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Analysis: Reagan Facing Foreign Policy Debacle In Central America

by Deborah Tyroler

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[The article below by Roger Burbach was distributed by Pacific News Service the week of 03/21-27/88. The LADB has authorization from PNS for reproduction.] Events in mid-March have pushed the Reagan administration's Central American policy to the brink of disaster. The twin pillars of that policy the contras and the centrist government of Jose Napoleon Duarte were badly shaken and there is now concern that they may even topple in the months before Reagan leaves office. "Central America is more volatile and brittle than ever," lamented one State Department official. It is now recognized that the contras suffered heavy and perhaps irreversible losses as they were pushed back to their Honduran base camps, while Duarte's Christian Democratic party is in a state of total disarray due to the legislative and mayoral victories of the right-wing ARENA party headed by Major Roberto D'Aubuisson. The arrival of 3200 US combat troops in Honduras has tended to overshadow the dire military situation the contras now find themselves in. Cut off from any direct US military and logistical support on Feb. 29 by Congress' refusal to renew contra aid, many contra units deep inside Nicaragua began a hasty retreat to their base camps in Honduras. This retreat was turned into a rout as the Sandinistas launched a major offensive in northern Nicaragua which effectively cleared the area of contra troops and their encampments. When the contras met with the Sandinistas to begin holding peace talks on March 21, the contras found themselves with few bargaining chips. The Sandinistas clearly held the upper hand and could appear to be magnanimous by ordering a unilateral cease-fire in the war. This situation has dire consequences in Washington for the Reagan administration. For seven years it has backed the contras in an effort to topple the Sandinista government and score a success for the Reagan doctrine. But instead of "rolling back" the first revolutionary government on the mainland of the Western Hemisphere, the administration today finds that its contra allies have been effectively rolled back into Honduras with adverse effects on the stability of that country, which has no capacity to absorb, house or relocate the contras. In El Salvador, the administration's policy is also on the ropes. Since 1980, the US has poured over \$3 billion into the country in an effort to contain its virulent right wing and to stave off a victory by the leftist guerrilla movement under the leadership of the Farabundo Marti Liberation Front (FMLN). But now the situation is up for grabs. Duarte is at best a figurehead president as the right-wing death squads step up their activities and the ARENA party dominates the government through its control of the country's legislative body. This comes in the midst of a leftist resurgence in the major urban areas. Demonstrations, strikes, street confrontations, and increased guerrilla activity have turned the country's capital into a seething cauldron in which no one knows what to expect next. Rumors of a major offensive by the FMLN are now rife, and independent observers there believe there will be a dramatic upsurge in the political and military activities of the left. As in the case of the contras, the unraveling situation in El Salvador has important repercussions in Washington. Ever since Duarte's election as president in 1984, the administration's Salvadoran policy has enjoyed the support of Democrats as well as Republicans. Now the success of D'Aubuisson and his ARENA party pulls the rug out from under this bipartisan policy. Even before the ARENA victory many liberal Democrats were threatening to

curtail military and economic aid to El Salvador because of the stepped-up activities of the right-wing death squads. Salvadoran aid requests now join contra aid as an arena of heated partisan debate in Congress. The shaky condition of the contras and the Salvadoran government means that the Reagan administration could face a foreign policy debacle before it leaves office. Until mid-March many administration officials were hoping they could maintain some form of the status quo in Nicaragua and El Salvador. "We want to preserve the contra option and a stable Salvadoran government for the next administration, be it Republican or Democratic," proclaimed one high-ranking State Department official in early March. Gone was all hope of scoring a major foreign policy victory either by toppling the Sandinistas or destroying the FMLN. The administration simply wanted to hold on. But now the Reagan administration, rather than its successor, may have to deal with the consequences of its failed policies. And the options the administration faces are rapidly narrowing down to two: accept the collapse of one of its Central American allies, or send in US troops. One longtime observer of administration policy in Washington believes "there is now a greater danger of direct US intervention than ever before." The problem for the administration is that, whichever option it chooses, its Central American policy may go down in history as a failed policy that expended US resources and brought only more turmoil and upheaval to Central America.

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