

Arias sees a dream become reality

By Tony Avirgan
and Martha Honey

SAN JOSE, COSTA RICA

OFFICIALS HERE SAY THEY WERE SURPRISED at the ease and rapidity of agreement among the Central American presidents on Costa Rican President Oscar Arias' regional peace plan.

The Costa Rican government officials who were involved in negotiating the agreement say an important factor in making the pact possible was the ill-timed introduction of the Reagan Central American peace plan, and the way it was introduced on the eve of the Guatemala City summit.

When Arias, who was still in Costa Rica, heard that officials in Washington were saying that the Reagan plan was being sent to Guatemala for consideration by the Central American presidents, he was furious. The Costa Rican president ordered his foreign minister, Rodrigo Madrigal Nieto, to keep all preliminary discussions focused on the only agreed-upon agenda item—consideration of the Arias plan.

This was done. Reagan's plan was publicly praised as a positive step forward by all presidents, including Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua. But the Reagan plan was quietly set aside during the working sessions of the summit.

Arias had created a pride among the regional presidents based on the possibility of Central Americans solving their own problems. The Reagan proposal was seen as a crude intrusion into Central American affairs.

The Costa Rican presidential delegation went to Guatemala August 6 expecting two long days of tense negotiations among the five often-feuding Central American leaders. They expected particular difficulties from the right and left of the region—Jose Napoleon Duarte of El Salvador and Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua.

But soon after the first day of meetings got off to a late start at 4:30 p.m., Arias noticed a lack of hostility between Ortega and Duarte. By 1 a.m., all five presidents had agreed on a regional peace plan and Ortega and Duarte capped off the extraordinary night with an unprecedented toast to peace in Central America.

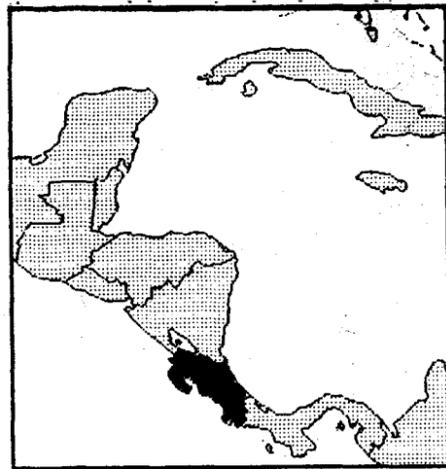
Arias had accomplished what almost no one thought he could. In a period of six months he had managed to bring the presidents of Central America together on a set of principles that, if followed, promise to end decades of bloodshed. During the course of those six months, Arias was accused by the left of being a tool of Reagan and was accused by the right, including those in the White House, of naively playing into the hands of the Sandinistas. In the end, his problems with the left had disappeared but his problems with Washington had intensified.

Behind Duarte's signature: Arias and his aides believe that the biggest single factor facilitating a breakthrough was the attitude of Duarte, the Salvadoran president who had been responsible at the last minute for scuttling Arias' first attempt to bring the presidents together last June. It was generally accepted that Duarte had done this on instructions from Washington. In preliminary talks Arias had conducted with each Central American president, Duarte had been the least enthusiastic about the Costa

Rican proposal. It was assumed that at the Guatemala City meeting the Salvadoran leader would not be making his own decisions.

However, as soon as the meeting got underway it was clear that Duarte was as anxious as anyone else for an agreement. Apparently, Duarte's independence from Washington was the result of his increasingly bad relations with the Reagan White House.

Costa Rican officials say Duarte complained to them that the Reagan administra-



tion was hindering his Christian Democratic Party in order to clear the way for a victory by the far right in the Salvadoran elections 18 months from now.

Duarte lamented that for over a year El Salvador has not received a penny of U.S. aid other than military. Lack of funds, he said, had caused his government to stagnate and his popularity to plummet. As a condition for the resumption of aid, the Salvadoran president reportedly said, the U.S. was demanding economic reforms that would surely make his government even more unpopular than it already is.

Duarte said he realized his own future as a politician was finished and that his only goals now were to gain a place for himself in history as a peacemaker and to block an election victory by the far right, which he felt would result in a terrible blood bath. The Arias peace plan, he reportedly said, could help achieve both of these goals.

Costa Rican sources say Duarte seemed

to think he was doing something subversive by signing a peace accord that was looked upon with disfavor by Washington and the generals of the Salvadoran army. One Costa Rican official said Duarte joked with

COSTA RICA

Guatemalan President Vinicio Cerezo, saying, "If the generals don't let me come home, can I live in exile in Guatemala?"

Ortega's ready compliance, although surprising, was somewhat more predictable. Costa Rican analysts say the Arias plan offered Ortega's government the acceptance by the rest of Central America that has eluded the Sandinistas during eight years in power. It also provided hope for ending the debilitating contra war, thus giving relief to the beleaguered Nicaraguan economy.

The price of peace: No matter what benefits the leaders of Nicaragua and El Salvador found in the plan, the initiative has cost the Costa Rican leadership dearly. Arias' determined opposition to military aid for the contras and commitment to finding a peaceful solution to the conflicts of Central America have provoked strong economic and political retaliatory measures by the Reagan administration.

While publicly praising Costa Rica's longstanding friendship with the U.S., privately Costa Rican officials list numerous hostile actions by Washington:

- None of the \$140 million in U.S. aid legislated for Costa Rica has been disbursed for the past six months.

- During the previous administration of Luis Alberto Monge, who quietly collaborated with the U.S. and the contras, U.S. aid soared to more than \$300 million annually.

Costa Rican President Oscar Arias succeeded in forging an agreement. But the U.S. is making him pay a price for peace.



President Oscar Arias

- The Reagan administration has recently slapped unusually strict bans and restrictions on flowers, clothing and some other Costa Rican exports to the U.S., thus hurting foreign exchange earnings.

- The U.S. last month refused, for the first time, to intervene with commercial banks on Costa Rica's behalf. The banks rejected an Arias proposal for rescheduling Costa Rica's foreign debt. The failure to reach agreement with the banks has made Costa Rica ineligible for further bank loans and held-up agreements with the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and European donor countries.

- Costa Rican officials say they suspect the Reagan administration's failure to appoint a new ambassador for over seven months is a sign of Washington's displeasure.

"Isn't it a shame that the U.S., the biggest democracy in the world, can't name an ambassador to Costa Rica, the smallest democracy in the world?" quipped a presidential adviser.

One top Arias aide said that despite the irangate revelations and the Central American peace plan, "there has been no change. This embassy is not here for dialogue or political development in Costa Rica. It's still here with the aim of creating a southern front [for the contras]."

- Costa Rican officials say they are surprised at the pettiness and viciousness of the Reagan administration's attack against Arias. They say White House pressure forced the resignation last month of one of Arias' top advisers from a United Nations post. John Biehl, a Chilean, had been working for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), where he was assigned to advise the Costa Rican president's office on economic policy.

But Biehl, a close friend of Arias since they were college classmates, advised the president in political matters as well and played a key role in formulating the Arias peace plan. U.S. pressure for his resignation is said to have begun in June after he accompanied the Costa Rican leader to a tense White House meeting with Reagan, Bush and other top officials. A Costa Rican at the meeting says Arias aggressively defended his peace proposal and told Reagan that "only two countries in the world support your contra policy, the United States and Grenada."

Revenge: While U.S. pressure on Costa Rica is not unusual, this time Arias—unlike his predecessor—has not buckled. He has pursued efforts to rid the country of contra activities and reach a regional peace accord despite U.S. hostility.

U.S. Embassy spokesman Mark Krishik denies that any of these measures are politically motivated. However, former U.S. Ambassador to Costa Rica Francis McNeil told a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee last month that "it is impossible to avoid the suspicion that Costa Rica's 'less favored national treatment' is a form of revenge for having the temerity to disagree with us about the contras."

An economic adviser to the Costa Rican government put it bluntly: "They want our economy to get out of hand."

Commented one aide pessimistically, "The Reagan administration is blind, obsessed with Nicaragua. But they are not going to succeed in overthrowing the Sandinistas. In the end what they are going to destroy instead is Costa Rican democracy."

Tony Avirgan and Martha Honey are Costa Rican-based journalists.

One-way news traffic

BANGKOK—In Somerset Maugham's famous story of prewar imperial rituals, an Englishman posted to Southeast Asia received each month a consignment of the previous month's *London Times* which he would then read each day in proper sequence. He is aroused to murderous passion when a visitor gets to the new monthly bundle first and reads them in a sitting, destroying the pleasurable illusion of news, though long delayed, unfolding in proper sequence.

I'd hoped for a similar delay, on the general supposition that a month- or even week-old copy of the *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal* would be vastly preferable to the same thing hot off the presses, in that most of the news' judgments and all of the pundits' opinions would have been already invalidated by subsequent events. No such luck. On my Bangkok hotel's closed-circuit TV Ronald Reagan was addressing the American people as I arrived, more or less in realtime, and the next day the local English-language papers carried post-speech analysis at substantial length. I was able to ramble around the Temple of the Dawn, fortified by up-to-the-moment details of the interrogation of the pilot incautious enough to have flown close to the presidential helicopter and of the conduct of Cuban exiles in Indianapolis.

The global village has a main street and it's one way. Associated Press sends out an average of 90,000 words a day to Asia from New York. In return AP takes in about 19,000 words from either its Asian correspondents or from the national news agencies of Asia. Reuters and UPI also send out about four or five times as much as they take in from Asia. Overall, AP, UPI, Reuters and *Agence France Presse* provide over 90 percent of the foreign news printed in the world's newspapers.

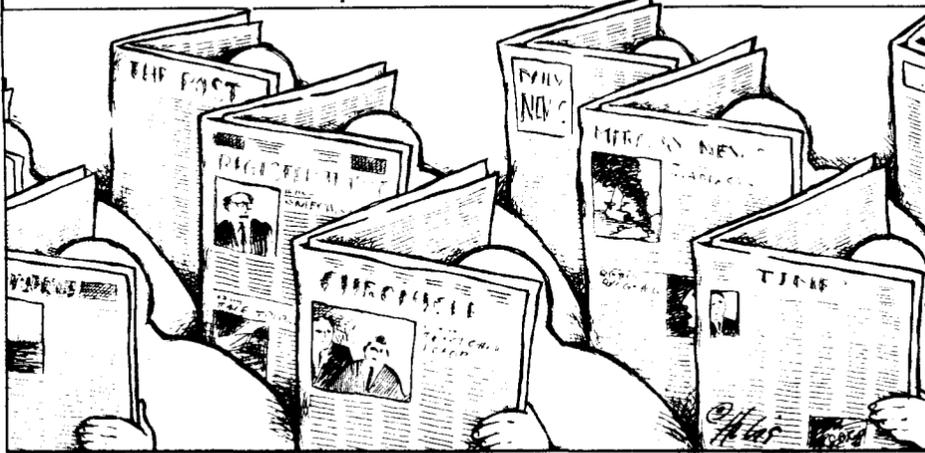
The result is a perpetuation of old imperial divisions. In a report in Third World Network Features, the Zimbabwean journalist Dingaan Mpondah points out that each of the agencies has carved out its own sphere of influence from the old colonial empires. AFP in Paris is strong throughout Francophone Africa. AP and UPI have extensive operations in Latin America and are widely used in Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, the area of U.S. control in the postwar period. Reuters is strong in the English-speaking Commonwealth countries. To give one example of what this can mean, 50 percent of all news published in South America comes from AP and UPI, with another 10 percent from Reuters and AFP.

The results of this can be bizarre. The sports page of the *Bangkok Post* on August 19 carried as its main story UPI's report on the poor showing of the U.S. boxing team at the Pan Am Games in Indianapolis, along with shorter AP dispatches on a golf tournament in Oregon and an episode of soccer violence in England. This is not accounted for by the profusion of U.S. (though not of English) tourists in Bangkok. Years ago, Mpondah remembers, the publisher of the *Fiji Sun* used to complain about the flood of agency reports of English soccer matches and other unusable material.

Throw in, on top of all this, the *International Herald Tribune* and one is never really out of range of Western agitprop. It will be only a matter of time—and in a sense it has already happened—before there will be a world paper. *World Today* modeled on *USA Today*, with each nation getting its tiny news hole and making its own contribution to the Great World Soap, which of course will fea-

ASHES & DIAMONDS

By Alexander Cockburn



ture mostly stories about the weather.

This unbalanced state of affairs has not gone entirely unnoticed by the Third World, which has been calling for "a new information order" for years. The response of the major Western news organizations was to set the whole issue in terms of censorship. They duly denounce an uncouth Third World attempt to "license" First World reporters, doing so in columns and editorials full of virtuous and self-aggrandizing drivels asserting "freedom of speech," the imperishable heritage of the First Amendment and other old stand-bys of little interest to the Third World newspaper readers wading their ways through English soccer results and aware that their own countries will usually make it into the First World press only if they sustain a catastrophe—natural or artificial—claiming the lives of more than 10,000 people, or if they become a strategic domino in the Cold War.

The sort of Third World item that would not get into our hypothetical *World Today* is the following story published by the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior* on July 9: "The U.S. is a great market for all the countries of this continent. Whatever it needs, we Latin Americans provide—tomatoes, strawberries, marijuana, etc. This is part of a structure of inequality and injustice. It is our reality and we have to fight to overcome it, especially when First World needs lead us to commit delinquent and morally degrading acts.

"For example, in recent times the U.S. market has been demanding human organs of various types, and to this request have come responses that are of criminal dimensions. The traffic northward to the U.S. of prospective adoptees is now, in more than a few cases, initiated with the intent of three children sacrificing organs in 'prestigious' hospitals of that powerful nation.

"In San Pedro Sula, Honduras, a short while ago the police found a center where there were 13 captive children, ready to be sent to the U.S. to be used as organ donors. The five persons detained by the police confessed as much. For each child they were to receive \$10,000. A similar event occurred in Guatemala City. Children either stolen or bought from poor families or single mothers were ready to be sent to private U.S. organizations, supposedly benefactors but actually doing a fine business in the sale of human organs. According to the police report, the price per child was \$15,000. The same thing has been happening in El Salvador and Colombia."

The story, by Marco Antonio Aguilar Cortes, concluded with an appeal to Mexican mothers not to send their children northward. The story seems scarcely credible, just as does a recent article in the Italian Communist Party paper *L'Unita* that told of a Colombian child going for a cornea transplant

and returning with the cornea gone. Maybe the stories can be refuted. AP, UPI, Reuters and AFP all have bureaus in Mexico City. It would not be beyond the powers of the reporters in them to investigate *Excelsior's* charges. If they have, then the details have escaped my attention. If they have not, it would scarcely surprise anyone familiar with the rhythms of news from the Third World in the post-Maugham age.

Spymania

In the Abdication crisis of the late '30s British censors made themselves an international laughing stock by spending hours laboriously scissoring paragraphs out of copies of *Time* magazine. The authorities felt it inappropriate that the British people should be able to read unwholesomely frank reporting of the romance between King Edward VII and Wallis Simpson.

Now the censors have made themselves ridiculous all over again. At the end of July, five venerable gentlemen known as the "Law Lords"—the highest court in the United Kingdom—announced that British news media would not be able to report certain allegations made in *Spycatcher*, the memoirs of a former MI5 security officer called Peter Wright. The Law Lords also said that the press would not be able to report on these same allegations, made in open court in Australia. At one point, before rescinding themselves, the Law Lords even stipulated that the press would not be able to report on open debates on the allegations in the House of Commons.

The British mania for secrecy is nothing new. The press chafes under restrictions that would not survive for a moment in any U.S. court. Even the Reagan administration, with its obsessive pursuit of state secrecy, always justified by "national security," would probably have quailed at the idea of launching police raids on news magazines and television stations in search of compromising material. Yet this is precisely what British police, on the orders of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, did earlier this year when they raided the BBC and the *New Statesman* after the former had prepared—but not broadcast—a documentary, and the latter had published an expose of an impending British military satellite.

In the case of *Spycatcher*, Mrs. Thatcher has now produced the ludicrous situation that tourists from the U.S. with copies of the U.S. edition of the book under their arms can have them confiscated. The press is appealing to the European Court on Human Rights, but this is an arduous and above all lengthy process. No one in the United Kingdom will be legally reading *Spycatcher* for a long time.

There has, naturally, been a lot of editorial spluttering in the U.K. about a "blow to democracy and cherished freedoms," which ignores the point that lacking a First Amendment or a Bill of Rights the British really have very little in way of freedom regarding expression, for the simple reason that the British state has never perceived any sound reason for allowing such freedom to exist. Anyone asking why this is so should read *Spycatcher*. Its author, Peter Wright, was former assistant director of MI5, the branch of the British security services in charge of state security and counter-espionage. Much of the book concerns the suspicions of Wright and some of his colleagues that a director general of MI5, Sir Roger Hollis, was in fact a double agent. They never managed to prove their allegations against Hollis, who is now dead. I can offer, from personal knowledge, one example of the foolishness of this kind of spymania. Wright regarded it as sinister that Hollis never entered in his file his friendship at Oxford with my father, Claud, who was well known for his communist sympathies in the '30s. Hollis' "Cockburn connection" was a big part of Wright's case. The trouble with this theory is that my father's intimate at Oxford was Hollis' elder brother Christopher, and at that point in his life my father was an Asquith liberal, not a communist, and even acted as special constable in the General Strike of 1936. Such is the stuff of which "counterintelligence" is mostly made.

What really frightened the British government and the security services as Peter Wright, retired to Australia, readied his memoir for publication, were his indiscretions about the behavior of MI5 toward Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson. Wright recounts in detail how MI5 gradually became seized of the idea that Wilson might be a Soviet spy, and how that idea was carefully fostered by the late James Angleton, hyperparanoid head of the CIA's counter-intelligence section.

Once again, there was not the slightest element of proof to such allegations. The simple fact was that the security services were filled with conservatives who thought—wrongly—that Wilson was a dangerous radical who should be kept from power. Accordingly, in the months before the election of 1974, a group in MI5 planned to leak rumors about Wilson and destroy his career. As Wright accurately remarks, this enterprise was a carbon copy of the "Zinoviev letter" which had finished off a Labour government in 1928. Masterminding that effort had been Adm. "Blinker" Hall, head of British Naval Intelligence.

Naturally Thatcher's Conservative government is eager to suppress this portrait of a security service plotting a coup against an incoming Labour prime minister. It presumably also recognizes that Wright, often unwittingly, has painted a horrifying portrait of the madness and inverted priorities engendered by the cult of "national security," of the stupidities and misapplied energies fostered by "spymania." And before anyone in the U.S. gets too complacent about freedoms enjoyed here, I suggest they read, in tandem with Wright's book, former CIA officer Philip Agee's recently published memoir *On the Run* and study the damages to democracy done on this side of the Atlantic, and around the world, by this same cult of "national security." ■

Alexander Cockburn also writes a column for *The Nation*.