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Restive Honduran Military;ready To Bite The Hand That Feeds It

by Deborah Tyroler

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[The following article was distributed by Pacific News Service on 01/23-29/89. The LADB has authorization from PNS for reproduction.] By Roger Burbach The assassination of former Honduran military chief General Gustavo Alvarez reportedly by left-wing guerrillas underscores the growing volatility of Honduras long considered the most secure and submissive US ally in Central America. But it is a restive Honduran military not the Cincheneros guerrillas that pose the biggest challenge George Bush faces in Honduras. The Reagan administration spent over \$400 million in direct military assistance to Honduras in an effort to turn the country into the US regional bulwark against Central American revolutionary movements. But the powerful Honduran military now appears all too anxious to bite the hand that fed it. "The biggest contradiction here is between the military and the United States," says Victor Meza, a political analyst at the Honduran Documentation Center. The most obvious sign of disgruntlement is the Honduran decision to suspend discussions to giving the US permanent access to facilities it built for recurring US military maneuvers. More serious, reports are now circulating that the Honduran military, not the Cincheneros, may have been responsible for placing a bomb at the US Peace Corps office last year, and for wounding several US soldiers in a feigned guerrilla attack in early 1988 in San Pedro Sula. A night guardsman at a nearby construction project has reportedly identified Honduran soldiers who took part in the latter attack. US Embassy officials, who at first heatedly denied the validity of these charges, now say, "We don't know who carried out the bombing and the attack. We have no proof that it was the guerrillas or the army." A special US investigative team sent to Honduras reportedly fingered the military. But given the explosive nature of the report, all US officials are publicly denying it. Observers in Tegucigalpa point to several different factors for the military's growing antagonism towards the United States. The contras are a major irritant. Over 12,000 contras are now in the country, along with another 25,000 contra family members and refugees. While the Bush administration and Congress try to hammer out a bipartisan program for dealing with them, sources at the US Embassy admit "there is a growing perception here that the United States cannot deliver and is abandoning its allies." However, the primary concern of the Honduran military is not with the contra presence but with the end of contra military aid. From the very beginning, CIA covert activities in support of the contras have involved the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars, a portion of which went to collaborating Honduran military officials. Gen. Gustavo Alvarez was a major beneficiary of these funds, amassing a fortune in the millions while he was head of the military. Now those funds have dried up, and even if humanitarian aid arrives to help relocate the contras, it will provide little for the military. The Honduran military is also disgruntled because of the drop in direct US military assistance from a high of \$81 million in 1986 to \$41 million in 1988. The drop coincides with the rising prominence of the Salvadoran military Honduras' old rival which now has a US-backed counterinsurgency army more than twice as large as Honduras. US-Honduran military relations have also been strained by the US war against drug trafficking. Press reports early in 1988 revealed the Honduran military was involved in drug dealing, but heavy US pressures, including the US kidnapping of drug kingpin Ramon Matta last spring, have caused the Honduran military

to back off. Manuel Gamero, editor of Honduras' second largest newspaper El Tiempo, believes the "US has reduced the drug problem in the military to tolerable proportions." This of course means yet another source of military graft has been hit by US actions, further embittering some officials. Military corruption is part of the general decomposition of Honduran society over the past eight years. Bribery has reached unprecedented levels, touching even the country's Supreme Court. The corruption goes hand in hand with the country's economic decline. Since 1981, despite a six-fold increase in US economic assistance, real per capita income has declined. Chris Rosen, a Canadian relief worker here for the past five years, says that "In Honduras, people have fallen from a state of poverty to total misery." The general perception of official corruption and economic malaise has adversely affected the military's image. Notes Manuel Gamero of El Tiempo, "The military is viewed here as the single most important force in the country's life. When the economy and the political system don't deliver, the military is held responsible. This growing popular disgruntlement has made the military even more willing to turn on its US benefactor, hoping to deflect attention from its own role."

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