The Arias peace plan: how we can help make it work

Holt Ruffin
Special to The Times

THE award last month of the Nobel Peace Prize to Costa Rican President Oscar Arias expressed recognition of an individual's extraordinary efforts to bring peace to Central America, as well as the hope that it would improve the chances for success of the diplomatic accord that bears his name.

The Nobel Committee awarded the Peace Prize in somewhat comparable circumstances in 1973, when Henry Kissinger and North Vietnam's Le Duc Tho received the award for the Paris Peace Accords. That agreement, in the words of the committee, "brought a wave of joy and hope for peace over the entire world."

Events later made a mockery of the award. One observer likened the agreement to "a dictionary for a language that nobody speaks."

While Central America is very different from Indochina, Arias' plan tries to accomplish an end to the violence and foreign intervention in his region without an ensuing "peace" of the Indochina variety: police states, continued social conflict, and endless economic misery.

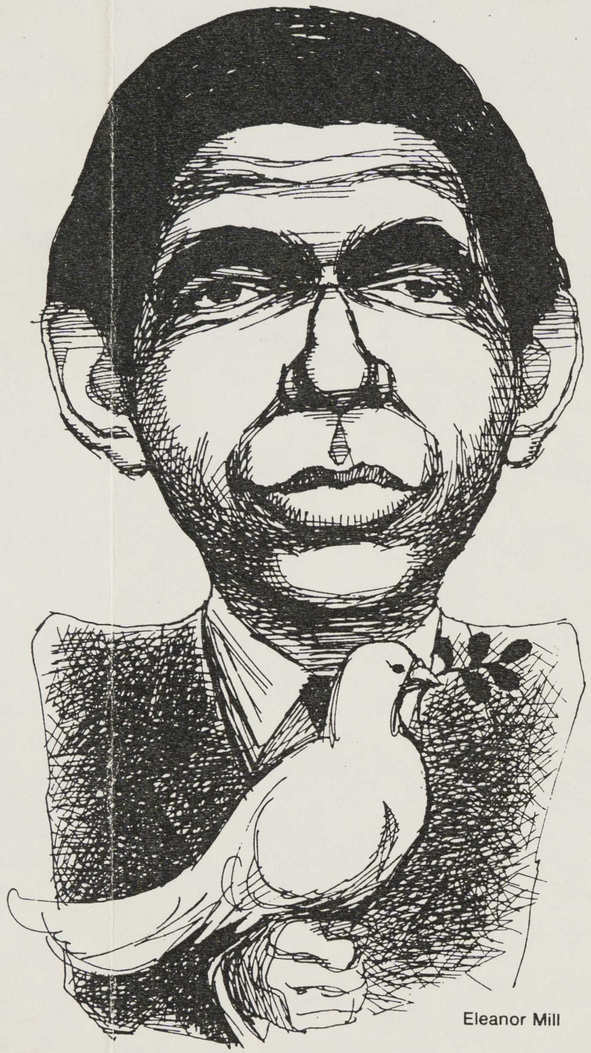
The Arias plan, although it applies equally to all five nations that signed it, is directed principally at the conflict in Nicaragua.

What are the threats to success of the Arias plan, and what can U.S. citizens do to help Central Americans overcome them?

One threat is that the United States, overtly or covertly, will continue to aid the Nicaraguan contras. The Arias plan calls for the cessation of all outside assistance — military, logistical, territorial and financial — to "irregular forces or insurrectionist movements" in the region. The forces most seriously affected are the contras, although the Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador and Guatemala are also affected.

Despite confusion on this point from the White House, it appears that both the administration and Congress will comply with this provision of the Arias plan, at least until early January, when Central American heads of state will meet to review compliance with the plan.

In one sense, the Arias plan came along in the nick of time, giving an administration that was unlikely to obtain more contra funding from Congress an excuse not to ask for such funding. It is an excuse the administration should seize.



Eleanor Mill

President Oscar Arias

The contra-aid policy has been a failure because the American people (a) are averse to financing long-term "low-intensity conflict" simply in order to promote negotiations between a dictatorship and its political opposition in Nicaragua; (b) do not believe the threat Nicaragua's government poses to U.S. interests is as great as the president contends, and (c) perceive the policy as not having the support of the democratic leaders in Central America, on whose behalf the United States is supposedly acting.

The policy has been the target of a fierce propaganda campaign in which the Sandinistas and their supporters in U.S. cities have falsified and exaggerated contra violations of law and morality while largely ignoring those of the Sandinista army and government.

It would be wrong to assume — as some organizations on the U.S. right do — that only such propaganda accounts for the failure of the administration's policy to obtain bipartisan support.

The contras have also had their advocates, and on the battlefield of ideas, victory has probably been theirs, insofar as a majority of Congress — and the populations of the nations that border Nicaragua — are persuaded that the Sandinista government is a variety of Marxist dictatorship that threatens the stability of the region.

Thus, contrary to the theme of most Central America "peace" activity in the United States, the agreement signed by Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua on Aug. 7 does not call for an end to U.S. aid to the contras as the only condition for peace in the region.

Instead, the first paragraph in the Arias plan ascribes the sources of conflict in Central America to deep social divisions ***within*** the countries and calls for "steps for national reconciliation that would allow for popular participation with full guarantees in authentic political processes based on justice, freedom and democracy."

The next five elements in the plan call for an amnesty, the establishment of a National Reconciliation Commission in each country that is party to the agreement, a cease-fire, democratization, and free elections. The agreement's language on democratization is perhaps the clearest. Effective yesterday:

" . . . there shall exist complete freedom of press, television and radio. This freedom will include the opening and maintaining in operation of communications media for all ideological groups, and the operation of these media without prior censorship."

Also to go into effect yesterday were "complete political pluralism . . . broad access to the communications media, full exercise of the right of association . . . as well as freedom of movement by members of political parties in order to proselytize," and the re-establishment of "full exercise of all constitutional guarantees."

Critics argue that other parts of the plan are excessively vague, that it contains no enforcement provisions, and fails to address the issue of correcting the military balance in the region. (Costa Rica, for example, has no army, while Nicaragua has a regular army of 60,000.)

Cynics worry also that the Arias plan will permanently dismantle the contra organization in return for Sandinista "democratization" that can be reversed as soon as U.S. aid to the contras is politically dead.

Arias is aware that his plan represents a gamble — that moral and political pressures will work better than violence in bringing peace and democracy to Nicaragua. He seems to have the support of virtually all the democratic leaders in his region in believing that U.S. support of the contra war strengthens the Sandinistas more than it weakens them.

This may be so. What is less debatable is that the division and rancor that have led young Nicaraguans to kill one another over political differences for five years would not exist today if the democratic institutions the Arias plan calls for had been put into effect by the Sandinistas in 1979, when they came to power. They now have a second chance, and they should be encouraged to seize it.

North Americans, particularly those who travel to Nicaragua or are in touch with its government, can help. They should (1) urge Congress and the president to comply with the Arias plan by suspending contra aid at least until early January, when the Central American presidents will meet to review progress under the accord, and (2) apply political and moral pressure to the Sandinistas to comply with Arias plan's pledges to democratize.

In Seattle, such critics of contra aid as the Church Council of Greater Seattle, Centro de la Raza's "International Department," the Seattle-Managua Sister City Association, the mayor's office, and others could support the Arias plan by sending telegrams to the Sandinista government, urging it to release all political prisoners, lift the state of emergency, grant a broad amnesty, negotiate a cease-fire, and institute complete freedom of the press and association.

■ Holt Ruffin is executive director of the World Without War Council in Seattle.