

After Two Years, Honduras Holds His

Heart on a Fraying Tether

By MICHAEL REINHARD

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras—The village below had not changed—small mud and adobe houses in the shade of fruit trees and banana palms, horses grazing in the plaza of grass, vultures resting on the tile roof of the white colonial church.

I was returning after an absence of two months, and I felt again the doubt that had made me pause when I first saw La Iguala from this pine-covered hill two years ago. Again I asked myself what my presence would mean to the people below. And once again I descended.

The concrete bridge came into sight. It had been La Iguala's dream. Two years ago, here at the edge of the Masica River, a boy had greeted me with a question: Had I come to build the bridge? Now we crossed over it in a Jeep, the bridge's Peace Corps engineer and I. It had been a bitter project. The idea of the bridge was both acceptable and unacceptable to the village. In the struggle to work with this ambivalence, we wound up isolated and on our own. Now the bitterness was gone, but again we entered the village questioning the people's hesitation to realize their dreams.

Behind us was an assignment on public-works projects in a banana town just outside the industrial city of San Pedro Sula. For two months we lived in a banana company house on the edge of a golf course, with the added luxury of access to daily newspapers and to a paved highway to the capital city of Tegucigalpa.

In those same two months, the Honduran military moved into the border region of El Salvador, incurring the Salvadoran rebel movement's declaration of war upon Honduras and the bombing of power stations in Tegucigalpa. A month later, to the day, more bombs exploded simultaneously in three separate buildings around the capital. Bombs also wrecked the offices of the Honduran airline in Guatemala and Costa Rica. There was a shootout between suspected terrorists and police. And then an incident in which a city bus was shot up by anti-terrorist troops in pursuit of a drunken gunman. U.S. planes and helicopters helped move Honduran troops to the Nicaraguan border where they set up an encampment near the Miskito refugee center in Mocoron. During a "routine" exercise, U.S. Marines went ashore at Tela for a walk around the old banana port. All along the border, the activity of exiled Nicaraguans fighting the Sandinista government increased—or received increased coverage in the Honduras press. Nicaragua, backed by Cuba, said it would arm itself to the teeth to protect its revolution. The U.S. Senate passed a resolution to impede, by any means necessary, Cuban aggression in the Western Hemisphere.

As if all that weren't enough, the Honduran teachers' union made an untimely bid for a wage increase in the face of government financial calamity. During one teachers' demonstration in the capital, a group of soldiers stepped in and fired their automatic weapons in the air for two minutes. The minister of education came out of her office to intervene between the soldiers and the crowd.

In Tegucigalpa, I checked out of a cheap hotel where two young journalists were typing furiously in the second-floor lounge and set out for a last visit to the flat and lush Sula Valley. I spent a few days there, visiting

an erosion project of the banana company and drinking in the serene scape of the golf course outside the guest house. Then the engineer and I moved on.

Back in La Iguala, I pushed open the door to my mud-and-stick house with its earth floor. I lit a lantern and studied the emptiness where before had been books on shelves, pots and clothes hanging. I breathed in the musty smell mixed with smoke from fires cooking the village's evening meal. Within these walls I had become a part of the pueblo, living its poverty, its unvaried diet, its enduring divisions of one family against another, the tragedies of theft, murder, rape, death. When I turned back to the doorway, a flock of children were peering in. The gringos had returned.

For two years the engineer and I had struggled with three different governments to bring projects to these mountains. There was the military government, then the transitional government, finally the elected constitutional government. In every project, the real struggle was with the village—or the village struggling against itself, with us in the middle. It was clear that the transition in the national government would require several more elections in rural areas before local communities could obtain a sense of self-determination or direction.

I had seen numerous government projects come to the village—projects of health, sanitation, nutrition, gardening, agriculture, schools, family planning and water—each failing to receive village support. I would sit in my house with a sense of being upon a remote island. Then came the election. The political movement barreled down our new road and put the village in motion.

Six thousand people came down from the mountains to elect a mayor for La Iguala and 30 outlying settlements.

But one election will not cure Honduras' economic headache; foreign aid still comes down the same channels. And in La Iguala, government projects are no more acceptable than before. Yet, after witnessing one election, I felt that with time, with better economic conditions and more elections, La Iguala could get a grip on its destiny.

In the evening, the engineer and I went to a dance in the old school, the floor spread with pine needles to keep down the dust. The people were raising money for notebooks and pencils. Old Vicente embraced me, and Gladys, the schoolteacher, pressed me to tell the outside world that La Iguala is a pueblo of good people who want to work and progress. In these farewells, I realized that I was a North American once again, and that I would be remembered not for my part in bringing La Iguala the road or the bridge, but for something more important—sharing its life.

Back in Tegucigalpa, I did not buy the newspapers. I was afraid to read them while still trying to fix La Iguala in time and space. Two years ago Honduras was known as "the Island of Peace." Today the news reports and the rumors point in another direction.

I have said goodbye to the people of La Iguala and to the Peace Corps. Yet I remain here unable to leave, I wait for the future in Honduras, an island no more.

Michael Reinhard hopes to remain in Honduras as a writer.

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Good news from Central America

At last, a couple of encouraging signs from Central America.

Representatives of Nicaragua's non-communist labor unions, political parties in exile, human rights organizations, and the private sector will meet for three days in Caracas this weekend to form a united opposition to the Sandinistas.

They'll not have an easy job, given the egos and personal ambitions at that gathering. Yet, their goal is essential if the exiles are to present a realistic alternative to the communists now governing their country — and if they expect to receive badly needed international recognition and support in their struggle.

If they can indeed bury their differences and come up with a political agenda acceptable to all, they will then have to put together a military force. There's no shortage of *primadonas* among the anti-Sandinista guerrilla leaders either, but maybe the politicians this weekend can point the way towards coopera-

tion even among their armed colleagues. We wish them well.

The other item comes from the State Department, which has just revised its earlier warning of dangers for Guatemalan-bound American travelers. The recent modification recognizes that, while hazards still exist, "the level of violence in Guatemala City and certain other areas has been reduced substantially since the change of government in March."

It implies, therefore, that Guatemala's new president is not only trying but succeeding in restoring order to his nation, despite continuing guerrilla insurgency in the countryside.

Carried one step further, State's now less alarming travel advisory might lay the groundwork for resumption of modest U.S. military aid to the Guatemalan government — if Congress can recognize progress the way the administration has. Unfortunately, that's a big *if*.

A Nicaraguan's cry

Press censorship in Nicaragua may go largely unreported these days because it's old stuff to the American media. To the Nicaraguans, though, it's a daily reminder of what their three-year-old communist government is all about.

No one knows more about the current lack of press freedom in Nicaragua than Violeta Chamorro. Her husband, the former publisher of the independent *La Prensa* and political leader of the Somoza opposition, was murdered by unidentified gunmen during the Somoza era. She supported the Sandinistas and was rewarded with a position on their first junta. After getting an insider's look at the new government, she quit. One of her sons works for the government-controlled newspaper, and another now runs *La Prensa*.

She recently tried to share her concerns about the lack of a free press with her fellow countrymen through an open letter to them. *La Prensa* wasn't allowed to print it.

Her letter is a moving document. In it, she recounted her joy at the Sandinista victory — and the souring of that joy. She wrote that "...scarcely three years [after taking power],

the Sandinista government guided by totalitarian ideologies imported from other countries far from our history and our culture is trying to maintain the concept that liberty of conscience is divisionism or ideological war."

She described the role of the press in a free society and concluded that "without liberty of press there is no representative democracy, no individual liberty, nor social justice, nor government responsibility ... on the contrary, there are darkness, impunity, abuse, mediocrity and repression."

The abuses "are multiplied," she wrote, "the bloody deeds repeated, the injustices heaped up. The people whimper and whine in silence, gagged, whispering their sorrows ..."

It's tragic enough all this is taking place in Nicaragua. It's even more tragic that few seem to notice anymore. Worse yet, the pattern could be repeated in Guatemala and El Salvador — where the American press now reports at length on the flaws of these governments struggling against communists insurgents.