American Aid for Salvadoran Guerrillas

by David Helvarg

While the Reagan administration is pushing for new military aid to the government of El Salvador a grassroots effort is underway in the United States to raise money, medical supplies and recruit volunteers to work in rebel controlled areas of El Salvador.

Two U.S. based organizations, Medical Aid for El Salvador and the Committee for Health Rights in El Salvador have raised and channeled over a half a million dollars to the FMLN guerrillas in El Salvador to set up clinics and other health care facilities in areas under their control.

A U.S. doctor, recently returned from a year working behind guerrilla lines in El Salvador, is now on a fund raising tour of the country and a sophisticated campaign of fundraising parties, computer mailings and door to door canvasings in half a dozen major cities is expected to bring in an additional half a million dollars over the next two months.

"Gifts of medicine from people in the United States help the Salvadoran campesinos draw a clear distinction between the people and the government of the United States." Dr. Charles Clements, a 37-year-old ex-Vietnam combat pilot tells a private gathering of some 50 lawyers and young professionals in a quiet suburb of Sacramento. Clements has been working with some 10,000 civilians civilians in the guerrilla zone of Guazapa, 25 miles north of the capital of San Salvador. "Everyday I was there we were bombed and rocketed by A-37 Dragonfly jets and U-2 spotter planes provided by the United States. I have treated civilians burned by white phosphorous rockets and artillery shells." He tells his audience.

At the end of the evening they pass the hat, raising $4200 for the purchase of skin grafting equipment and other needed supplies.

Back in Salinas, Dr. Clement's hometown and headquarters of the Committee for Health Rights, a group of local farm workers, students and Salvadoran refugees are volunteering their evening preparing another fundraising mailer.

"We've been able to get small shipments of anti-biotics, anaesthetics and medical supplies through in the past," says Dr. Jeffrey Ritterman, a Bay Area cardiologist who helped found the group after a 1980 report, "Abuses of Medical Neutrality in El Salvador" was published by a fact finding group of U.S. health professionals. "Today it's very difficult to move anything into El Salvador. We've been forced to send cash so that the guerrillas can purchase their medicines on the black market. That's unfortunate because Ketamine, for example, an intravenous surgical anaesthetic, which costs $2.50 a vial here in the States might run anywhere from fifty to a hundred dollars on the black market in Salvador."

The L.A. based Medical Aid for El Salvador channels its funds through a sister organization in Mexico as well as a paramedic training program in Costa Rica headed up by Salvadoran medical students who were forced into exile when the army shut down the national university three years ago.

Medical Aid, with Ed Asner and academy award film maker Burt Schneider on its board of directors, has been endorsed in its efforts by 19 congresspeople including Rep. Tom Hartkin of Iowa, Ron Dellums of California and Mickey Leland of Texas.With the use of computer mailing lists and rock concerts the group has been able to draw contributions from over 25,000 donors.

"Our 'People to People' campaign has raised more than $30,000 in cash and $150,000 in pledges over the last two months," says Mary Ann Buckley of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), the Washington-headquartered organization that started raising money for the Medical Aid group in January.

Along with organizing anti-intervention protests and teach-ins around the country CISPES' 125 chapters are now involved in fund raising efforts including door to door canvasing in low and middle income neighborhoods of Seattle, New York, Philadelphia and other cities.

Guerrilla Supply Lines from the U.S.

Ironically "solidarity" campaigns like these, along with similar multi-million dollar efforts in Canada, Mexico and Western Europe may account for a significant part of the "guerrilla supply lines" that the Reagan administration is committed to shutting down.

While most aid efforts are focused on El Salvador, outrage over the CIA's not-so-secret war against Nicaragua inspired members of the San Francisco Bay Area medical community to contribute over $200,000 worth of hospital equipment including beds, x-ray machines and surgical tables to a Nicaraguan hospital earlier this spring.

A number of doctors volunteered to teach in Nicaraguan hospitals this summer and the American Medical Student Association, which has come out against the U.S. role in Central America, sent a 19 member study group to Nicaragua in July.

U.S. citizens are also volunteering to work in the guerrilla zones of El Salvador. "Interviews of doctors and medical people are going on right now." says Bill Monning, a lawyer working with the Committee for Health Rights. "I think their presence will have important symbolic value. Over 6,000 Americans joined the Lincoln Brigades to fight fascism during the Spanish civil war in the late thirties. I see a lot of parallels with what's happening in Central America today."

Joe Anderson, a 36-year-old activist from California was killed fighting with the Salvadoran guerrillas last year. Dr. Clements says he knows of at least two other Americans now fighting with the guerrillas. He adds that what the rebels really need is not people to do their fighting for them but people with skills in medicine, law and engineering to help make life in the civilian areas under their control more tolerable for the people who live there.

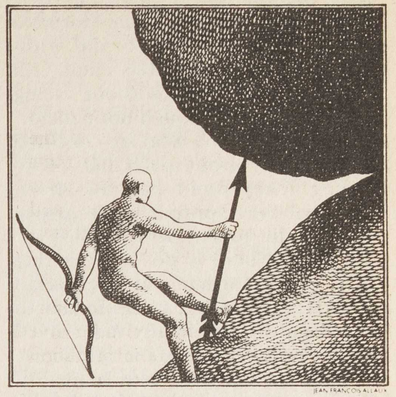
Hotter Fall

CD events and demonstrations against Euro-missiles and war are expected.

Major protests in the U.S. are scheduled for Rocky Flats, the nuclear weapons plant near Denver, at Honeywell in Minneapolis, at the Seneca Army Depot in Seneca Falls, N.Y., at Orlando, Florida's Pershing missile contractor, in Burlington, Vermont, and a state-wide march for Texas is planned in Austin. As of early September, demonstrations against nuclear weapons in October will be held in 26 states, including D.C.

Also on this Fall's agenda are national demonstrations against U.S. intervention in Central America. On November 12th, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. will be the centers of the protests. San Diego will sponsor a "Walk-a-thon" around General Dynamics in Kearny Mesa on November 13th.

Questions and Answers on Nicaragua



This is the first part of a series on Nicaragua.

by Robin Greyson

Like a lot of people, I have been very concerned about events in Central America. I was able to spend most of this summer traveling and studying in Nicaragua.

A few things need to be said at the outset. Nicaragua is not the issue in Central America. Whatever Nicaragua may or may not be is irrelevant to the crucial questions facing that part of the world. The Reagan administration has won more than the left would care to admit in the battle for the political agenda. The sheer fact that we are now talking of Nicaraguan supply lines and Cuban advisors, rather than Salvadorean death squads and U.S. supported exploitation, is a victory of power over truth. The Reagan administration has waged one of the most cynical attempts at public manipulation since the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Though there may appear to be nothing but demagogery in the Reagan Central American policy, there is a frightening element of truth. If they can win against a few exploited peasants when simple human decency says we should aid, not threaten, then they will have defeated the "Viet Nam Syndrome," and there will be no qualms about invasions or de-stabilizations in any other part of the globe.

The fact is that the United States, directly, and through a series of dictators, has dominated the Central American isthmus since the mid-1800s. The series of events unfolding in that part of the world are part of a long history of struggles for national autonomy and liberation. Long before there was a Cuba, or Soviet Union, the peasants of Central America were taking up arms against their landlords and exploiters. To see events in El Salvador or Guatamala as originating in anything else but this centuries-long conflict is simply a lie.

Haven't the Sandinistas betrayed their own revolution? President Reagan has said that the government has not fulfilled its promise to hold elections, and that hundreds of former Sandinistas are now fighting against their old party.

When I first arrived in Nicaragua, I had been speaking to a friend about the revolution. I was talking about what had taken place "after the revolution in 1979," when my friend interrupted me. "What happened with the triumph in July of 1979," he said, "was the end of the period of insurrection, the revolution continues."

The period of insurrection was a broadly popular event. Nearly all classes and groups participated — everyone thought the revolution was "theirs." While the alienation of the lower classes was taken for granted in Nicaraguan politics, Somoza had managed to alienate most of the upper classes as well; and had crushed not only trade unions and peasant organizations, but business associations and conservative parties that opposed him. The Sandinistas had been fighting the dictatorship for decades, while others joined in the last few months before the triumph. Some people fought to end poverty and centuries of exploitation, while others wished to overthrow a particularly greedy ruler. For some, the revolution was for the poor—the worker, the campesino; for others it was for the wealthy—the businessman, the landlord.

Social revolutions can't be all things to all people. The government is neither purposely trying to alienate the upper classes, nor is it rushing into a socialist economy, but it is clear that priorities have changed. A large amount of land, about 20% of all holdings, most of which was owned by the Somoza family or members of the National Guard, has been redistributed. Small landholders and collectives now receive first priority access to credit and farm machinery, and agricultural workers are organized into unions. Nicaragua is still a mixed economy, with over 60% of all productive resources in private hands; and nearly 80% of the land is still held by individuals, a fact which the media seems to ignore. Those who use their companies and land productively and who don't exploit their workers, have nothing to fear from the state. But those who leave their land idle, or decapitalize their industry, or ship their profits abroad, may have their property seized. The private property in the major means of production has had its historical unilateral power limited. For those who made the revolution to increase their profit margins at the expense of the workers—the Sandinistas have betrayed them, and many have left the country for Miami. Their gripe was with one particularly greedy dictator—but the revolution was never theirs to begin with. They came to it late, gave it half hearted support, and left it quickly.

The middle classes are in a more complicated and tragic situation. Like the upper classes, they too participated in the revolution and expected things to be better for them afterward. Expectations for this group were more legitimate. The problem is that although the government would like to help these groups, its resources to do so are limited, and the future potential does little to satisfy the needs of today. There is a serious shortage problem in Nicaragua. Basic food supplies are sufficient, and the government claims that there has actually been an increase on production over the pre-revolutionary period. But, the lower classes economic improvement means that there are more people consuming these foodstuffs. Now most food is rationed, and there are long lines and long waits; which is, at least, a burden that rich and poor must share alike. For the middle