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U.S. decries buildup of Nicaraguan forces

By Henry Trehwitt
Washington Bureau of The Sun

Washington—Intelligence authorities yesterday made public aerial photographs to support claims that Nicaragua is building the most powerful armed forces in Latin America and burning villages to clear Indians from the border with Honduras.

One sequence of photographs showed extensive construction of runways to accommodate jet fighters that Nicaragua does not yet have. Another showed a series of new garrisons, some still under construction, that are almost duplicates of Cuban bases—photos of which also were displayed for comparison.

Appearing throughout the photographs was an array of equipment—tanks, guns, trucks, helicopters, amphibious vehicles—which John Hughes, the premier American interpreter of intelligence photographs, identified as Soviet-made. It was Mr. Hughes who in 1962 discovered on photographs the Soviet missiles in Cuba that led to Soviet-American confrontation.

Adm. Bobby R. Inman, the deputy director of central intelligence, said the evidence supports the belief that Nicaragua already has "upset the military balance in Central America." When the expected Soviet jet fighters arrive, he added, it will have the most powerful air force in the region.

Admiral Inman conducted the unusual briefing, backed by Mr. Hughes and Lt. Gen. James Williams, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. The intelligence community went

public, declassifying sensitive photographs, the admiral said, partly because he was "concerned and angry."

He was concerned over what the buildup "means for this country," he explained, and angry because of skepticism—presumably on the part of the media—toward previous administration claims. The photographs were taken from manned reconnaissance planes, he said, and he did not make public even more sensitive material, such as agent reports.

The administration plans a comparable report for Friday regarding the situation in El Salvador. U.S. officials say the leftist insurgency there receives at least part of its arms through Nicaragua.

Admiral Inman only rarely departed from presentation of the evidence yesterday. But he did speculate that the offensive potential in Nicaragua was evidence that Cuba and the Soviet Union had resolved four or five years ago a long debate about how to encourage revolution.

Other officials have argued that the Soviets earlier chose to operate only through established Communist parties, avoiding sponsorship of such groups as the Sandinista leaders of Nicaragua. Their indirect involvement in Nicaragua, and the even less direct one in El Salvador, would mean by that judgment that the more assertive approach of President Fidel Castro of Cuba has prevailed.

From the evidence now available, Admiral Inman said, Nicaragua projects regular forces of at least 25,000 to 30,000 men and a militia of 100,000 to 150,000. Some analysts

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ty "is not ready to go that high."

With 70,000 men in combined forces, he reported, Nicaragua now has a more formidable military structure than it did under the late dictator Gen. Anastasio Somoza Debayle. It has no conceivable defensive use for such forces, he said, implying that they could only be used against Nicaragua's neighbors.

The bases and airfields now built or under construction, he said, amount to "clearly the infrastructure for a larger military force." He remarked that the training of 50 Nicaraguan pilots in Bulgaria has been extended, indicating that they will get the MiG-21 fighter, not the less potent MiG-17.

Admiral Inman reported 16 Miskito Indian villages destroyed along the Coco River, which marks the border with Honduras. Before and after photographs indicated complete destruction.

"There are 23,000 now homeless," the admiral said, 12,000 of whom have fled to Honduras. The Sandinista government has reported 8,500 in its own camps, saying they were relocated to reduce provocations.

But, again speculating, Admiral Inman judged that the northeast Miskito area is where any substantial contingent of Cubans probably would be assembled. A new airfield is under construction at Puerto Cabezas on the Caribbean in that region.

To illustrate the similarity of Nicaragua's new garrisons and those of Cuba, Mr. Hughes showed slides of one in Cuba, and a comparable one at Managua, Nicaragua. The latter base also includes a mockup of an airfield with derelict aircraft.

Admiral Inman said the field is used for training in guerrilla activity—such as the raid that destroyed much of El Salvador's air force in January.

Other slides showed details that Mr. Hughes identified as Soviet-model obstacle courses for training troops and even grease pits for trucks.

Admiral Inman observed that the Sandinista government has yet turned completely to the Cuban model, noting that it still tries to keep peace with private capital. But the stage is set for change, he said, "and I believe, you can see some pattern developing here."