

Reagan wrong-foots peace summit

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THE PRESIDENTS of five Central American countries began their postponed regional peace summit in Guatemala City yesterday, visibly wrong-footed by the Reagan Administration's new diplomatic initiative towards the left-wing Sandinista regime in Nicaragua.

The US initiative, launched in response to the peace plan put forward six months ago by President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica, immediately put a spoke in the summit wheels. Foreign ministers from the five countries, here preparing the meeting's agenda, skipped a meeting arranged for Wednesday morning for example, instead gathering information on the 11th-hour US plan from American news bulletins and their own governments.

The Reagan plan calls for an immediate ceasefire in the Nicaraguan civil war on terms acceptable to the Sandinistas and the US-backed Contra rebel armies, followed by the lifting of all restrictions from the opposition and a timetable and procedure for new elections to be agreed within 60 days.

The call for new elections has in the past been rejected by the Sandinistas, who came to power in the 1979 overthrow of the US-backed Somoza dynasty and formalised their control of government in 1984 elections in which most of the Nicaraguan Right refused to take part, claiming that the Sandinistas were denying them basic rights to organise.

The US plan has been greeted



Arias: Washington opposed his initiative for region.

with private scepticism and cautious public approval by officials from Costa Rica and Guatemala - the main sponsors of this week's regional summit. These officials recall that it was basically Washington's objections to the Arias plan which caused the summit to be postponed in June.

The initiative has been received more warmly by officials from El Salvador and Honduras, Washington's closest allies in Central America, who together will receive US aid of over \$1bn this fiscal year.

But Nicaragua, the target of the US initiative, has shrewdly given the plan a cautious wel-

come, calling for the immediate resumption of bilateral talks with the Reagan Administration, broken off three years ago.

Initially, Father Miguel D'Escoto, the Nicaraguan Foreign Minister, remarked caustically here that Mr Reagan, now failing as the Great Communicator as a result of the Irangate scandal, was trying his hand at "becoming the Great Manipulator."

But President Daniel Ortega's statement in Managua later in the day, intended to demonstrate internationally that his government was prepared to take the US Administration at its word, now opens the possibility that talks between the two sides will indeed resume.

This temporarily eclipses the regional intent behind the Arias plan, which called for an end to military activity in all Central American countries, prior to talks between governments and "unarmed internal oppositions" leading to simultaneous elections across the isthmus to a Central American parliament.

The US Administration, by contrast, addresses itself exclusively to its political dispute and proxy war with the Sandinistas. It ignores, for example, the more intractable civil war in El Salvador, where its economic and military support underpins the survival of the Christian Democrat regime, as well as the future of the Honduras-based Contra armies.

Most Latin American and Western European diplomats and officials here were inclined

to see the sudden US revival of a twin negotiating track in a largely military-oriented Central American strategy as a ploy to get Congress to approve new sums for the Contras in October.

But almost everyone was prepared to dismiss the initiative out of hand, arguing that resumed talks held risks for both sides. If and when negotiations go ahead, one Western European diplomat argued, it would require delicate political management of public, and particularly US perceptions in the apportioning of blame should the talks fail, as most observers assume they would.

The Sandinistas, in particular, appear extremely chary, arguing that it is not widely appreciated that they offered to meet "all genuine US security concerns" at the series of talks they held with administration officials in Mexico throughout 1984.

As officials here started adding up the pluses and minuses of the new US approach, it was also noted that Washington appears to be seeking to push aside the efforts of the Contadora group of Latin American nations in favour of explicitly involving the Organisation of American States, in which the US voice is dominant.

One Latin American official noted at the same time that the US appears to have dropped its demand that Managua negotiate directly with the Contras, whose role in the conflict appears increasingly to be one of pawns.