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Support Against Terrorism has Domestic Aspects

by LADB Staff

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Governments of six Central American states met in Honduras Sept. 19 and promised support for the US campaign against international terrorism after the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and the Pentagon. Public opinion in the region did not fully support their pledges, however, and the presidents of Nicaragua and El Salvador encountered harsh criticism at home for trying to tie political opponents to the terrorists. Present at the summit were Presidents Miguel Angel Rodriguez of Costa Rica, Francisco Flores of El Salvador, Alfonso Portillo of Guatemala, Carlos Flores of Honduras, Arnoldo Aleman of Nicaragua, and Moises Coll, representing Belize.

During the summit talks, the representatives agreed to improve security on their borders and at ports and airports. Salvadoran President Flores and two generals suggested that Salvadoran troops might assist the US military. Following the summit, Central American military leaders met to promise assistance to the US in the form of 120 specialists in search and rescue work as well as troops if requested.

At the Organization of American States (OAS) meeting held Sept. 21 in Washington, foreign ministers from Central America joined in a resolution of support for the US war against terrorism under the 1947 Rio Pact. However, popular support was less enthusiastic than government rhetoric, especially regarding joining the US in military operations. The Miami Herald reported that opinion polls in Argentina, Brazil, and elsewhere in Latin America showed large majorities opposed direct participation in any anti-terrorist conflict and also opposed US retaliation against states accused of harboring terrorists.

An informal survey by the San Salvador daily Prensa Grafica showed supporters of President Flores' offer of military support were outnumbered two to one by opponents. One respondent said, "He shouldn't make the country look ridiculous. If the president wants to send someone to war, let him go." Another said, "Flores is not the one to decide if our few weak and malnourished men should go to a foreign country to offer their lives." Others, however, thought El Salvador owed something to the US for its aid during the recent earthquakes.

Celia Medrano, head of the Costa Rica-based independent Comision de Derechos Humanos de Centroamerica (CODEHUCA), said it was "dangerous" for Central America to be "dragged" into US policies. Medrano and other critics have said Flores' anti-terrorist remarks were hypocritical because anti-Castro Cuban terrorist Luis Posada Carriles lived for some time in El Salvador and traveled on Salvadoran passports. "We must issue a universal condemnation of terrorism," Medrano told Inter Press Service. "It can't be that these actions are just supported when they are against countries like Cuba." University of Costa Rica professor Luis Guillermo Solis said, "It's a pity [the presidents] don't meet to resolve pending border disputes or the famine in Guatemala."

Anti-terrorism talk provokes controversy

In a statement issued at the Sept. 19 summit, the presidents asked political parties in their countries to suspend any ties they might have to terrorists. The statement was aimed at the former guerrilla organizations that are now political parties: the Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) in El Salvador and the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) in Nicaragua. Salvadoran President Flores said outright that the FMLN had ties to the Colombian guerrilla force Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).

Pressure on the FMLN escalated after a Sept. 15 march, in which the party participated. The march was organized to protest dollarization and other government economic policies. But some marchers used the occasion to protest US war plans in retaliation against the terrorist attacks. The protesters burned a US flag and carried signs expressing support for accused Saudi terrorist Osama bin Laden.

After the march, the FMLN disassociated itself from the anti-US protestors. Party leaders issued condemnations of the Sept. 11 attacks and condolences to the victims, but FMLN official Fabio Castillo also asked that the US refrain from a violent response that could injure innocent people.

On Sept. 27, governing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) leaders in the Legislative Assembly asked the attorney general to investigate the march and to prosecute anyone found to have links to terrorists. ARENA Deputy Roberto d'Aubuisson said a special legislative committee should also investigate the march and identify terrorists to dispel any notion that all Salvadorans have terrorist associations. In the Sept. 21 Legislative Assembly session, representatives of the Asociacion de Salvadorenos con Familiares en el Extranjero started a battle of placards, placing anti-terrorism signs on the desks of ARENA deputies. They said the FMLN deputies would not get any placards because "they are the Taliban deputies."

FMLN legislators responded by making their own signs that read "FMLN against terrorism." Aleman links opponents to Taliban Without naming the FSLN, Nicaraguan President Aleman said at the summit that those in Nicaragua with ties to the terrorists were well-known. This was in reference to the relationship between Sandinista leader and former president Daniel Ortega (1979-1990) and Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi and Cuban President Fidel Castro. Libya and Cuba are on the US State Department's list of countries that sponsor terrorism. Aleman had gone on the offensive before the summit when he alluded on Sept. 17 to supposed ties Ortega had with terrorists.

Other members of the governing Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) went on the state-owned television channel to denounce Ortega. Bolanos said during a trip to Miami that he had a list of 1,000 people who had received citizenship from the Sandinista government in the 1980s. He said it was "common practice" then to give sanctuary to terrorists. He promised that, if elected president in November, he would mount an "exhaustive investigation."

PLC official Wilfredo Navarro told the daily El Nuevo Diario that Ortega owed the people an explanation of the "terrorist network" in Nicaragua. Later, on his regular radio program The President Speaks with his People, Aleman said he had been misunderstood and had never called Ortega a terrorist. At the same time, though, he incorporated the terrorism issue into the election campaign, calling on listeners to "watch out for whom they vote." "We must close ranks," he said,

"[and] let us unite and not permit the return of those who welcomed and sowed terror in past decades."

Ortega called the comments "totally irresponsible." As for his relations with Gadhafi, Ortega said most countries had relations with Libya, including Nicaragua, and that Gadhafi had offered support to the US effort against terrorism. Sandinista Deputy Victor Hugo Tinoco accused Aleman of using the terrorist incident to gain political advantage against the FSLN in the current election campaign.

Opinion polls conducted this month showed Ortega with a narrow lead in the presidential race over PLC candidate Enrique Bolanos, Aleman's former vice president. But FSLN leaders turned the terrorist accusations against the administration, charging that officials had allowed a network of traffickers to promote the illegal entry into Nicaragua of Middle Eastern nationals. For some time, there have been allegations that the government was trafficking in foreign nationals from the Middle East who used Nicaragua as a transit point for entry into the US.

US Ambassador in Managua Oliver Garza said the embassy was working with the government to find out if "elements" dangerous to the US or other countries had entered Nicaragua. He added that the embassy had asked the Nicaraguan government to reform its immigration laws to reduce the flow of illegals into the US. Under a 1999 presidential decree, Nicaragua no longer requires an entry visa. Salvador suspect arrested in Virginia The arrest of a Salvadoran citizen living in Falls Church, Virginia, put additional pressure on the FMLN. Luis Alonso Martinez Flores, of Usulután province, was detained by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) on immigration violations. He is suspected of having helped some of the hijackers who took part in the Sept. 11 attacks to obtain Virginia drivers licenses.

Mauricio Sandoval, director of the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC), said the US wants to know if Martinez Flores and 20 Middle Eastern suspects had bank accounts or property in El Salvador. Although no evidence has linked Martinez Flores to the FMLN, ARENA leader Walter Araujo said the arrest added to suspicions about the FMLN because of supposed links the party had to the Basque ETA separatists and other terrorist organizations. He said he worried that El Salvador could become a target for US reprisals. FMLN Deputy Manuel Melgar called the insinuations "pure inventions," and suggested the campaign against his party originated with the state intelligence agency Organismo de Inteligencia del Estado (OIE).

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