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ROBERT MacNEIL: The fighting in Nicaragua -- is it counter-revolution? Civil war? Or a clandestine plot by the United States?

[Up theme music].

Good evening.

The United Nations Security Council held its fifth day of debate on the fighting in Nicaragua today, leaving no one much wiser about what's really going on. Nicaragua's government continued to charge that the United States is backing the rebel attacks launched from bases in neighboring Honduras. Honduras denies that, but says Nicaragua is using Honduran territory to smuggle arms to rebels in El Salvador.

The Nicaraguans claim that the Reagan Administration is plotting to destabilize and overthrow their left-wing Sandinista government. U.S. spokesmen have not commented directly on this, but say the Nicaraguans are trying to cover-up the unpopularity of their own regime.

Behind all this welter of complicated charges, there is fighting between Nicaragua's 22,000-man army and the rebel force estimated to number anywhere from 1,500 to 5,000 strong. And, in the last week, that fighting has intensified, prompting Nicaragua to appeal to the Security Council.

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Tonight, the fighting in Nicaragua and what is the U.S. role.

Jim.

JIM LEHRER: Robin, there was a brief time when it appeared the United States and Nicaragua's new revolutionary government might be able to get along. That was four years ago, right after the success of the Sandinista-led rebellion against the Somoza family regime that had ruled Nicaragua for nearly 50 years.

Many of the Sandinista leaders were Marxists and strongly anti-America. Most of their rhetorical and practical support in their plight had come from Cuba. But the U.S., under the Carter Administration, had backed off its years of solid support for the Somozas and, toward the end, maintained an almost neutral position.

There was much talk, officially and unofficially, that a working relationship could emerge. The U.S. followed that prompt with a small amount of economic aid for the new government.

But, two years later, in the early months of the Reagan Administration, it came apart. The aid was cancelled as then-Secretary of State Haig and other Administration officials accused Nicaragua of arming left-wing guerrillas in El Salvador. There have been charges and counter-charges and --at -- and an increasing rate of heat ever since, the most recent being those about the current fighting in Nicaragua, who's doing it, and who's supporting it.

This afternoon at the United Nations Security Council, Nicaragua's case was laid out by the Deputy Foreign Minister, Victor Hugo Tinoco.

VICTOR HUGO TINOCO: Mr. President, from the information that has been offered during the meetings of the Council, from the various attacks by Honduran military units in Nicaraguan territory which have taken place over the past week, and from the information that has been reported in the international mass media, it can be concluded that the danger of the internationalization of the conflict along the Honduran-Nicaraguan border continues. And for this reason, it is necessary that the Council remain alert to the development of events.

Mr. President, as all who have participated in these meetings know, the decision of the American Administration to continue with its plans and aggressive actions remain unchanged, and they are aimed at the overthrow of the revolutionary government of Nicaragua.

It is clear to all present that the American Administration at all levels, from President Reagan to Secretary of State Schultz, and even Madame Kirkpatrick, Representative for the United States in the Security Council, has denied, rejected the concrete acquisitions -- accusations levelled by the delegation of Nicaragua, namely, that they are advising and directing the strategy and the details of the activities of the Somzas revolutionary bands who have infiltrated into Nicaraguan territory.

Secondly, that they have officially approved funds in the amount of at least \$19.9 million by the American Administration to finance and promote the activities of these counter-revolutionary bands, the purpose of which is to overthrow the revolutionary government of Nicaragua.

Thirdly, that there exists counter-revolutionary Somozas training camps of those who wish to overcome the revolutionary government of Nicaragua in the United States of America.

Mr. President, today's "New York Times," in an article entitled, in English, "U.S. Not Denying Sandinista Charges."

[Brief interruption by interpreter].

"This quotes the spokesman in the White House, Alan Romberg, saying"

[Interruption by interpreter].

"But there's a little psychological warfare in this silence by the United States when these accusations are leveled out."

Mr. President, this is not psychological warfare. This is a real war promoted by the United States against Nicaragua. The automatic weapons, the C-4 explosives, the grenade launchers made in the United States that [name unintelligible] Kinsher of the "New York Times" reported on in yesterday's article, are all real. And he reported on a visit of his to a revolutionary -- counter-revolutionary camp in Honduran territory.

Mr. President, the widows in Nicaragua today, the wounded children, and the decapitated peasants, as a result of aggression promoted by the United States, are not psychological warfare. What could be considered as having a psychological effect but an extremely dangerous one would be that the government of the United States, with its silence and its scorn with which it has responded to accusations that it is destabilizing Nicaragua, accusations leveled at it by the United States, has gotten the international community to feel

that perhaps this attitude toward obvious facts is natural and normal. It is dangerous because further escalation of this --these activities could also be claimed to be normal in keeping with the cannons of silence, but in keeping with the principles of speedy reactions by the present American Administration.

It's dangerous to allow scorn for international public opinion to become a norm of daily conduct for a country, especially in the case of a power like the United States.

MacNEIL: During the debate, the United States position has been put by the United Nations Ambassador, Jeane Kirkpatrick, who is with us this evening.

Madame Ambassador, why has the United States, and you as its spokesperson -- one of the spokesmen included -- not replied quickly and explicitly to that charge by the Nicaraguans?

AMBASSADOR JEANE KIRKPATRICK: Well, we -- we replied in various ways, actually. We said, certainly, that the United States was not engaged in any sort of invasion of Nicaragua, which they have repeatedly charged.

We have said that is very clear is that Nicaragua, which has a -- an increasingly and appallingly repressive government, today finds itself with a very great deal of internal opposition. Today, there are Nicaraguans fighting Nicaraguans inside Nicaragua.

We've also said that Nicaragua has been for more than two years regularly supporting with arms and training and commander-controlled functions, actually, a guerrilla war in El Salvador against El Salvador, and to a less extent in Honduras and with greater threats increasingly to Costa Rica and Guatemala.

We have said that -- that Nicaragua can hardly be expected to enjoy immunity from opposition in its own society when it is in fact promoting opposition in other societies, and we have finally proposed that what would be appropriate in this situation is a regional solution.

MacNEIL: We'll come back to the regional solutions and suggestions for a conference in a moment.

Does the United States deny the Nicaraguan charge that it is assisting what they call "these counter-revolutionary fighters" to overthrow the Sandinista government?

AMBASSADOR KIRKPATRICK: The Nicaraguan government has made a number of charges against us. Last year -- just exactly

a year ago, they came to the United Nations saying that they were -- we were about to engage in a massive invasion. This year, they've also suggested we were engaging in an invasion. We certainly deny we're engaging in an invasion, and we haven't been invading anybody.

They suggested also that we were helping with arms, I think, the internal Nicaraguan opposition to the government of Nicaragua, and we have declined to respond to that specifically.

MacNEIL: Why? Why? Why decline to respond?

AMBASSADOR KIRKPATRICK: We -- we've decline to respond to that -- actually, I hate not responding to questions myself -- but it is a very firm U.S. government policy, which is not only the policy of this Administration, but of all previous administrations, neither to affirm nor deny any question concerning any kind of covert or intelligence activities of the U.S. government.

MacNEIL: Does that not, as the "New York Times" suggests today -- the "New York Times" suggests today, lend credence to the charge that, in fact, such covert operations are going on?

AMBASSADOR KIRKPATRICK: Well, I don't know. You know, -- I mean, I think probably -- as I said, it's a standard policy neither to affirm nor to deny, ever, such charges. I think people have to decide for themselves and then they would have to decide for themselves what they would think in any case about the U.S. providing arms to internal Nicaraguan insurgents at a time when there is massive provision of arms by the Soviet bloc in Cuba and Nicaragua to Salvadoran, and Guatemalan, and Honduran, and Costa Rican insurgents.

MacNEIL: Is it also, as the "New York Times" suggests in one of its reports today, part of deliberate Reagan Administration policy to wage psychological warfare by not saying whether or not it is doing this so as to leave the Nicaraguan government in some doubt about what it's doing and what it isn't?

AMBASSADOR KIRKPATRICK: Well, if we don't want to say whether or not we're doing it, then, obviously, I'm not going to say what it would mean if we're not going to say whether or not we're doing it.

I might say a word about Reagan Administration policy here. I suppose at the beginning of my -- of your colleague's characterization of the decision to stop aid to Nicaragua -- actually, in the first 18 months, the United States gave more

economic aid than any other country to Nicaragua, to the Sandinista government. And it was under the Carter Administration, in December of the Carter Administration, that the decision was made that Nicaragua did not meet the qualifications established by the Congress to continue aid, and that decision was made then and not by the Reagan Administration.

I'd like to make that clear just to be clear that this is not just a kind of Reagan policy.

MacNEIL: Right.

Again going back to the "New York Times" today, another report from the "Times" on the U.N. debate says that you personally have been stunned by the air of disbelief among many of the countries taking part in the debate, including many who are often included as those friendly to or voting with the United States. In other words, to put it in shorthand, that they don't believe the arguments you've been making. What is your response to that?

AMBASSADOR KIRKPATRICK: Well, I think it's mistaken, and I think the story, quite frankly, was written after the first day's debate and does not reflect what happened in the subsequent days of debate.

When I -- I think, in fact, that it's very clear that it was Nicaragua who found that -- most of its case was met with incredulity, and it -- the proof has been, finally, I think, that fighting in -- it was clear to everyone that more countries in the United Nations accepted the notion -- or at least as they participated in the debate -- accepted the notion of a regional approach to these regional problems, and they rejected Nicaragua's contention that they had simply a bilateral problem with Honduras or a bilateral problem with the United States.

MacNEIL: The United States is willing to go along with the suggestions by countries like Peru, and late today by Britain, that there should be a conference or a meeting of a number of countries in Latin -- in Central America?

AMBASSADOR KIRKPATRICK: You know, when I was in Central America about two weeks ago -- or four weeks ago -- the biggest effort was -- that is, Panama, Venezuela, and Costa Rica and Honduras, and El Salvador -- was to try to organize a conference that would have included all the Central American states. That's the five basic Central American states, including Nicaragua, plus the five interested -- the general democracies. That would be Panama, Venezuela, Colombia,

Mexico, and the Dominican Republic. That's called the five --five-on-five conference, and it does not include the United States. Some people felt it ought to be an all-Latin conference, and we had no place in it. And, after consideration of our government, we decided sure, that's fine. If they want to try to deal with it as regional level, we will interpose no obstacles whatsoever.

MacNEIL: Thank you.

Jim?

LEHRER: First of all, Madame Ambassador, I stand corrected on the aid question.

Next, the views of a key U.S. congressman who has been critical of the Reagan Administration policy toward Nicaragua. He's Congressman Michael Barnes, Democrat of Maryland, Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs.

He introduced legislation last year that would prohibit U.S. support for covert or paramilitary actions against Nicaragua.

And, Congressman, you said last week that what the U.S. is involved in now in Nicaragua was a 1980s version of the Bay of Pigs. Do you believe that?

CONGRESSMAN MICHAEL BARNES: Well, if any of the reports are believable, that's clearly what's involved here. What you've got is apparently the United States -- I say apparently because it won't be confirmed or denied by Ambassador Kirkpatrick or anybody else in the Administration, but what it appears to be is the United States funding and supplying arms to a group of exiles who are operating out of foreign territory -- in this instance Honduras -- in an effort to either destabilize or overthrow the government of their own country, Nicaragua.

LEHRER: From your point of view, what's wrong with that?

CONGRESSMAN BARNES: Well, there are a number of things wrong with it. There's the fundamental question of whether the United States ought to be engaged in overthrowing governments of other countries -- as a matter of policy whether we ought to. There's a question of whether or not it's legal. Domestic law is clear. If not, the Congress passed a law last year -- passed the House unanimously -- saying we shouldn't be doing this. It's against international law. It's against the

Organization of American States' charter which the United States is not only a signatory to, but we wrote, which specifically prohibits the kind of actions that are taking place at this time.

There are a whole lot of reasons why I think many in the Congress are raising very serious questions about whether the United States engaged in it. Apparently we're engaged in it, and if we are are we doing the right thing.

LEHRER: You heard what the Ambassador just said, that if you believe that the -- that Nicaragua is arming the leftist guerrillas in El Salvador, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, then -- then this -- she said it's up to people, then, to decide whether or not this kind of action, if it is in fact going on, is justified by the United states.

You think there's any justification for this?

CONGRESSMAN BARNES: Well the Congress doesn't think so, and we passed a law prohibiting the use of United States funds for this purpose, and it was passed unanimously, as I indicated. It was not a matter of dispute in the Congress. It was clear the attitude of the American people on this issue.

Beyond that, I think, you know, the soldier will man the fence, which is essentially what the Administration is using. "Well, if we are doing it, it's only because they're doing it in El Salvador" is not really a very valid justification for a policy of this nature.

Ambassador Kirkpatrick very correctly just said -- I have enormous respect for her talents and abilities. She --she just very correctly said that the countries in the region -- when they talked about trying to find regional political solutions to the problem -- to the problems in the area. I don't want the United States involved. They would prefer to work Latin with Latin rather than have the United States invovled.

And here what we are apparently doing is through the CIA injecting the United States very directly with a military effort in the region -- paramilitary to -- to solve what we perceive to be a problem that threatens U.S. security interests.

It is probably the worst way from the Latins' perspective for the United States to inject ourselves in the region. It raises all the specters of Chile, of Guatemala, of the Bay of Pigs, of the many times the United States has sent the Marines to Nicaragua in the past. A couple years ago, I

met with some Nicaraguans, and they said, "You're going to invade." And I said, "That's ridiculous. The United States is not going to invade Nicaragua."

Well, they said, "You've done it nine times before." You know, they have a memory of the U.S. role in Latin America. We sometimes are lacking the historical perspective, and I think this policy is an indication of that.

LEHRER: You've several times now, understandably, based on what the government has said officially, including Ambassador Kirkpatrick, you use the word "apparently," but you then go on -- you really believe the United States is, in fact, funding and directing that operation on the Honduran border, correct?

CONGRESSMAN BARNES: Somebody's funding it. Five hundred or more guerrillas were para-dropped into Nicaragua last week in a rather significant military operation. They got their helicopters from somewhere. They're getting all these weapons from somewhere.

The United States is not denying the assertions in all the U.S. media that it comes from the United States. I have specifically not requested an intelligence briefing because once you get one and they tell you what's happening, then you can't talk about it.

I would prefer to be able to raise the kinds of questions that my colleagues expect me to raise as Chairman of the Subcommittee about this kind of policy without being constrained by knowing, in fact, whether it's true. All I know is what I've read in the papers about this. All of the press says the U.S. is doing it. Everybody in the region certainly thinks we're doing it, and the leadership of many of the countries in the region have urged me to do what I can to see whether it's possible to bring about a more rational policy on the part of the United States.

LEHRER: And do you believe the -- the next part of this charge from Nicaragua that the purpose of this operation is to overthrow the government, the Sandinista government in Nicaragua?

CONGRESSMAN BARNES: Well, clearly, that's what the -- that's what the guerrillas who are fighting the Sandinistas say they want. I mean, they make no secret about what their intent is. They want to overthrow the Sandinistas, and there -- there's a dispute among those guerrilla factions as to what they'd like to replace them with. Some of them are very genuine democrats. Others are more inclined to setup some kind of right-wing government reminiscent of the Somoza regime. There's a dispute there.

Let me just comment on one point that Ambassador Kirkpatrick made, and that was she indicated that it was the policy of the United States never to comment on assertions of this kind.

Well, just this week the government of Grenada has said that the United States is planning to -- to invade Grenada or to support people who want to overthrow the government of Grenada, and the State Department has immediately denounced that as absurd, and suggested the United States would never do such a thing.

And yet we have comparable accusations not only from the Nicaraguans, but from CBS, NBC, the "New York Times," the "Washington Post," the "Christian Science Monitor," the "Miami Herald," and the Administration says, "Well, we would never comment on such a thing."

LEHRER: Thank you.

Robin?

MacNEIL: How about that, Madame Ambassador?

AMBASSADOR KIRKPATRICK: Ridiculous.

MacNEIL: What is ridiculous?

AMBASSADOR KIRKPATRICK: All of this is ridiculous. You know, first of all, it's also pretty serious, actually.

If I understood my Congressman Mike Barnes, he, first of all, is accusing our government of breaking the law, and that's a very serious charge, and it is one which we certainly will comment on. It's not so.

MacNEIL: You can assure him the law

AMBASSADOR KIRKPATRICK: Assure him absolutely that the law is not being broken. Absolutely.

And, then, I think it's very serious for him to say so, quite frankly.

MacNEIL: Congressman, do you want to comment on that?

CONGRESSMAN BARNES: Well, I'm delighted to hear that. If that's the case, then Dr. Kirkpatrick is saying that the allegations of the Nicaraguans and all the allegations that have appeared in the press are not correct, that we are not

in fact attempting indirectly and covertly to destabilize or overthrow the government of another country in the hemisphere.

MacNEIL: Is that what you're saying?

AMBASSADOR KIRKPATRICK: I

CONGRESSMAN BARNES: If that's what she's saying. . .

AMBASSADOR KIRKPATRICK: I think what I am saying -- I think -- Mike, you're a lawyer, aren't you?

CONGRESSMAN BARNES: I am.

AMBASSADOR KIRKPATRICK: That's what I thought. Well, then, we can use language

[Confusion of voices].

AMBASSADOR KIRKPATRICK: I'm a political scientist. Never mind. And I think we can both use language carefully.

I think there is a resolution, a law, which forbids the United States to attempt to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. I think that's the law.

CONGRESSMAN BARNES: Direct -- directly or indirectly?

AMBASSADOR KIRKPATRICK: I would certainly say that the United State is not breaking the law. That's very simple.

Second, another very serious mistake I think was --was Mike's assertion about, what Latins want. What Latin governments in the region want is peace, and they want it very badly, and they want the governments in the region to cease destabilizing each other, and they want an opportunity to develop democracy and -- and engage in economic development, which they were making some progress in some time ago.

They're also confronted with massive shipments of arms from the Soviet bloc by way of Cuba and Nicaragua. They also want help, and they want help very badly. Even someone like Archbishop Revera Damas(?) in El Salvador wants military assistance from the United States, and says so very clearly.

Third, the United States is not the least bit reluctant -- either this government or any previous one -- to say that we don't intend to invade anybody. We have no intentions of invading anybody. We said that -- I said it in the Security Council this week. I said it a year ago. We said that about Grenada. Of course we don't intend to invade Grenada.

MacNEIL: Congressman, you want to comment? We have less than a minute.

CONGRESSMAN BARNES: Well, with respect to what the people in the region are saying, let me say what one leader from the region said to me just very recently.

"Has the United States thought through the implications of its policy?"

The danger of a war right now between Honduras and Nicaragua are greater than they've been in years. It's a very intense situation. It wouldn't be surprising to anybody if the Nicaraguans responded to the threats that's been presented to them by moving into Honduras to try to take out the bases that have been reported, for example, in today's "New York Times" and yesterday's papers. Then what happens? Does Honduras engage in a major war? Do they -- do we then count on the restraint of the Soviets and the Cubans, and the Nicaraguans...?

[Confusion of voices].

MacNEIL: Mr. Congressman, we have to leave that as a question hanging for tonight, and probably we'll be coming back to this story.

I'd like to thank you for joining us. Dr. Kirkpatrick, thank you.

Good night, Jim.

That's all for tonight. We'll be back tomorrow night. I'm Robert MacNeil. Good night.