

29 May 1984

NICARAGUA/
FIGHTING

MACNEIL: The Nicaraguan government said today that its troops have mounted a major attack on the northern part of the country against rebels operating from bases in Honduras. A military source said about 200 of the insurgents have been killed. At the same time, the governments of Nicaragua and Costa Rica have formed a commission to investigate attacks back and forth across their common frontier on the southern flanks of Nicaragua. Nicaraguan rebels, called contras, operate from bases in Costa Rica in a campaign to overthrow the Marxist Sandinista government of Nicaragua, and Costa Rica has accused the Nicaraguans of sending their troops into Costa Rica to attack the rebel bases. Meanwhile, the Nicaraguan government is trying to create a calm atmosphere for a general election next November, and the Costa Rican government is coming under domestic political pressure to suppress the Nicaraguan rebels on Costa Rican soil. Both governments say the raids should stop, but they go on. Recently, there was heavy fighting on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua when the rebels captured and for two days held a fishing village called San Juan del Norte near a larger town called Bluefields. After that engagement, Bruce Garvey, of the CBC, visited both sides of the frontier and talked about the contras and the Sandinistas. Here's his report.

GARVEY: Through the tall brush that can cut like a razor, with the sun beating down at more than 100 degrees, a march down a booby-trapped jungle trail, escorted by tense Costa Rican civil guardsmen, a march that will sneak us into Nicaragua, free Nicaragua as the rebels here like to call it, down a steep embankment, and then we meet the self-styled freedom fighters of our day, the democratic revolutionary alliance. They're suspicious and trigger-happy, but a symbolic handshake shows Costa Rica supporting this guerrilla war against the Marxist Sandinista government. The documents issued by Arday's political headquarters in in Costa Rica carefully checked and rechecked. Across a narrow creek and into a secret guerrillas base camp where nervous young peasants can pick up a CIA paycheck that's double the going rate for stoop labor in a jungle plantation. It's here they train with U.S.-supplied uniforms automatic rifles and machine guns before they're smuggled north to skirmish with the Sandinista army and militia. It's from bases like this one they call Delta that the guerrilla war against the Sandinistas is being fought. This is Nicaraguan territory, but the contras control it. And, as the action heats up along the border with Costa Rica, the Sandinistas are heading back with frequent rocket attacks from the air. On the ground and on the river, however, this is

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very much contra-controlled territory. This is the second front against Nicaragua, much publicized in recent weeks following this action filmed by a contra combat cameraman. The guerrillas stormed and occupied an isolated border village called Santa del Norte, a bloody battle that was costly to both sides. But it gave credibility to the contras even though the Sandinistas recaptured it within days. There were Sandinista prisoners and a military success for charismatic contra leader Eden Pastora. He's a mercenary traitor to the Sandinistas, but in Central America he's a legend. The U.S. media has portrayed Pastora as a democratic Che Guevara, a liberator. Now Pastora says publicly he plans to seize Blue Fields, the administrate of Nicaragua's huge Atlantic region. It's just a little tin-shack town on the host swampy plain the British used to call the Mosquito Coast when they ran it. And Blue Fields has become an important strategic garrison town. It's Blue Fields that's the guerrillas' target. If they can take it, they'd control a big piece of Nicaragua's Atlantic seaboard and use this town to set up a provisional government to fight the Sandinistas in the rest of the country, at least that's the plan. And it makes sense, for if the revolution is lukewarm and vulnerable anywhere in Nicaragua, it's here in Blue Fields, with its mix-master blend of Spanish, Indians and former West Indian slaves, who still speak a Caribbean-accented English. That's why the army's here. The region's traditional alienation is becoming more acute as the economic squeeze tightens. The government has failed to increase production. And more and more resources are being diverted to the military buildup. It's tough on everyone. Even a resourceful guy such as *Joaquin Malaspan, a cab driver who knows how to hustle a deal. The fact that Joaquin owns his own cab puts him solidly in Blue Fields' middle class. There aren't too many other kids in town who get chauffeured to school every morning. And nobody's denying that school is one thing the Sandinistas have improved. (Footage of unidentified classroom of students reciting in unison, in Spanish)

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GARVEY: In Blue Fields, if they're waiting for the contras to come, then nobody seems too worried about it. On sultry May nights, they dance around a makeshift May pole in a bizarre relic of some half-remembered folklore the British brought with them. (Footage of bingo game) And in the bingo hall they're still playing the numbers, using beans for counters. It's the quickest way to make a buck in Blue Fields, and no revolutionary government is about to put them out of business. The war has come to

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Blue Fields out across the bay. To navigate these deadly waters today you need a pilot with nerves of steel who can pick his way through the invisible mine field. This is where the ammunition ships used to tie up with crates from Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, but that was before the mines. We're sitting here in the middle of a mine field. This is the harbor or El Bluff, a strategic port on Nicaragua's Atlantic coast, one of several laid with mines by the CIA. The half-sunk fishing boat behind us was struck by one. And we've inched our way out here very slowly, in order not to suffer the same fate. The Nicaraguans just don't have the means to sweep the harbor clean, and right now it's virtually closed to ocean-going vessels. Perhaps more than anything, this is the catalyst for criticism of the the U.S. The shock wave when this old shrimp boat triggered a mind sent ripples around the world. Canada, Britain, France, the World Court all recoiled in horror. Today it sits there like some embarrassing sore on the body of U.S. foreign policy. At this summer mill at *Cucla Hill, north of Blue Fields, conveyor belts have ground to halt, and the cane piling up, production at a standstill. This kind of thing isn't new. In fact, Nicaragua's gross national product has been declining since the revolution. But suddenly, the mining and U.S. economic sanctions have given the Sandinistas a ready scapegoat. At Cucla Hill, there's a man they call the king of innovators. He's learned to make replacement parts out of almost anything. Ask him about it, and he'll tell you why. UNIDENTIFIED NICARAGUAN MALE (Speaking Spanish, voice of translator): Because we haven't been able to get spare parts that we used to get from abroad before. Because right now we're blockaded.

GARVEY: Perhaps the foreman of this work gang said it best. 'We're simple peasants,' he said. 'Why don't the Americans just leave us alone?' You find the other side of the argument here on this airstrip being carved out of the bush at Blue Fields. Sure, the town needs something more than the present dirt runway. But those big Japanese graders don't come cheaply. And there's no need to building this 10,000 meter runway for 727s loaded with tourists. Maybe, like the contras say, the Sandinistas do have MiG 25s waiting for delivery from Cuba. Who knows? Right now they just laugh and point to a few ancient hand-me-downs, like this Israeli-built veteran that constitute Nicaragua's tiny air force, beefed up with some rocket power that's effective in jungle warfare. They don't laugh when they load up their old Russian helicopters with supplies that include coffins, daily supply runs to the troops in the bush fighting contras while they wait for the gringo invasion.

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MACNEIL: The Reagan administration has repeatedly denied that it plans any U.S. invasion of Nicaragua. As for future contra activity, that may well depend on the willingness of Congress to vote further clandestine aid. The house recently voted no, and another vote in the Senate is expected soon.

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