

# Peace pipedreams

**L**ast Friday's peace plan signed by five Central American nations raised hopes that an end to the past decade of war and turmoil in that region might finally be at hand. Among optimists and the not so well informed, that is.

People familiar with Central America and its thicket of problems received the news with pessimism.

The plan, promoted by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, calls for a negotiated settlement of the guerrilla wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. It includes regular elections, freedom of the press, multiple political parties and civil rights. Guerrilla warfare is to cease and no Central American nation's territory is to be used to mount attacks on neighboring states.

On the surface, the Arias plan sounds good. But look deeper, and serious flaws become apparent. The plan recognizes the legitimacy of the Marxist Sandinista junta in Nicaragua. It calls for an end to U.S. aid for the anti-communist Contras and implicitly denies them the vital base camps in Honduras without which they would have difficulty sustaining operations.

More important, no provision has been made for the reduction of the large numbers of Cuban, Soviet or East German troops and advisers in Nicaragua, nor of East Bloc military aid, nor of Nicaragua's large and powerful armed forces.

No wonder the Marxist junta in Nicaragua rushed to sign the accord. The Sandinistas are required only to allow vaguely defined political and press freedoms and to stop fighting provided the Contras do so.

How the Sandinistas define "political plurality" or "freedom of the press" is quite different from the way we do. While claiming for years that they are a democracy, the Sandinistas have jailed thousands of political opponents and shut down the opposition press. A nation where the chief of the East German-directed secret police is named

## Punch



"We have an hour to kill before the 10 o'clock news. Can I interest you in some bickering?"

## ERIC MARGOLIS



Lenin Cerna is not likely to tolerate meaningful political dissent.

What all this means is that the Sandinistas will have to listen to a bit more internal criticism without giving up an inch of their political or military power. Nor will they have to lessen at all their dependence on the Soviet Union and Cuba. The Contras, who were the only force that could have pushed the Sandinistas into real concessions, seem now to have been scuttled.

Thank President Ronald Reagan's bumbling diplomacy and the liberal Democrats in Congress for this. As a result of American ineptitude and timidity, Nicaragua now appears likely to become another Cuba in the heart of Central America.

Knowing this, why did the non-communist governments of Central America promote this lopsided and dangerous accord?

First and foremost, because they all have a deep fear of Nicaragua. Most Central American nations supported the Sandinistas against the Somoza regime; without extensive help from Costa Rica, Panama and Venezuela, the Sandinistas would never have gained power.

But as the dedicated Marxism of the Sandinista junta became more and more apparent, Central America's leaders took alarm. Today, they plainly worry about the large, well-equipped Nicaraguan armed forces and the Sandinistas' ability to mount revolutions in their countries.

When it became apparent that the Reagan administration was on the skids and a Democratic Congress would do nothing about Central America, the region's leaders saw they had to take action.

The Arias plan, though deeply flawed and most likely unworkable, was the best temporary measure available to buy time. Time in which it was hoped that the Sandinistas might somehow really prove that they had no bad intentions toward their neighbors and who might, when relieved of American hostility, revert to being kindly and compassionate agrarian reformers.

Giving Nicaragua a chance to show that it was not really a nasty, Marxist police state or Soviet mercenary like Cuba is a pretty risky gamble. The Contras, perhaps soon to be abandoned and homeless, might just crumble, leaving a victorious Nicaragua and its Warsaw Pact friends with pretty much a free hand in the region.

Once disbanded, the Contras will not be easily reformed, which leaves only the U.S. Marines to prevent Nicaragua from bullying its neighbors.

Next to the Sandinistas, the next worst thing to Central Americans is the prospect of Marines wading ashore. So President Arias and his neighbors are crossing their fingers, whistling in the dark and hoping the Sandinistas will somehow beat their Soviet T-55 tanks into plowshares.