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EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT DELEGATION

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Background note

on

THE CONTADORA GROUP

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THE CONTADORA GROUP

1. The Contadora Group, named after a Panamanian island, was formed in January 1983 by the Presidents of Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela with the aim of seeking a peaceful settlement to the Central American conflicts. The four Contadora countries are not directly involved in the conflicts but, given their geographical location, are particularly concerned about the crisis in the region. The five countries most directly involved are Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica. The governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica (which has no army and tries to remain neutral) tend in varying degrees to be close to United States policy in the region. The two principal armed conflicts in the region are: (1) In El Salvador, between the government and anti-Government forces. (In mid-October 1984, a first meeting between the two sides at the initiative of President Duarte represented a very significant step towards a negotiated settlement); (2) In Nicaragua, between the Government and rebels - the so-called 'contras' based principally in Honduras and Costa Rica and who receive backing from the United States. There is also an armed conflict between the Government and rebels in Guatemala.
2. Following a number of meetings at foreign minister level, the Presidents of the Contadora countries met at Cancun in Mexico in July 1983 and adopted the so-called Cancun Declaration, which was duly ratified by the countries concerned at the end of September 1983. Amongst other things, the Declaration affirmed that peace in Central America can only be achieved by respecting the fundamental principles of co-existence between nations, non-intervention, self-determination, the sovereign equality of States, cooperation for economic and social development, the peaceful settlement of disputes and the free and genuine expression of the popular will.
3. On 9 September 1983 in Panama, the Foreign Ministers of the five Central American countries, with the participation of the Contadora Group, signed a document known as the Panama Pact or the "Document of Objectives". In this document the Central American countries

declared their intention of achieving 21 objectives which have since formed the basis of the Contadora initiative. The objectives set out in the Panama Pact include the following:

- To promote détente and put an end to conflict in the area ...
- To ensure the strict observance of the principles of international law ...
- To adopt measures designed to enable the establishment and improvement of systems of democratic representation and pluralism ...
- To ban the installation on their territory of foreign military bases and any other forms of outside military interference ...
- To draw up an agreement to reduce, with a view to eliminating, the presence of foreign military advisers and other outside elements involved in military or security activities.
- To eliminate arms traffic between regions or from outside the region ...
- To prevent the use of their territory and not to give military or logistic assistance or allow it to be given to persons, organizations or groups which may attempt to destabilize the governments of the Central American countries.

(There were also a number of provisions concerning trade, social and economic development, and economic integration).

4. The Ten Member States of the European Community have consistently supported the efforts of the Contadora Group to achieve a peaceful settlement to the region's problems. In this context, on 29 September 1983, en marge of the United Nations General Assembly in

New York, the Foreign Ministers of Greece, the FRG and France (presidency, former presidency, succeeding presidency of the Ten) held a meeting with the four Contadora Foreign Ministers.

5. The United Nations General Assembly, the Organisation of American States, and the United States are also amongst those who have expressed their support for the Contadora initiative.
6. On 8 January 1984 in Panama, the Foreign Ministers of the Contadora Group signed a further document entitled 'Rules for fulfilling the commitments undertaken in the statement of objectives'. In June 1984, the Contadora countries drew up a draft "Contadora Act for Peace and Cooperation in Central America".
7. A particularly significant development in the Contadora process was the adoption by the four Contadora States in Panama on 7 September 1984 of a revised draft "Act for Peace and Cooperation in Central America", which sought to reflect the views of the five Central American Governments and was submitted to the United Nations on 25 September 1984. The intention and hope of the Contadora Group is that the Central American states will sign this Act. The Act, which runs to 55 pages, and which reflects the general principles enunciated by the Contadora Group on its earlier declarations, contains detailed and specific proposals for the peaceful resolution of the region's conflicts. It has been referred to in the media as a 'draft treaty'.
8. The revised draft Act contains five main chapters:

Part I

General Commitments

The General commitments reflect the objectives and principles laid down by the Contadora Group in its earlier documents such as: resolution of controversies by peaceful means, respect for existing borders, non-use of territory for actions against the sovereign rights of other States, non-intervention and self-determination.

Commitments on Political Affairs

According to these commitments, the parties would agree to promote mutual confidence and refrain from hostile propaganda. They would take measures aimed at establishing and perfecting representative and pluralistic democratic systems and, where pertinent, promote immediate national reconciliation actions and make possible a true amnesty. They would guarantee full respect for human rights. They would take several measures with regard to the electoral process, including the promulgation or revision of electoral legislation "so as to guarantee the effective participation of the people as a whole".

Commitments on Security Affairs

The parties would prohibit the holding of international military manoeuvres within their respective territories (to take effect within 30 days of the signing of the Act). Detailed commitments would be made with a view to halting the arms race in all its forms and to limiting the number of military personnel under arms. Foreign military bases or schools would be eliminated within six months of the signing of the Act. Foreign military advisers engaged in operational and training activities would be withdrawn and those involved in maintenance would be kept within reasonable limits. The intra-regional and extra-regional flow of arms would be limited and support for irregular forces, for terrorism or for subversion would be prohibited.

Commitments on Economic and Social Affairs

Various measures are envisaged for the strengthening of the process of economic integration in Central America and for solving the refugee problem.

Part II

Execution and Follow-up

The Act Contains detailed provisions concerning its execution and follow-up.

9. The Act also contains an additional protocol which is open for signature by all states which wish to contribute to peace and cooperation in Central America and which accept the terms of the Act without reservation. Signatories to the additional protocol would commit themselves amongst other things to abstaining from any actions which might prevent the Contadora Act from attaining its objectives, and to cooperating with the Central American states for the success of the Act. Several states, including France, Spain and Portugal, are understood to have indicated their intention of signing the additional protocol.¹
10. Nicaragua announced on 22 September that it was prepared to sign, immediately and without further modification, the Act for Peace and Cooperation in Central America. At the same time, it requested that the United States should sign and ratify the additional protocol (see paragraph above).
11. The reaction of the United States, which seemed to be taken somewhat by surprise by the Nicaraguan acceptance of the proposed peace treaty, has been mixed. The State Department was reported as describing the Nicaraguan acceptance as 'hypocritical' because, it was alleged, Nicaragua was not providing full participation for all opposition parties in its forthcoming elections.² Secretary of State, George Schultz, was, however, said to have welcomed the Nicaraguan acceptance as 'generally positive'.³
12. The United States still considered the proposed peace treaty to be a good basis for negotiations, but believed that it required certain amendments. A confidential document leaked to Associated

1) Le Monde, 2 October 1984.

2) The Financial Times, 24 September 1984.

3) Le Monde, 25 September 1984.

Press,⁴ the authenticity of which has not been officially confirmed, suggested that the remaining United States objections related to such matters as:

- the distinction between foreign advisors engaged in training and operations and those engaged in maintenance;
- the prohibition on military bases and exercises in Central America,
- a freeze on arms acquisitions which might institutionalise Nicaraguan military superiority;
- the need for stronger verification procedures on the ending of support for subversion in other countries;
- lack of powers to enforce the principles of democracy set out in the agreement;
- the voluntary protocol to be signed by non-Central American states which would admit a Soviet and Cuban role in Central America.

13. Although all five Central American countries accepted in general terms the proposed treaty, a number of them - notably El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica - registered some objections and called for its revision.

14. On 28 and 29 September, the Foreign Ministers of the Ten Member States of the Community attended a Conference in San José, the capital of Costa Rica. The conference was also attended by the Foreign Ministers of the Contadora Group countries, of the Central American countries and of Spain and Portugal. At the beginning of September, the US Secretary of State had addressed a letter to the Ten requesting that no aid or comfort should be given to Nicaragua at the San José meeting.⁵ The attendance of the Foreign Ministers of the Ten symbolised their concern about the situation in Central

4) A.P., 11 October 1984.

5) The Financial Times, 1 October 1984.

America and in the joint communique the Ten, amongst other things, reaffirmed their support for the Contadora process in the following terms:

"6. The Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to the objectives of peace, democracy, security and economic and social development, and political stability in Central America and were united in the view that the problems of that region cannot be solved by armed force, but only by political solutions springing from the region itself. In this conviction they affirmed their support for the pacification measures which are being developed in the Contadora process. They expressed their conviction that this process represents a genuinely regional initiative and the best opportunity to achieve a solution to the crisis through political undertakings aimed at the achievement of the aims set out in the "Document of Objectives" approved by all the Governments of the region on 9 September 1983. They noted with satisfaction the progress achieved so far towards such a solution, and that the revised draft Contadora Act for Peace and Cooperation in Central America is a fundamental stage in the negotiating process for the attainment of peace in the region. They called on the States concerned to continue to make every effort to bring the Contadora process rapidly to final fruition through the signature of a comprehensive agreement which would bring peace to the region. They were agreed on the necessity for a practical commitment to the implementation of any such agreement by all the States in the region and all other countries which have interests there, and on the necessity for the verification and control of that implementation.

7. The European countries expressed their willingness to support, within their capabilities and if requested, the efforts of those states to which it falls to implement the provisions of any agreement."

15. With the Nicaraguan government seeking to keep the draft treaty unchanged, but with the United States, El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica seeking changes in it, it is not yet clear to what

extent the proposed amendments will be incorporated in the draft treaty. An official from Mexico (one of the Contadora countries) was quoted on 19 November 1984 as saying that the Contadora Group now has to determine which of the amendments are acceptable and which are not. "This will entail", he is quoted as saying, "convincing Nicaragua that some of the proposed changes are valid and convincing the other three countries that some are not".⁶ It appears that the document will not now be signed before the end of the year and that there will be another round of prolonged negotiations.⁷

16. The United States is reported to have offered to underwrite the monitoring operation if the peace treaty incorporates its proposed amendments. It has offered, in this context, to provide helicopters to ferry inspection teams around Central America and to pay the entire cost of the verification process. It has also proposed that the inspection teams be drawn from countries outside the region, including Canada.⁸

6) The Guardian, 19 November 1984.

7) The Observer, 8 November 1984.

8) idem.