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Demilitarization In Central America: Beginning Of A New Era

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[The article below is the second of two parts. The first installment appeared in the 01/17/92 issue of the Central America Update.] . Robinson Changes in international relations, economic restructuring and a new correlation of social and political forces in Central American have led to a new convergence of interests in favor of demilitarization. The end of the Cold War, the deprioritization of Central America in US foreign policy following the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the invasion of Panama, and negotiations between governments and insurgents in El Salvador and Guatemala, contributed to defusing the conflict that had brought Central America in the 1980s to the brink of region-wide war. Demilitarization has now become the most polemic agenda item of the regional peace process, begun in 1987 with the signing of the Esquipulas Accords. This article addresses current levels of militarization and efforts to date to demilitarize the region. A survey of militarization and demilitarization Currently, El Salvador boasts the largest army in the region, with a 56,000-strong army and a police corps of 15,000. Next is Guatemala, with 46,000 regular troops and a police corps of 17,500. The Honduran security forces are comprised of 27,000 soldiers and 14,000 police officers. Nicaragua now has 28,000 soldiers in the army, and a police force of 11,000. Costa Rica has no army, but maintains an 8,000-strong police force, while the Panamanian army was dismantled in the wake of the US invasion and replaced by a police force of 6,500 [Inforpress (Guatemala City), 11/14/91]. An estimated 200,000 private security officers in the employ of local and transnational companies and wealthy families, approximately 200,000 members of army-controlled "civil defense squads" in Guatemala, several thousand "recontras" and "recompas" in Nicaragua, and some 15,000 Salvadoran and Guatemalan insurgents, complete the portrait of militarization in Central America. Apart from Panama, where the national army has been replaced by US occupation forces, Nicaragua is to date the only Central American nation to have implemented substantial demilitarization. From some 96,000 soldiers in November 1989, the army had been cut to 28,000 by mid-1991, and current plans call for a further reduction to about 18,000 troops in the course of 1992. A professional and "apolitical" army is, for the Sandinistas, the greatest guarantee for democracy, political participation and the possibility of recovering power through elections. In the history of Latin America there has never been a case of the armed forces respecting the political victory of a left-wing group, as the recent coup in Haiti attests. At the same time, the Sandinista army has not interfered with the implementation of a right-wing program by the conservative government of President Violeta Chamorro. Thus the constitutional model in Nicaragua has become, for some, a model of demilitarization and a new, non-political role for the military in Central America. Costa Rica constitutionally abolished its army in 1948, but a US-funded security program gradually built up and "professionalized" the police and related security forces during the 1980s. A Legislative Assembly commission appointed in late 1990 to investigate the Rapid Action Unit, a counter-terrorist force organized by the US, concluded that the Costa Rican police have become "an army in disguise which has escaped political control." The Salvadoran armed forces moved during the 1970s from an instrument of the agro-export oligarchy, placed directly in government in 1932 by the coffee barons, to an institution monopolizing political power, controlling an increasingly large
portion of the economy, and dominating civil society down to the grassroots level. A decade of civil war, including stalemate and attrition in the war with the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) rebels, a situation of dual power, and fissures between the army and the modernizing right, has transformed Salvadoran society. If the recent peace accord between the government and the FMLN is actually implemented, the army will not only be reduced, but dramatically transformed along the lines of the Nicaraguan military. Thus, El Salvador could follow Nicaragua's example of successful demilitarization, a development that would also provide a powerful impetus for the process in other Central American nations. Like El Salvador, the Guatemalan army has come to dominate all levels of society, to enjoy near-total impunity and ultimate control over the levers of political power. Yet the Guatemalan army rules over a weak state and faces only a limited military challenge from the insurgency, and poorly organized opposition from civil society. For the moment, the generals show no sign of bending to the pressures of demilitarization. Nevertheless, the military is under strong pressure from the US, and has also become thoroughly discredited in the eyes of most Guatemalans. Honduras and the complexity of demilitarization The Honduran situation highlights the complexity of demilitarization, and especially the contradictory push-and-pull factors which influence conservative "New Right" governments in this process. The Honduran military, less developed relative to those in neighboring countries, was built up by hundreds of millions of dollars from the Reagan administration during the 1980s into a "containment wall" against the Sandinista army. The nation's political system effectively became hostage to the army. In 1985, Rafael Callejas who is now president had to surrender the presidency which he had won at the polls, result of a meeting of Air Force commanders. The Honduran Air Force gave the presidency to Jose Azcona. Since his inauguration in 1990, Callejas has been playing a "cat and mouse" game with the armed forces. His demilitarization efforts have been supported not only by Washington, but also by the influential Honduran business sector, which is resentful of growing military intrusion into the economy, a relatively new phenomenon in Honduras. With the army placed on the defensive by a reduction in US military aid following the Sandinista electoral defeat (from US$61 million in 1989 to US$20 million in 1990), Callejas managed to reduce the military's budget by 10% during his first year in office as part of a fiscal austerity program. Proportional cuts of other budget items, including social welfare spending, were higher. Callejas, fearful of losing too much support among the military brass, and also sensitive to regional geo-politics, has pursued a contradictory course. Honduras has fewer troops than El Salvador, Guatemala, and, until recently, Nicaragua. The country fought a 72-hour border war with El Salvador in 1969 and then became embroiled in the Nicaraguan military conflict in the 1980s. These experiences have left strong anti-Salvadoran and anti-Nicaraguan sentiment among a good portion of the military and the civilian population. The army has been able to argue that large military forces in neighboring countries justify a strong Honduran army for defensive purposes. Thus, in June 1991 the Honduran Congress, with the approval of Callejas, vetoed a proposal to reduce the military budget by an additional US$3 million (less than 10% cut), and endorsed a new 10 to 15% reduction in spending for health, education and social security. According to Deputy Roberto Matute, who introduced the bill to reduce the military budget, "We have schools without teachers. We are so broke that we are unable to ward off the cholera epidemic for lack of financial resources. The military is a financial burden on an impoverished people, yet it is untouchable." Then, in a move which caught many by surprise, Callejas arrived in San Salvador in July 1991 for a Central American presidential summit meeting (the tenth since Esquipulas) with a draft "Central American Security Treaty." Among other measures, the draft treaty proposed the gradual reduction of troop levels, and the inspection of each country's arsenal by a "Central American Commission." Upon closer inspection, however, the Honduran proposal
was consistent with the limited demilitarization preferred by the New Right civilian administrations. The draft treaty was limited to the idea that a demilitarization process should focus on achieving a "reasonable balance of forces" among neighboring states, not on the demilitarization of society itself. Given this limited focus, Callejas rejects a unilateral reduction in military spending, both for fear of military supremacy in other countries, and because of pressures from his own army. At the same time, neither Callejas nor the US supports the demand for withdrawal of foreign military forces and bases from the region. Honduras is the site of the US military base at Palmerola, several Pentagon radar and electronic installations, about 1,000 permanently stationed US soldiers, and regular US military maneuvers. Callejas' proposal calls for the "regulation," not elimination, of foreign military presence in Central America. Demilitarization and regional negotiations The original 1987 Esquipulas Accord called for multilateral security negotiations, including an inventory of armed forces and weaponry, and the establishment of a "reasonable balance of forces" between states. Between 1987 and 1990, the demilitarization theme was eclipsed by the Nicaraguan conflict. The issue finally moved to the forefront of the regional agenda at the June 1990 summit in Antigua. At that time, US Secretary of State James Baker warned that US economic and political support would be contingent on demilitarization. The presidents created the Central American Security Commission (CSC) to draft demilitarization proposals. The CSC is comprised of defense and foreign relations ministers from the five nations. Military cutback became the most contentious agenda item at the tenth summit meeting, held in El Salvador in July 1991. The Nicaraguan and Costa Rican governments expressed support for the above-mentioned Honduran proposal. The Guatemalan and Salvadoran presidents argued that such a treaty would only benefit respective insurgencies. In the end, the heads of state decided to submit the document to the CSC for "study." Last November in San Jose, Costa Rica, the CSC resumed debate on the Honduran proposal. The Salvadoran and Guatemalan delegates reiterated their opposition. At the close of the meeting, the CSC agreed to request that the Honduran delegation submit a modified draft in early 1992.

Observers believe the Salvadoran peace accord renews prospects for the Honduran proposal, and generates new opportunities for regional demilitarization negotiations. The Nicaraguan government has introduced a proposal called the "Declaration of Central America as a Zone of Peace, Democracy and Cooperation." The proposal calls for full regional demilitarization, including a prohibition on foreign military bases and military maneuvers, reduction of troop strength to minimum levels, and the elimination of military influence throughout society. The proposal, although formally placed on the Esquipulas agenda by President Violeta Chamorro's government, was first drafted by the foreign ministry under the Sandinista administration, and introduced at a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1983 in Managua. Subsequently, the proposal was submitted to the US State Department and the other Central American governments for their consideration, and then taken up, at the behest of Nicaragua, by the Contadora Group. Changing the face of Central American politics Momentum toward demilitarization is building up as part of an historic transition in Central America, with a "new world order" as backdrop. The agro-export oligarchy in Central America, in place since the late 19th century, is crumbling. While the world order is still being defined, the types of societies to emerge in Central America from the breakdown of the oligarchy-ruled system are also not yet clear. Regardless of the precise destination of Central America's transition, the movement toward demilitarization promises to usher in a new era in the 1990s, in which the face of Central American politics and society will be irreversibly transformed.