

Central America ... the Eye of the Storm

By Agostino Bono

Washington (NC) -- President Reagan continues to attract controversy by his Central American policies, even in his efforts to gain more public support.

A case in point was his formation of a bipartisan commission to reevaluate the policy and suggest changes. Reagan hopes that a bipartisan approach will receive more support in Congress, where his aid requests are being cut by critics, and that this congressional support will help shape a national consensus.

But his choice July 18 of Henry Kissinger, former secretary of state, to head the bipartisan group brought criticisms from congressional liberals, who said Kissinger was responsible for the overthrow of Chile's Marxist president in 1973, and conservatives, who said the Soviet Union was allowed to expand its world influence while Kissinger was part of the Nixon and Ford administrations.

Another controversy arose when press speculation, citing unnamed administration officials, said Cardinal Terence Cooke of New York had agreed to be a commission member. Cardinal Cooke responded by issuing a public statement July 19, prior to the naming of the remaining commission members, asking that he not be named.

Several days later, July 22, the president of the U.S. Catholic Conference, Archbishop John R. Roach of St. Paul-Minneapolis, issued a statement criticizing Reagan's Central American policy and asking the administration to seek diplomatic rather than military solutions.

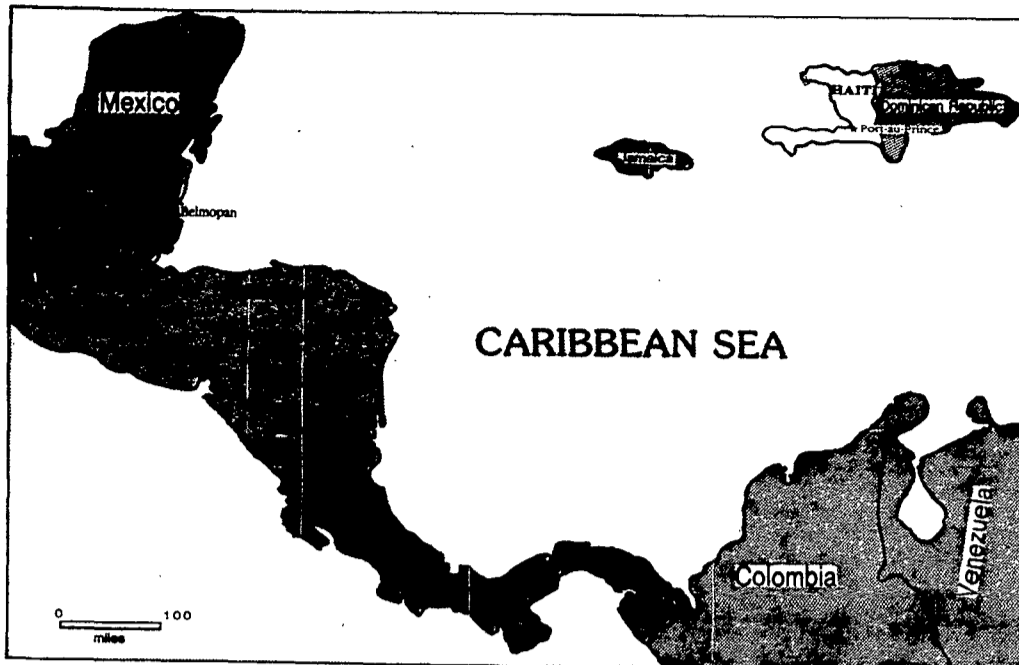
The U.S. bishops, through the USCC, their public policy agency, have been consistently critical of Reagan's Central America policies.

The controversy over the Kissinger commission was quickly followed by a renewal of the ongoing controversies regarding El Salvador, especially the human rights situation and progress in solving the murders of four U.S. Catholic women missionaries killed in December 1980.

On July 20 the Reagan administration certified that the Salvadoran government had made progress in human rights, although U.S. embassy figures showed an increase in the number of civilian deaths during the first six months of 1983 compared to the previous six months.

The embassy figures, based on Salvadoran press reports, said 1,054 civilians were killed during the first six months of 1983 compared to 961 civilians in the last half of 1982.

In a letter accompanying the certification, Secretary of State George



Shultz said the record falls short of what the administration and Congress wanted but that progress was being made.

The certification report cited the establishment of a Peace Commission to organize elections planned in December, an amnesty program which has led to the release of 500 political prisoners and the extension of the land reform program.

The certification was required for El Salvador to receive U.S. military aid. The certification was the fourth and final 180-day certification required under 1981 legislation.

On July 20 House and Senate conferees approved \$25 million in military aid for El Salvador, half the sum requested by Reagan.

The U.S. embassy figures for civilian deaths differed from those of Tutela Legal, the human rights agency of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, El Salvador. Based on its own investigations, Tutela Legal (legal protection) said 2,527 civilians were killed by security forces and death squads allied with the military during the first half of 1983 compared to 2,340 civilian deaths during the last six months of 1982.

The figures were used by the American Civil Liberties Union and Americas Watch, a human rights agency, in a joint report opposing certification because "the human rights situation continues to worsen."

"The Salvadoran security forces are impervious to pressure from the United States to end the practice of political murder, apparently because they recognize that the lectures about human

rights they get from the U.S. embassy and Washington are not going to be backed up by a reduction in military aid," said the report.

Certification also renewed the controversy over progress in solving the murders of Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel, lay volunteer Jean Donovan and Maryknoll Sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke. The four U.S. missionaries were killed in December 1980 and five members of the National Guard have been charged with the murders.

The case has become a litmus test of the Salvadoran government's determination to improve the human rights situation.

The administration, in its certification report, said it was hopeful that the accused would be brought to trial "within the next few weeks." It added, however, that "further delays cannot be ruled out" as the Salvadoran legal system gives defense attorneys a number of opportunities to slow down the pretrial process.

On the same day the administration issued its certification, a U.S. lawyers' group working with the relatives of the murdered missionaries held a press conference to criticize Salvadoran handling of the case.

Salvadoran prosecutors "have done almost nothing" to bring the case to trial, said Michael Posner of the Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights.

"We have serious doubts that the case will come to trial even by 1984," he said.

In early June, Salvadoran President Alvaro Magana had told Reagan the

accused would be tried in four to six weeks.

On July 22, the Salvadoran judge handling the case said new evidence involving six other suspects would have to be pursued, possibly delaying the beginning of the trial for six months.

The statement by Judge Bernardo Rauda Murcia means the case will continue to be a controversial thorn in U.S.-Salvadoran relations.

When Reagan named Kissinger to head the bipartisan commission, he indicated it was part of an effort to improve the U.S. approach toward Central American policies. The commission is scheduled to make its recommendations in December.

Reagan accompanied the announcement, however, with a strong defense of his policies regarding El Salvador and Nicaragua, the two key countries in the current Central American turmoil.

He said the United States continues to support the Salvadoran government in its war with guerrillas and still opposes the Nicaraguan government which is a "dictatorship of counterfeit revolutionaries."

"We must not allow totalitarianism and communism to win by default," he said.

The Reagan administration contends that political turmoil in Central America is the result of Soviet, Cuban and Nicaraguan efforts to spread Marxist revolution in the region.

Reagan's July 18 speech was accompanied by military actions, including the sending of a U.S. aircraft carrier to the Pacific coast of Nicaragua and joint U.S.-Honduran-army maneuvers along the border with Nicaragua. The United States is also supporting guerrillas fighting the Nicaraguan government.

The Reagan administration says these efforts are part of a plan to interdict the arms flow from Nicaragua to the Salvadoran guerrillas.

On July 22 Archbishop Roach reiterated that the "U.S. Catholic Conference has advocated a diplomatic course of action for the United States as a means of addressing the war in El Salvador and a method of addressing the presently dangerous course of U.S.-Nicaraguan relations."

"In contrast to this recommendation of positive diplomatic engagement, U.S. policy toward Nicaragua presently has the effect of deepening the internal crises in the country and escalating the dangers of war in the region," he added.

"I wish to oppose any form of U.S. military intervention in Central America," Archbishop Roach said.

The Challenge of Peace

Fifth in a series
By Jim Lackey

Washington (NC) -- If peace is to be an enduring reality, then society must do more than simply avoid war, the U.S. bishops say in their new pastoral letter on war and peace. Affirmative action for peace is required.

Thus the pastoral, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response," does not stop at judging nuclear deterrence policies and assessing the possible uses of nuclear weapons. It also proposes several steps individuals and nations can take to reduce the dangers of war. They range from accelerated efforts for arms control to the development of non-violent ways of resolving conflicts.

According to the bishops, Catholic teaching on war and peace is not exhausted by the task of paying "consistent attention...to preventing and limiting the violence of war."

"A complementary theme, reflected in the Scriptures and the theology of the Church and significantly developed by papal teaching in this century, is the building of peace as the way to prevent war," the pastoral notes.

Pope John Paul II, for instance, said during his trip to Britain in 1982, "Peace is not just the absence of war. It involves mutual respect and confidence between peoples and nations. It involves collaboration and binding agreements. Like a cathedral, peace must be constructed patiently and with unshakable faith."

First on the bishops' list of steps to reduce the danger of war is accelerated work for arms control, reduction and disarmament.

Here the pastoral laments that though there have been serious arms control negotiations, "the results have been far too limited and partial to be commensurate with the risks of nuclear war."

The bishops repeat their call, made earlier in the pastoral, for a negotiated halt in the development of new nuclear

weapons systems, followed by reductions in existing weapons. And they say each side must be willing to take some first steps which, although risky, can beneficially influence the arms race.

Such steps, the bishops quickly add, would not be permanently binding if an "appropriate response" does not come from the other side.

In addition to arms control negotiations there must also be "persistent and parallel efforts to reduce the political tensions which motivate the build-up of armaments," the bishops say, citing regular summit meetings as such an effort. They also call on the United States and other nuclear-exporting nations to adhere to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968 in the export of fissionable materials for the production of energy.

Next on the list are continued efforts to minimize the risk of any war since, as the bishops note, negotiated reductions in nuclear weapons "could conceivably increase the danger of non-nuclear war."

Therefore the bishops call not only for limits on nuclear weaponry but also for limits on conventional forces and for reaffirmation of existing prohibitions on the production and use of chemical and biological weapons.

The pastoral also criticizes the United States for the role it has played in the increasing international sales of conventional arms. Such sales, the bishops note, have been deplored by Pope John Paul as "truly alarming."

Closely related is the third point on the bishops' list, namely the relationship of nuclear and conventional defenses.

Here the bishops acknowledge that the price of reduced reliance on nuclear weapons may well be the strengthening of conventional defenses. But since conventional war "can also become indiscriminate in conduct and disproportionate to any valid purpose," any effort aimed at reducing reliance on nuclear weapons "is not likely to succeed unless it includes measures to reduce tensions and to work for the balanced reduction of conventional forces."

The fourth point on the bishops' list is civil defense. But here the bishops do not endorse strengthening of civil defense systems but rather ask if such systems offer a realistic prospect of survival.

Noting that the purpose of existing programs for fallout shelters and citizen relocation is unclear in the public mind, the pastoral calls for an independent commission of scientists, engineers and weapons experts to examine whether civil defense programs have any value.

Finally the bishops urge further development of non-violent means of conflict resolution. They also cite the role of conscience in personal decisions to resist war.

"Non-violent means of resistance to evil deserve much more study and consideration than they have thus far received," the pastoral says.

"There have been significant instances in which people have successfully resisted oppression without recourse to arms," it adds, citing the Danes who would not turn Jews over to the Nazis and the Norwegians who would not teach Nazi propaganda.

Non-violent resistance is to some extent derived from Christian teachings, the bishops also note. "Christ's own teachings and example provide a model way of life incorporating the truth and a refusal to return evil for evil."

Thus the bishops endorse congressional proposals for the establishment of a government-sponsored U.S. Academy of Peace. They also urge parishes and educational institutions to develop programs in the field of peacemaking.

And they reiterate their long-standing support for selective conscientious objection. Federal law currently requires that conscientious objectors be opposed to all wars and allows no room for objection to a particular war.

But all those steps -- from accelerated arms control efforts to training in peacemaking -- are not the only proposals the bishops have for securing a long-lasting peace. Equally important for peace, they say, is the establishment of a world order and an understanding of the interdependence of nations.

NEXT: Shaping a peaceful world.