

## Caracas draws away from Haig's policies

by Dennis Small, Latin America Editor

Over the last two to three years, Venezuela has been one of the principal players involved in the Central American crisis. As a relative economic giant in the region and an oil producer, Venezuela teamed up with Mexico a year ago to provide cut-rate oil to the area's most impoverished economies, in what is known as the San José Accord. Through various other forms of economic aid Venezuela last year gave a total of \$81 million to El Salvador—more, government officials are quick to note, than the United States came up with during the same period. Venezuela's ruling Christian Democratic Copei party exercises particular influence over El Salvador's Christian Democratic Party, and its leader José Napoleón Duarte, who lived for many years in exile in Caracas.

Since 1979, when President Luis Herrera Campins came into office, this considerable Venezuelan influence in the Caribbean Basin has been wielded largely on behalf of the policies of the U.S. State Department. Often, in fact, Haig has turned to Venezuela to act on his behalf to counter the initiatives of the other large Latin power in the region, Mexico.

All that may now be changing.

In the course of a recent visit to Caracas, this writer was informed in no uncertain terms by high-level government officials that Venezuela was planning to "put some distance between us and the policies of Mr. Haig." The same message was delivered publicly on March 22 by President Herrera himself, who criticized America's "language of threats," and warned against any "armed intrusion" of the sort repeatedly suggested by Haig. Herrera also reported that the Venezuela government would be engaging in a "full review" of Central American policy, once the March 28 elections in El Salvador were past, and hinted that he might throw Venezuela's weight behind international efforts to reach a negotiated settlement in that war-torn country. The Vatican and the government of Mexico are two of the principal forces seeking such a negotiated solution.

Herrera then shocked the press by announcing that he had just received a letter from the FDR/FMLN guerrillas in El Salvador requesting his collaboration in seeking a peaceful solution to that country's crisis—a letter he characterized as "surprisingly sincere."

I asked many of the individuals I met with in Caracas in mid-March why their government was trying to introduce some daylight between its policies and Washington's. "Because we are scared of the way the Central American crisis is spreading," one high-level official with knowledge of the security field said. "U.S. policy is going to produce a strengthening of the right in El Salvador," the official predicted—one week before the March 28 elections that produced just that result. "That will lead in turn to a leftist countermobilization. Look for not only Venezuela, but also Colombia, to distance itself some from your government."

The governments of both Colombia and Venezuela fear the spread of Salvador-style right and left violence in their own countries, with all its attendant political instability. Colombia is already being subjected to this treatment, with the leftist M-19 guerrillas in an open shooting war with the rightist MAS death squads. Venezuela, for the moment relatively free of terrorism within its own borders, may well experience a sharp rise in violence in the period immediately ahead (see article below).

Not all factions in the ruling Copei party, however, share this concern over the drift of Central American events and their significance for the region. Herrera heads a minority grouping within his own party, which continues to be dominated by former president Rafael Caldera. For example, when Herrera recently criticized NATO maneuvers in the Gulf of Mexico for heightening regional tensions, Caldera violently opposed this view. Caldera, who for over 40 years has been on intimate terms with the worst of Europe's black nobility, favors continued tight coordination with Haig. Caldera recently threw his hat in the ring for the party's 1983 presidential nomination, and is widely expected to win Copei's nod. He will run against Jaime Lusinchi, the candidate for the opposition Acción Democrática party, which is officially affiliated with the Socialist International.

But an upstart from Herrera's faction, former Interior Minister Rafael Montes de Oca, has dared to challenge party patriarch Caldera, and has announced that he too is in the running. Although no major policy rift between Montes de Oca and Caldera has yet surfaced on issues like Central America, sources in Caracas emphasized to *EIR* that, immediately before his recent formal announcement that he was seeking Copei's presidential nomination, Montes de Oca was in Rome for a meeting of the international Christian Democratic parties. The gathering was addressed by Pope John Paul II himself, who launched a blistering attack on international terrorism and the powerful forces that deploy it. It is likely that Vatican officials used the occasion to make their preferences for negotiations in El Salvador known to Montes de Oca.