



On the Record: Central American Civil Society After Mitch (1999)

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Contents:

- **In the News**
 - **Fears of a Military Take-Over Shake Honduras**
- **Stockholm Report by Marie Clark**
 - **Donors Press Central American Governments on Transparency and Civil Society**
 - **Guatemala Says Indigenous Vote Will Not Set Back Peace Progress**
 - **Donors Support Embattled Nicaraguan Comptroller**
 - **Interamerican Development Bank Is Asked to Help Central America Push for Open Markets**
 - **Regional Environment Plans Urged to Reduce "Ecological and Social Vulnerability"**
 - **Decentralization "Strengthens Central Government"**
 - **Independent Judiciary Seen as Key to Honest Government**
 - **US Seeks to Assuage Honduras Anger Over Deportations**
 - **Follow-Up to Stockholm Discussed**
- **Profile: Amadeo Martinez – Consejo Indigena de Centro America (CICA)**
- **Feature of the Day by Donna Vukelich: Landmines in Nicaragua**

From the AP Editorial Desk

Fears of a Military Take-Over Shake Honduras

In a startling reminder that democracy may not be completely secure in Central America, the government of Honduras has opened an inquiry into reports that the Honduran military might be preparing to seize power.

The news was given to reporters on May 25 by the Defense Minister of Honduras, Edgardo Dumas Rodriguez. It has apparently rattled nerves in the Central American country.

While the idea would seem implausible, the government of Honduras has been overthrown three times by the army this century, and the army has fought hard to retain its privileged role in Honduras. President Carlos Reina, the president who began the reforms to weaken the military's influence over the government during the early 1990s, survived three attempts on his life.

Minister Dumas Rodriguez has picked up where Reina left off and given clear signs that the military will be held accountable. He is the first Defense Minister chosen from outside the military, and on assuming office he ordered an audit of the commercial transactions of recent army commanders.

According to the Honduran press, it was reports that Joint Chief of Staff Colonel Eugenio Romero and other senior officers were conspiring against Dumas that prompted the investigation.

Some feel that that Dumas might be drumming up support for more reconstruction aid from the United States. With the closure of Howard air base in Panama, Honduras has become more important to the United States as a base in the war against narcotics. The US base at Palmarola served as the center for US military relief efforts during the hurricane.

Dumas was among those calling for a new "Marshall Plan" to rebuild Central America after Hurricane Mitch. He might be raising the specter of a coup to attract more attention from the United States.

- Information from **STRATFOR**, Global Intelligence Update, May 26, 1999.

Stockholm Report

by Marie Clark

Donors Press Central American Governments on Transparency and Civil Society

To the relief of nongovernmental participants, donor governments have used the Stockholm meeting to press for greater involvement of civil society in the reconstruction of Central America.

This emerged clearly on Wednesday and Thursday, when the five governments most affected by Mitch – Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Guatemala – were quizzed in detail by donors about their reconstruction plans.

During the debate, repeated references were also made to controversies that have been aired in this series of On the Record. These included the future for Guatemala's indigenous people after the recent vote in that country; the dispute between President Aleman and Nicaragua's Comptroller General; obstacles to the distribution of relief aid in Nicaragua; and progress on land reform in Honduras.

Following the country discussions on Thursday, the consultative group heard from four technical workshops (on ecological and social vulnerability, trade, decentralization, and transparency). Pledges were due to be announced Friday at the final session.

There is little doubt that the Central American governments have tried to involve civil society both in the preparation of their plans and at the Stockholm discussions. This in itself is a breakthrough, even if the honeymoon does not last on return home.

In the case of Honduras, there does seem to be a genuine closeness between government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) – partly because both believe completely in the need to relieve Honduras' debt burden. During a break in the meeting, President Carlos Flores was seen huddled in conversation with Mauricio Diaz, a program coordinator for ASONOG, the Honduran association of NGOs.

At one point after the Honduran government invoked the name of Interforos, the coalition of NGOs (including ASONOG), Bernice Romero from Oxfam America was heard to say to a friend: "You see, we are having an influence!"

Unveiling Nicaragua's request on Wednesday, the Nicaraguan delegate noted that the delegation included members of the Nicaraguan political opposition parties, different ethnic groups, representatives from the private sector, and also the farmers. NGOs were represented on the delegation by Ana Quiros, from the Managua-based organization CISAS (which works on health).

In addition, said the delegate, the Nicaraguan proposal had been put together with help from "more than 500 social groups and NGOs, 10,000 families, and 100 community leaders." As for the future, said the delegate, the government plans to create a tripartite process within three months, comprising government, donors and civil society. Together, they will develop a "national integrity plan."

Presenting El Salvador's plan, the Foreign Minister also stressed that it had been drafted over a period of four months with help from civil society. He pledged that the relationship would not suffer from the recent change of government in elections.

In fact, he said, NGOs and the Vice-President had jointly signed an open letter on reconstruction to donors, pledging that civil society will monitor reconstruction. He also promised that the management of road projects will be shared with local communities and NGOs.

"We want a national reconstruction plan and process to be one of exemplary consultation," said the Minister. "We want this Consultative Group meeting to be a continuation of the discussion."

Generally speaking, the donors seemed more inclined to take El Salvador at face value than Nicaragua, after hearing of the angry confrontation between the Nicaraguan Comptroller and the Nicaraguan President Aleman. But even when it comes to El Salvador, the donors clearly will not be satisfied with vague promises. France, for example, wanted to know more about a bill currently before the Salvadoran parliament that could make it impossible for donors to work directly with local communities.

The question is how far donors will go to ensure the continuing participation of civil society, and whether they will link their aid specifically to such concerns. Quite apart from the colonial overtones of conditionality, any withholding of aid at this critical juncture might be hard to justify – particularly as the overall aid response to Mitch has been so meager.

Asked about this by On the Record, Elena Brineman, mission director of US Agency for International Development (USAID) in Honduras, predicted that governments would not place formal conditions on pledges. "I don't think it is needed. The pressure is there from Honduran citizens and the international donors, Brineman concluded.

Others seem more inclined to conditionality, although they prefer to present it as an incentive rather than penalty. Noting that Guatemala has a \$400 million debt, Belgium suggested exchanging the debt for projects involving civil society.

At the very least, this indicated the creative thinking that has gone into the role of civil society at Stockholm.

Guatemala Says Indigenous Vote Will Not Set Back Peace Progress

Donors have pressed the government of Guatemala to explain the low turnout of indigenous people in the recent referendum, which appeared to kill any hopes of significant participation in the political process by Guatemala's indigenous people.

Speaking on Thursday during a discussion on Guatemala's aid request, donors returned repeatedly to last week's vote, which rejected a constitutional amendment to grant more autonomy to the indigenous people as recommended by the international peace plan for Guatemala. (See 'On the Record', Issue 7)

Sweden, Norway, Spain and Germany all asked why more effort had not been made to get out the indigenous vote. For the Germans, the fact that just 18 percent of the indigenous population had voted indicated a profound lack of progress in judicial and fiscal reforms. The Germans made it clear that progress in the peace process would be a prerequisite for any German aid.

In response, the Guatemalan delegation described the recent referendum as "just one chapter" in the peace process, and pledged to keep the process on track. A new administration would take office on January 14 next year, said delegates, and make judicial and fiscal reform a priority. The United States asked whether there were any plans for a broad campaign of electoral registration.

As if to drive home the message, the Canadians called for a resolution of the murder of Bishop Juan Gerardi, a prominent Guatemalan human rights leader who was assassinated in Guatemala city on April 26, 1998 after releasing the results of a three-year study on human rights violations.

Donors Support Embattled Nicaraguan Comptroller

Several Western donor governments have used the Stockholm meeting to throw their support behind the embattled Comptroller General of Nicaragua, Agustin Jarquin, whose confrontation with the Nicaraguan president has turned into a litmus test of Nicaragua's receptivity to transparent government.

Speaking on Wednesday after Nicaragua presented its request for aid, delegates from Denmark and Sweden demanded that Jarquin's investigation into the personal finances of President

Aleman be followed up through due legal process. President Aleman has attempted to personally smear and discredit Jarquin.

Jarquin has been present in Stockholm. Although he has not commented publicly on his dispute with President Aleman, he has been pressing behind the scenes for the independent auditing of all official contracts, right through to the worksite.

The US is said to favor this idea, which Jarquin has reportedly discussed with Mark Schneider, the assistant administrator of USAID. But it is being vigorously opposed by the Nicaraguan government, which is prepared to accept the auditing of foreign money, but not that of the Nicaraguan government.

The debate has also shown that donors view "transparency" in the widest possible terms, and certainly wider than auditing contracts. The Dutch suggested that new loans to Nicaragua also need to be supervised. Denmark pointed out that land titles need to be guaranteed before any land reform program.

Sweden reminded Nicaragua that the government had agreed to the reform of the civil service at a donors meeting in Geneva last year, and wanted to know whether there had been follow up. All these are variants of the same theme – the need to open up government and make it more accountable.

Interamerican Development Bank Is Asked to Help Central America Push for Open Markets

In a move that could provoke US labor unions, the InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB) has been asked by the Stockholm meeting to help open up markets for Central American products and attract foreign investment for the export sector.

The request came from a technical workshop on trade that took place on May 25 under the direction of Sweden's Minister of Trade.

The workshop insisted that trade must be an integral part of reconstruction. It urged that Central American exporters be allowed greater access to the Caribbean Basic Initiative, and also be included in any expansion of the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA). Negotiations began in April 1998 to establish a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).

The workshop also urged that any new round of negotiations under the World Trade Organization (WTO) should provide preferential treatment for Central American agricultural products.

At the same time, said the workshop, the IDB should consult with the steering committee of the consultative group to attract more foreign investment in export-oriented activities (ranging from trade fairs to the elimination of state monopolies) and also strengthen institutional support for exports.

Many economists argue that the best way for rich countries to help Central America is to buy more of its goods and produce. But Central American exporters also find the door barred against their most competitive exports. The European Union (EU) and United States are in the midst of a trade war over bananas from Honduras, which have been restricted by the EU.

On the other hand, an aggressive attempt to fund reconstruction through increased exports could also be controversial. Calling for Central America to be included in an expanded NAFTA could anger American labor unions, which feel that NAFTA threatens American jobs and allows multinational companies to exploit cheap labor.

The wider question, which has been raised repeatedly by this series of On the Record, is whether pushing Central America to export more makes any sense. This is because of the ecological damage caused by many agro-exports, which are grown with pesticides, exhaust the soil and (in the case of shrimp) destroy natural resources like mangroves.

Regional Environment Plans Urged to Reduce "Ecological and Social Vulnerability"

A technical workshop at Stockholm has concluded that the countries of Central America need to work together to reduce "ecological vulnerability" to natural disasters like Mitch, because they share much of the same natural assets, particularly watersheds.

The workshop began with the premise that "a failure of past development efforts" had accounted for the destruction caused by Mitch. Reducing vulnerability, it said, was a vital and "cost-effective" form of disaster prevention – and hence development.

Reducing vulnerability must start at the local level, with land tenure, proper land use, and agricultural practices (particularly on steep slopes and near water).

But at the same time, said the workshop, Central America is so small, and so ecologically vulnerable that its governments must act together for environmental management to succeed: 60% of the region's watersheds are shared, and there is an obvious need to share technical information when the entire region is affected by severe weather like Mitch. Several regional environment programs already exist, like the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor which receives funds from the Global Environment Facility.

The workshop concluded: "All parts of a watershed are inextricably linked, with vulnerability in one area affecting the infrastructure in other areas. Any infrastructure investments should include measures to protect entire resource (including upstream watershed management)."

Apart from this workshop, environmental issues have taken a back seat at the Stockholm conference. Yet Mitch was above all an ecological disaster (see issues 2-3 of this series). The delegation from El Salvador noted that only 5 percent of the country's forests remain. Two thirds of El Salvador's water comes from the Lempa river which rises in the highlands of Honduras.

In another paper presented at Stockholm, the Central American Integration System presented a budget of \$116.7 million to be spent on regional projects that would cushion the region against future disasters. This includes \$15.5 million for the integrated development of river basins.

Decentralization "Strengthens Central Government"

Decentralization is a test of a national government towards participatory democracy, but it need not involve the weakening of central government, according to a technical workshop discussion that took place at Stockholm.

The workshop noted that for decentralization to succeed, central governments have to be prepared to share power. But, it said, this need not imply a weakening. "On the contrary, central governments are likely to be strengthened as they can better focus on national policy issues and central functions."

Moreover, "at its best decentralization simultaneously reorganizes the roles and responsibilities of central government and opens government processes to greater involvement by the people."

The workshop noted that in many countries there is considerable confusion about decentralization – what it involves, and what it would cost. Given this, it says, countries should articulate a strategy, drawing on civil society in the process.

Independent Judiciary Seen as Key to Honest Government

An independent judiciary which provides quick and effective justice is one of the best guarantees of transparency, according to a technical workshop which met at Stockholm.

The workshop agreed that "transparency" is a broad term that applies to all elements of society (the state, civil society, and the private sector.) It also laid out some of the broad requirements needed to ensure transparency. These include the efficient and transparent management of public resources, free access to information, and even campaign financing laws.

But the workshop paid special attention to the judiciary, and the need to establish a "judicial system that is not corrupt and that is able to fight corruption." This requires proper training, adequate salaries, job stability, as well as the modernization of registry systems and the management of archives.

The workshop also calls for the implementation of international legal instruments, notably the InterAmerican Convention against Corruption. To this end, it says, governments should adapt their criminal codes in accordance with the Convention.

US Seeks to Assuage Honduras' Anger Over Deportations

Of the Hondurans currently being returned to Honduras from the United States, 99 percent left for the US after Hurricane Mitch, according to Elena Brineman, USAID's mission director in Honduras.

Brineman's comments to On the Record came at a time when migration from Central America has fallen from its peak after Mitch, while deportations from the US back to Central America are rising.

Many Latino organizations urged the Clinton Administration to turn a blind eye to the illegal entrants after Mitch, on the grounds that their presence in the US (whence they could send remittances back home) would do more to cushion the region than their deportation. But a moratorium on deportations was lifted on April 1.

Since then, Honduran government representatives have shifted the debate to the hundreds of thousands of Hondurans who left for the United States in the 1980s and early 1990s. They are still liable for deportation, unlike Cubans, Nicaraguans, Salvadorans, and Haitians, who have been given permission to remain.

The Hondurans fear that the massive return of deportees from the 1980s, without any family links or resources in Honduras, will add to the country's troubles. Besides which, many of the migrants turn around and attempt to return to the US.

Brineman said that the Clinton administration is trying to get equal treatment for the Hondurans and that "They have made some progress."

Overall, migration has received relatively little attention in Stockholm, even though it links all of the Central American countries and is an integral part of reconstruction. The delegation of Costa Rica noted that Costa Rica hosts 500,000 Nicaraguans, all of whom receive full social services.

Follow-Up to Stockholm Discussed

NGOs have heard of two possible follow-up mechanisms to the Stockholm meeting. Under the first, the IDB would establish an international monitoring body made up of Canada, Holland, Spain, and Germany.

A second idea, emanating from the Swedes, is for a "Friendship Commission" that is made up of Canada, Germany, Spain, Sweden, and the United States.

In each proposal, representatives from the countries would meet with aid recipients to ensure that any conditions are met.

Profile: Amadeo Martinez – Consejo Indigena de Centro America (CICA)

Amadeo Martinez is from the Lenca indigenous people in El Salvador. He wears several other hats, including that of a lawyer for the Consejo Cordinador Nacional Indigena Salvadoreno and secretary of the Consejo Indigena de Centro America (CICA).

The CICA has formed to coordinate efforts by the indigenous people of Central America to win aid. It attempts to meet the needs of those affected by Hurricane Mitch and address chronic

poverty, as well as lobby the governments of Central America to draft laws that protect the environment and indigenous rights.

For Martinez, as for other indigenous leaders, Mitch was merely the latest example of neglect by government. "The indigenous people were affected in every way. We lost lives, houses, schools everything." Yet, he said, only 1 percent of those affected received emergency health care. CICA is seeking funds to rebuild houses, and provide bi-lingual education and health care.

Increased tourism and other commercial ventures have weakened the environment, claims Martinez.

Martin stresses that – much like the environment – indigenous people have common regional interests that cut across national frontiers. He has been working closely with Jose Ernesto Suchite, the president of Confederacion de Pueblos Autoctonos de Honduras.

Only when the indigenous people unite will they be able to influence their government to create a "constitucion indigena" that will protect the "madre tierra" and the rights of the citizens.

Feature of the Day: Landmines in Nicaragua

From the editorial desk:

From the editorial desk: 70,000 landmines were left buried in Nicaragua after the war against the contras. Five Nicaraguan soldiers have died while trying to remove and destroy them. Following Mitch, the war against landmines took a turn for the worse. Tens of thousands of mines were dislodged by the water and mud, and settled in new locations. But as DONNA VUKELICH reports, Nicaraguans have responded to the setback with resilience and imagination.

A little boy runs down one of the sleepy streets in Dipilto, a small town less than an hour's walk from the Honduran border. Many T-shirts bear the Nike swoosh (which is ubiquitous, even in rural Nicaragua) or some sought-after brand name. Not his. His carries careful, technical drawings of a variety of landmines. They are intended as both warning and prevention to the residents of his community, as well as of scores of others.

When the floodwaters of Mitch that raged through northern and central Nicaragua finally subsided, they left in their path something that nobody could have planned for – thousands of landmines left over from the US war against Nicaragua during the 1980s that are now scattered across large areas of the country.

Military Mine Clearance

Major Sergio Ugarte is head of the Nicaraguan army's engineering troops and the officer overseeing Nicaragua's ongoing demining efforts. Late last year, he published a report that alarmed the OAS, and caused OAS Secretary General Cesar Gaviria to issue a warning about the threat to Nicaragua from the mines churned up by Hurricane Mitch.

Ugarte said that before the hurricane hit, the army had fairly accurate records of the areas where a total of some 76,000 mines were located. "Now, we simply don't know how many are still out there, how many were destroyed, or where they are" said Ugarte. He says that the most seriously affected areas include "vast zones" of Boaco, Chontales, Las Segovias, Jinotega, Matagalpa, and Chinandega.

The hurricane has forced the army to redesign its demining efforts, which have been underway since the early 1990s. One new problem is that the large amounts of mud and debris present will slow attempts to detect and deactivate mines. Ugarte says that far larger areas must be searched just to deactivate one mine, and the amount of debris means that all sorts of scrap will set off the detectors. The demining squads, of course, must treat each item flagged by the detectors as a potential mine.

On major point of concentration for the demining efforts will be all areas around bridges, many of which have river beds up to five times wider than a year ago. This also makes the army's work far time-consuming and expensive. For the first time since demining efforts began, the Nicaraguan army is beginning to use dogs.

The army had originally set the year 2000 as the deadline for the definitive deactivation of all existing mines. But after the hurricane Defense Minister Pedro Joaquin Chamorro acknowledged that the task will take much longer.

OAS head Gaviria said the Nicaraguan army has done an excellent job of demining to date. But he also noted that the army will need more international funds with which to continue and complete the task ahead. The army's special demining unit currently employs nearly 400 men. Five military officials and soldiers have died and 17 officials have been injured as a result of demining work begun about six years ago.

The civilian population in the affected rural areas is also at serious risk. One troubling fact reported to OAS head Gaviria is that many peasants are paid (between 100-200 cordobas, less than US\$20, per deactivated mine) by large landowners to do the dangerous work of demining. Gaviria called this a "crime." Nicaragua has also attracted the attention of Nobel Peace Prizewinner Jody Williams, who visited the country early this year to observe demining efforts.

Civilian Victims

At a ceremony held in early April, some 5,000 landmines were destroyed in a public event as part of Nicaragua's longer-term plan to destroy more than 136,000 landmines currently stored in Army warehouses. The destruction of the mines is in accordance with the Ottawa Convention on Landmines.

The most poignant aspect of the ceremony was the presence of civilians; mostly poor peasants from the areas hardest hit during the war. Some came to the ceremony limping, with makeshift crutches or new prostheses to replace lost limbs. All victims of landmines, they were powerful testimony to the ongoing impact of the war and its disproportionate effect on the civilian population.

One of them, Zeneyda Jarquin Soza, was looking for firewood just over a year ago when she stepped on a mine and lost her leg as a result. "All I remember is an explosion, and then I fell. I don't remember anything else," she says.

An OAS-funded program provided her with a prosthesis, and she is being cared for at the Aldo Chavarria rehabilitation hospital in Managua. But it will be a long recovery for her, both physically and emotionally. "I'm not the same without my leg," she says. She worries constantly that she will no longer be able to help her husband in the fields.

Sergio Caramagna, the OAS representative in Nicaragua, says that unless prevention is taken seriously by Nicaraguan society at large, it will be difficult to rid the country of the ongoing threat posed by the mines.

He tells the harrowing tale of Ramon Peralta, severely wounded by a mine earlier this month near Murra in Las Segovias. Peralta was taken to the hospital in Ocotal, where he spent three days without receiving sufficient medical care. Caramagna said that his office became aware of the case at that point and found out that the hospital had no blood available to properly treat Peralta.

One phone call to the Red Cross informed them that there was blood available in Esteli, just two hours away. Caramagna said, "it's a miracle Peralta's still alive" even if he is not yet out of the woods.

"A Tremendous Will to Survive"

Since 1997, the OAS has overseen a program directed at victims of mines who are not former soldiers (from either side) and who have missed out on government care. The program has helped to transport over 200 people to and from Managua, fit them with the proper prosthetic devices and make sure they receive the kind of therapy they will need in order to adapt to their new lives. This care costs about US\$1,000 per person.

OAS peace commissions – there are some 200 throughout the northern areas of the country – have also helped the Managua office to identify victims. The first phase of the program, funded by the Swedish government, comes to an end later this year, but Caramagna is optimistic that more funding will be coming.

By prevention, Caramagna talks primarily of education in the schools, in communities, and through churches. The aim, he says, is to make people aware of the mines, what they look like and how destructive they can be. The OAS has distributed free Superman comic books throughout the countryside that take on the topic of mines and warn children about their dangers. Posters displaying the mines, as the small boy's T-shirt did, are prominent in many government offices and community centers in the most heavily mined areas.

While he calls the situation of landmines "terrible, truly terrible" and points out that for many in the rural areas the war is not yet over, Caramagna also praises what he calls the organizational

capacity of the Nicaraguan people and their "tremendous will to live and to survive," in spite of everything.

"Nicaragua is going to have to live with these mines for a long time," Caramagna says, "So, people working together, learning about the mines and taking that information out to more people, will be absolutely key to preventing more tragedies."