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Cuba's Top Combat General Is Said to Serve in Nicaragua

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WASHINGTON, June 18—Cuba's top military combat commander has been working in Nicaragua for about a month and has been "secretly assigned to duty" there, according to an intelligence report disclosed by a Reagan Administration official.

The commander was identified as Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez, who as a brigade commander was said to have been instrumental in negotiating, organizing and leading the Cuban military buildup in Angola in 1976 and in Ethiopia in 1977. He is now deputy to Raúl Castro, Minister of the Armed Forces.

The report is based primarily on Central American military sources who, two officials said, have been reliable in their accounts of Cuban activities in Nicaragua.

These sources, according to the report, believe General Ochoa is organizing a "large-scale Cuban move into Nicaragua." One of the sources even said he would be chief of all Nicaraguan and Cuban armed forces.

Administration officials acknowledged that apart from the Central



Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez

American sources, they had no independent confirmation that General Ochoa had in fact been "assigned to duty" in Nicaragua.

An Administration official also said that the assignment did not mean General Ochoa was expected to be in Nicaragua full time to the neglect of his duties in Cuba and that it was assumed that he traveled back and forth between the two countries.

Reagan Orders a Review

Although Nicaraguan and Cuban officials have put the number of Cubans in Nicaragua at about 4,000, the C.I.A. report estimated that there were 8,000 there, 2,000 of them military advisers and technicians, 2,000 teachers and the rest in construction brigades and teams specializing in public health, agriculture and civil affairs. There was no suggestion that Cubans had engaged in combat.

Asked about the report, other Administration officials said there was no evidence that Cuban forces would be sent to Nicaragua for combat duty, but they said General Ochoa's presence might well presage a larger Cuban military advisory role and perhaps an increase in the number of Cuban advisers there.

An Administration official said that the report was given to President Reagan about two weeks ago in his daily intelligence briefing book prepared by the Central Intelligence Agency and that he immediately ordered a study to review

possible United States responses.

It was said that William P. Clark, the President's national security adviser, felt the report put a new "dark cloud" over the situation in Central America.

There was no suggestion by any of the Administration officials who spoke about the intelligence report that its disclosure was intended to justify any new American military moves. The motive for the disclosure was apparently to underline Cuba's growing role in Nicaragua and to warn Havana that Washington knows what is going on.

The disclosure falls into a pattern of recent events pointing to greater military activity in Central America. Administration officials said recently that the number of American-backed anti-Sandinist guerrillas in Nicaragua had risen by a third in the last two months to about 8,000 and that they could be expected to control large areas of Nicaragua within six months. Honduran officials indicated they would be asking for more American military aid if fighting in Nicaragua spilled over into their territory. More than 100 American Green Berets have been sent to Honduras to train Salvadoran forces.

Wayne S. Smith, formerly the State Department's top expert on Cuba and now with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said: "I would not expect Cuban expeditionary forces in Nicaragua. But given the external pressures on the Sandinists, I think it would be surprising if there were no response from the Cubans."

The judgment of the C.I.A. analysts who wrote the report was similar. They said President Fidel Castro had decided he had to, "for the sake of his world

revolutionary image and credibility, move decisively to prop up the Sandinista regime."

Ochoa's Previous Roles

The C.I.A. writers of the report contended that General Ochoa's assignment, based on his previous activities, was "a major indicator" of possible Cuban moves.

According to the report, General Ochoa completed a special training course in the Soviet Union in 1976, then went directly to Angola. When he arrived, Cuban forces were said to total fewer than 3,000, but when he left in April 1976, that figure had reached 20,000. The report put the present Cuban force there at 25,000. It defends the Marxist Government in Luanda against rival factions.

Later in 1976, according to the report, the general was one of Cuba's key negotiators in Moscow's agreement to supply arms to Ethiopia for use against Somalia in border clashes. In December 1977, the report said, General Ochoa was transferred to Ethiopia as head of Cuban combat and support forces. These forces rose from 2,000 in April 1978 to the current level of 17,000, according to the report.

General Ochoa is said to be in his mid-40's and to have been in charge of combat readiness and military combat training in Cuba since 1961. He is said to be a close friend of President Castro.

Other Indications in Cuba

The C.I.A. report's writers also said there were indications in Cuba that it might make further military moves in Nicaragua. They said that in the last few months Cuba had considerably increased its military abilities "for both foreign deployments and defensive preparedness at home." Details on these

were not made available. The officials also spoke of the "record-setting rate and nature" of military deliveries to Cuba by the Soviet Union over the last 30 months, shifting Havana's "military capabilities from a mere defensive to a now notably offensive footing."

The Administration official who provided the substance of the report also drew attention to the fact that Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko spoke on the Central American situation at length in a speech several days ago to the Supreme Soviet. But he and Administration specialists on Moscow said Mr. Gromyko said nothing new on the subject.

Soviet officials have been extremely careful to maintain that Nicaragua is not a "socialist" nation by Moscow's definition. This is deemed to be important because Moscow generally avoids any military commitment to countries it does not consider "socialist."

The prevailing view in the Administration, apart from that of the writers of the C.I.A. report, seems to be that neither Moscow nor Havana is likely to risk any dramatic new move in Nicaragua.

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