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Ex-rebel leader decries U.S. role in Nicaragua

From Inquirer Wire Services

Eden Pastora — nicknamed "Commander Zero" during the Sandinista revolution that toppled Anastasio Somoza's regime in Nicaragua — has added his voice to the chorus warning that the United States has moved perilously close to direct, military involvement on the Honduras-Nicaragua border.

The former Sandinista fighter, who now opposes the junta in Managua, said he believes that Washington has been providing aid to the anti-Sandinistas operating along the border, many led by former officers of Nicaragua's national guard, and that political and military conditions inside Nicaragua are such that a large-scale action along the border is imminent.

But, he added, such an action would fail and have an effect opposite to that sought by the United States — strengthening, rather than weakening the leftist Sandinista government.

"Those armed men are not going to resolve anything," he said in a recent interview conducted by a Knight-Ridder Newspapers reporter in Pastora's headquarters in Costa Rica, the country to which he fled in mid-1981, after splitting with the Sandinista revolution that he had

helped lead against the Somoza regime in Nicaragua.

"It is going to be a Bay of Pigs, perhaps not of 72 hours, but of 72 days," Pastora said. "The result will be a resentful, violent people, with a Sandinista National Directorate and army with their morale high as a result of victory, and a delicate political situation in which the democratic [opposition] groups won't be in a position to oppose the Sandinista Directorate."

In Pastora's view, most Nicaraguans, although increasingly dissatisfied with the Sandinistas' Marxist line, would still reject a liberating force led by former Somoza national guardsmen — the leaders of armed groups staging raids into Nicaragua.

Indeed, late last week junta leader Daniel Ortega warned Nicaraguans that they were "playing with fire" if they supported rightist counterrevolutionaries who have been making frequent raids from across the border in Honduras. On Thursday, the government placed all five of its northern provinces bordering Honduras under a form of martial law.

The martial-law order was issued along with a statement saying that a U.S.-backed invasion was imminent.

The government extended for six months a national state of emergency that suspends many civil rights — including freedom of the press and the right of assembly.

United Press International said that it had visited a deserted rightist camp last week and found it filled with discarded boxes that had contained ammunition and food manufactured in the United States. Area residents said the rightists had carried U.S.-made arms.

Newsweek magazine last week reported that the Central Intelligence Agency was using covert action to topple the Nicaraguan government. The Reagan administration has denied the report.

However, administration officials told the New York Times on Tuesday that the United States had supported small-scale clandestine military operations against Nicaragua intended to harass, but not to overthrow, the Sandinistas.



Eden Pastora

Known as Commander Zero

In any event, the United States is widely believed to be seeking to destabilize the Sandinistas, and a government with views more compatible with those of the United States would hardly be unwelcome.

Pastora, regarded as a moderate alternative to the former national guardsmen on the right, and the leftist Sandinistas now in power, was reportedly the CIA's choice to lead such a movement.

However, he is said to have rejected all such offers. In the interview conducted at his headquarters, Pastora acknowledged that he lacked the resources to match those available to the national guard.

He added that at no time since he left Nicaragua in mid-1981 has he been approached by anyone from the U.S. government offering to support him.

"I can talk to the KGB or the CIA," he said, explaining that he was willing to talk but not to surrender his political independence.

"My conscience is clear," he said. "What is my strength? My honesty. I do not submit to anyone. I don't sell myself to anyone. I am going to defend Nicaragua against right or left."

The Nicaraguans who have gathered in Costa Rica in the last six months — grouped around Pastora

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