David Helvarg on Central America

Interview with ex-San Diego Journalist

On the eve of his departure from San Diego on his way to set up residency in Oakland, David Helvarg joined us in a free-wheeling discussion on the current and historical situation in Central America. Working as a free-lance journalist, David has traveled to the inflamed isthmus 4 times over the last half dozen years. His first item was in the summer of 1979 when he and John Hoagland, a San Diego photojournalist killed in El Salvador one year ago, traveled south to cover the Sandinistas' final offensive in Nicaragua. David's last visit was in late 1982/early '83 while working with a Swedish television crew.

Question: What's your current assessment of the situation in Central America three to four months after Reagan's re-election?

Helvarg: The Reagan administration is stalemated in Central America at the moment and that creates a dangerous level of frustration. In El Salvador, they've managed to contain the guerrillas with a massive infusion of arms, arms aid and training over the last 4 years. This stalemate has been established in a country where the army had and lost the initiative early on in the conflict in the period '79 to '80. The guerrillas came back and had a clear initiative; they gained territory and popular control in the early part of the eighties.

By around late '82, the U.S. through a massive training and arms and other forms of support was able to bring the army back, and also through a political manipulation of the elections was able to establish what has certain international credibility — the Duarte government. Yet at the same time, the U. S. maintained a relation with the Right so they're able to veto any serious attempt on Duarte's part to come to terms with the rebels if he is in fact serious. Duarte is limited. The right-wing still controls the military-political apparatus. The extreme right, the death squads are less active today simply because the nature of the war has changed. They achieved their purpose. They wiped out the left-wing's links to the cities, the urban areas, the popular organizations, the trade unions and churches.

The nature of the war has become more rural based. Lines are defined. Rebel zones are more established. Where the Right used to carry out very visible killings in and around the capital, you now have an occasional massacre during army sweeps in very remote parts of the country — massacres that will be reported by the international press and then denied by the U.S. Embassy.

Now you have systematic bombing, the establishment of free fire zones, as in Chalatenago — where basically anything is considered a target . . . it means the air force has a go-ahead to try to depopulate rebel zones in the north. Army sweeps again tend to remain indiscriminate. Of course, the U.S. advisors' response is: 'let us be more actively engaged and we'll show them how to be more discriminate in their use of force.'

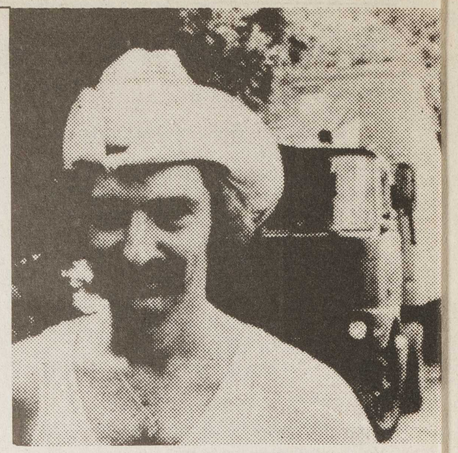
Question: What about recent defeats for the army in El Salvador? What do they portend for the peace process?

Helvarg: The guerrillas have a better tactical intelligence system in the field. They have the capacity to inflict serious damage on the army. Such as when they took out that army base in Chalatenago. Or when they dropped the two major bridges over Rio Limpo. But they're also limited in holding territory. When they go in and try to hold major towns like they did with the town of Berlin in late '82–'83, they're faced with overwhelming firepower which can be brought on them; U.S.-provided air power, the new gunships we've sent in there, the air mobility that's been established with the new choppers . . .

So at a certain level there's a stalemate. The army's tactics in the field aren't as good as the guerrillas, but the guerrillas can't hold the major towns and major lines of communication, like roads and bridges, because the army can come in and respond with greater force.

Question: Since Duarte met with the FMLN, there seems to be deepened divisions within the Salvadoran government, between Duarte and the more right-wing ARENA party. ARENA people have apparently assassinated some Christian Democrats, threats have been made against the Catholic hierarchy and Duarte himself.

Helvarg: Duarte moved beyond U.S. policy when he open negotiations with the FMLN. There've been lots of responses. Externally, in terms of relations



with the U.S., Washington is trying to short circuit the power of the Christian Democrats — they want Duarte's party up front in the political field, but they don't want them to be autonomous, the major political force. The CIA arranged Duarte to be elected during the last set of elections in '84. Today with the new municipal elections taking place, the U.S. is taking a stance of not allowing the Christian Democrats to displace ARENA in terms of political power in the Constituent Assembly. the U.S. is showing displeasure in Duarte's autonomy and is sending a covert message to the Right, which is, 'you play it our way, which is electoral, and we'll ignore your past history.' Their past history is their present history — the death squads. The death squads never disappeared.

Question: The peace talks were very popular in Salvador. Don't you think the Reagan administration and the extreme right forced Duarte to suspend them, partly because they allowed political space to open up in the urban areas, where there was just recently a resurgence of the mass movement?

Helvarg: Right. But the early eighties movement was different than what you have today. The movements that formed the popular organizations between '75 and '80 were clearly of the left. Even when the archbishop spoke out on their behalf, he was accepting the necessity for a radical social agenda, for a left movement.

The popular support for the peace movement today is much more based on a war weariness among the urban as well as the rural population. Even the strategy of the left recognizes this. They're much more serious about accepting a coalition government than in '79–'80 when both the right and the left were looking for total power. The popular organizations in the streets in '79 and '80 wanted a Nicaraguan-style revolution.

The left today is playing for coalition power or a power-sharing role. The hope that Duarte or somebody could bring people peace is aggravated by the Right who still seek "the destruction of the subversion," as they say. Negotiations can only go so far. Ultimately you come to the question of power sharing the army and the right wing elements won't accept power sharing with the left. That leaves Duarte with no space to operate in. You can sit down and talk about it and it looks good. But after the first talks and after all the banners with doves on them, there's really no place else to go.

Question: And in Nicaragua . . . ?

Helvarg: The U.S. has tried initially to hold the line in Salvador to the degree they've created a stalemate. At the same time they have tried to roll back any social achievements in Nicaragua by creating a contra force initially with a rationale to cut off arm supplies to El Salvador. That rationale has been put by the wayside and now the Reagan people are arguing that their aim is to force the Nicaraguans to negotiate with the rebel forces we've created. Effectively, the main Contra force, the FDN, would never have been a serious force without the CIA backing over the last 4 years.

Now the Contras have not achieved what they aimed for, which was to establish territorial control in Nicaragua. They have achieved an unstated goal of the U.S.-backed campaign to destabilize the Nicaraguan economy and shift priorities away from social reform to encourage a militarization of the system in Nicaragua. This in effect undermines Nicaragua as a social example for the rest of Latin America and the region in particular. Tney've achieved that.

The Contras have a larger force than Somoza ever had and better organized. In response to the Contras, you have a hardening and militarization of the system in Nicaragua. For example, the draft having to go into effect — which is not a popular practice . . . few are in the world. Youth just don't like to be conscripted . . . the revolution was voluntary.

If the real purpose is to force the Sandinistas to negotiate and to ultimately overthrow the Sandinistas, then clearly the Contras have failed as a strategy. And that brings the only alternative: direct force, direct intervention.

Question: If the U.S.'s goal is to force Nicaragua to the negotiating table, why then has the Reagan administration just recently broken off all talks with the Sandinistas?

Helvarg: When you work in Central America as a journalist, you have to deal with two levels. One is to deal with the rationale of what's supposed to be going on, and two, what's really going on. What's supposed to be going on according to policy in terms of selling the Contra war to Congress right now? They're supposed to be now trying to force the Sandinistas to negotiate with the Contras, 'because they don't have a democracy, it's a Soviet-style election.' Of course, earlier on, we got the major oppositional figure in Nicaragua to boycott the election. The election in Nicaragua had a lot of faults. So did the election in Salvador. But at the policy level, the Salvadoran election is held up as 'democracy' and the Nicaraguan as 'non-democratic.'

So we understand that Washington's major function is to undermine left-wing and popular forces in the region. Which means defeat for the rebels in Salvador. They feel they can't do this without defeating and overthrowing the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

The U.S. has the forces in place to launch military activity from Honduras. But even there things aren't all as they should be. Our main backer during the military build-up in Honduras was General Gustove Alvarez, a fanatical right-winger who had the backing of the Moonies to establish his own political party. He was going to use the Moonies' political structure, APRO, that he established, to set up a Pinochet-type regime within Honduras.

The traditional military rule there has been very loose and had allowed for a certain level of pluralism. When Alvarez began to monopolize power and establish his own death squads, working directly under U.S. Ambassador Negroponte, to push toward a war with Nicaragua, other younger and more liberal elements in the army got rid of him last year. They staged a sort of barracks coup. The Honduran armed forces aren't going to tolerate one-man rule, particularly if it means a war with Nicaragua and a war they probably couldn't win.

So there's a shift there. You have the Honduran armed forces pushing for a better deal. A major there once told me, 'If we're going to be the U.S. whores, then we should be well-paid whores.' They want Ambassador Negroponte out, they want a little bit of national autonomy back. Which means we can't push the Hondurans in front of us into Nicaragua.

In late March we'll be having armored units — a U.S. armored division with tanks — in Honduras for Big Pines 3, which is going to be fairly large-scale with a lot of U.S. troops. Several thousand U.S. troops have now gone through jungle warfare training in Honduras. The facilities are on the ground in Honduras. At the same time there's clearly not the political will in the U.S. and that's the thing that holds the Reagan administration back from more active involvement — either in a Salvadoran war or intervention in Nicaragua.

Question: What exactly is the relationship between the situation in Salvador and the situation in Nicaragua?

Helvarg: It's the regionalization of the war with the connecting point our turning Honduras into a military rear area. The connections are in U.S. policy. We went in there in early 1980. Henry Kissinger talked on the need of the U.S. for a quick and easy victory somewhere in the world to re-establish our prestige after Vietnam. We thought we would find it in Salvador. But instead, over a billion and a half dollars later we find ourselves in a stalemate. The Salvadoran government may be in crisis today but in fact the government there has been in crisis since 1979 when the U.S. sponsored the first reform coup.

Salvador's a dependency. It's basic economy is a war economy. There's a massive economic default kept short by U.S. aid. It's an aid-dependent economy in every sense, and we'll sustain it. It's a relatively cheap economy to sustain as long as we want the war to continue without any kind of recognition of a role for the left.

Washington counts back to the domino theory. 'It's all Soviet-Cuban influence.' If they could overthrow the Sandinistas, they'd still discover the poverty and oppression and other factors they don't consider relevant. They

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