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No. 1882/69
15 July 1969

MEMORANDUM

Subject: El Salvador - Honduran Crisis

1. El Salvador launched air and ground attacks against Honduras on the evening of 14 July. Honduras is expected to respond with a counterattack and the chances are good that it will gain the upper hand as it did during border clashes in May 1967. Although the Salvadoran population is significantly larger than that of Honduras (3.2 million vs 2.5 million) the military forces available to the two countries are roughly comparable in size. The Salvadoran armed forces have 4,250 men and 22 World War II-vintage aircraft; Honduras has 5,100 men and 38 planes. The morale and training of the Honduran forces, however, are believed to be superior.

2. The Salvadoran attack may relieve domestic pressures on the government for a tough anti-Honduran policy. Aroused nationalistic passions in both countries, however, may impede efforts to bring a quick end to hostilities and reconciliation will be difficult. The conflict is unlikely to spread and the other Central American countries are expected to continue their efforts to end the crisis.

3. Three major problems may arise from the current state of hostilities:

- (a) The most significant is the possibility that Salvadoran President Sanchez will be overthrown. The President had been accused of ineptness in handling the dispute and of timidity in defending the national honor. Strong domestic pressures have forced Sanchez to pursue an increasingly hard line. If the Salvadoran military fortunes are poor, he is likely to become a scapegoat and be overturned by the military.
- (b) A second problem concerns the Central American Common Market. Regional trade has already been disrupted and a prolongation of the crisis can be expected to cause severe

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economic dislocations within the market. Continued ill feeling between El Salvador and Honduras would make impossible the degree of economic cooperation necessary for sustained economic integration.

- (c) A third possible problem--and one of a much longer range nature--would be the creation of an intensified arms race between the two feuding states and the likelihood that the race would spread to the rest of Central America.

Background

4. The current crisis began rather innocuously during a soccer match when demonstrations by Salvadoran fans on 14 and 15 June took on an anti-Honduran cast and led to counterdemonstrations on 16 and 17 June against Salvadorans in Honduras. As reports of alleged atrocities filtered back to El Salvador along with the more than 16,000 Salvadorans who fled the neighboring country, nationalistic passions rose to a fever pitch and President Sanchez was forced to abandon his initial attempt to resolve the crisis through direct bilateral negotiations. The Salvadoran Government feared that it would be overthrown if it did not respond to the intense popular pressure for a tough stance and the matter could no longer be kept in low key. The charge of genocide brought before the OAS Human Rights Commission on 24 June, the severing of diplomatic relations on 26 June, and the breaking of commercial ties on 29 June followed. Sporadic border incidents occurred until full-scale fighting erupted on 14 July.

5. The rapid deterioration in relations between the two rather closely linked countries was not rooted in a soccer rivalry but resulted instead from a history of mutual antagonism caused by the massive influx of Salvadorans into Honduras, and by a long-festering border dispute. A population density of 387 persons per square mile--one of the highest in the hemisphere--and a rate of population increase of over 3 percent has created an unparalleled land hunger in El Salvador. This has led an ever-increasing number of Salvadorans to seek their livelihood in Honduras which is over eight times the size of El

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Salvador and has a population density of only 60 persons per square mile. At the beginning of the crisis, between 250,000 and 300,000 Salvadorans (nearly 12 percent of the Honduran population) lived in Honduras. With the reputation for being more skilled and more energetic than the average Honduran worker they often won out in the competition for jobs. The soccer incident provided, therefore, under the thinly disguised varnish of patriotism and national outrage, an opportunity for Hondurans to even some old scores and give vent to their jealousy and resentment of the Salvadoran immigrants.

6. On the Salvadoran side, the much-exaggerated reports of Honduran mistreatment of Salvadoran nationals triggered an even stronger popular reaction. Smarting under the humiliation of a dismal performance by the Salvadoran Army during the 1967 border clashes with Honduras, the demands for revenge were intense. Publicly taunted as members of a do-nothing army, many officers, especially in the lower echelons, viewed the crisis as an opportunity to redeem their reputation if not the national honor. This desire for an offensive policy impeded efforts by the Central American mediators to defuse the crisis. El Salvador repeatedly rejected calls for a demilitarized buffer zone and stationing of foreign military observers along the border, although Honduras had accepted this proposal.

7. Although ending the hostilities is a necessary first step, this alone will not solve the problem. The refugee question will have to be settled, the whole immigration issue clarified, and in the long run the border dispute would have to be resolved. The Salvadorans will want to renew the now-expired 1967 migration treaty with Honduras. Honduras would probably renew the treaty after the crisis was over; however, continued resentment to Salvadoran immigration by Honduran workers and student groups can be expected. Although for economic, demographic, and geographic reasons the majority of Salvadoran emigrants would go to Honduras, Hondurans would prefer to see a multilateral solution to the problem of Salvadoran overpopulation. This might take the form of a Central American treaty allowing free migration within the Common Market.

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8. Resolution of the border problem is likely to be even more difficult and more long term. Though much of the border is not contested, there are several sizable disputed areas in remote regions and considerable confusion and misunderstanding has resulted from the lack of demarcation. The last serious border incident occurred in May 1967 and although a border commission was established, it was unable to resolve the issue.

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