedra, to his inauguration, and has said he supports negotiations to settle the region's conflicts. But the highly conservative Guatemalan army has provided weapons to the Nicaraguan rebels, and Guatemalan businessmen have sold them supplies, according to reliable rebel sources.

The Administration has been most flustered by Costa Rica's new president-elect, Oscar Arias Sánchez, who has recently opposed aid to the Nicaraguan guerrillas. Mr. Arias is one of harshest critics of the Sandinista leaders, accusing them of building "a second Cuba." But he seems to be taking his cue from opinion polls showing that Costa Ricans strongly oppose the Sandinistas, but also strongly oppose a war in the region. Mr. Arias has said he believes that American money would be best spent fortifying governments to resist Nicaraguan influence.

If the American-backed guerrillas do not gain strength in the year ahead, other Central American leaders may adopt Mr. Arias's position. No matter what happens, it is unlikely that any government will be willing to translate private opposition to the Sandinistas into public support for their overthrow.