

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-1

NEW YORK TIMES
14 MARCH 1982

NICARAGUAN YOUTH RETURNED BY U.S.

Guerrilla Who Recanted Is Sent Home From Washington

By PHILIP TAUBMAN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 13 — A Nicaraguan who dismayed the Reagan Administration on Friday by recanting assertions of outside interference in El Salvador, was turned over to the Nicaraguan Embassy early today, according to embassy officials.

The Nicaraguan, Orlando José Tardencillas Espinosa, who said he was 19 years old, was captured in El Salvador last year while fighting for the guerrillas and was expected to describe Cuban and Nicaraguan aid to the rebels in a press briefing Friday. He left this morning on the first leg of a flight back to Nicaragua, a Nicaraguan Embassy spokesman said.

As Mr. Tardencillas headed home, Administration officials were trying to assess the damage done to the Government's credibility by his refusal to repeat previous assertions that Cuba and Nicaragua were providing military aid to the Salvadoran guerrillas.

After the briefing Friday, Dean Fischer, the State Department spokesman, said that despite the fact that Mr. Tardencillas had changed his story, he did confirm that he had led guerrillas in El Salvador.

In his recantation, Mr. Tardencillas suggested that he had been in El Salvador as a private individual and that he had never seen another Nicaraguan or a Cuban in the country.

Senior officials said today that their initial impression was that Mr. Tardencillas's appearance was a serious but not fatal setback for Administration efforts to convince Congress and the public that the Soviet Union, Cuba and Nicaragua had given financial and military aid to the Salvadoran guerrillas.

"It was a disaster," said one senior official. He added, "I don't know whether to laugh or cry."

Mr. Tardencillas, to the visible discomfort of State Department officials who had advertised him as further proof of outside interference in El Salvador, told reporters on Friday that he had no knowledge of Cuban or Nicaraguan involvement and said that he had made his earlier statements under coercion.

In the aftermath of Mr. Tardencillas's unexpected comments, the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency were reportedly investigating how the Government had failed to anticipate his turnaround.

Mr. Tardencillas was turned over to the Nicaraguan Embassy at 3 A.M. after a formal request was made to the State Department by the Nicaraguan Ambassador, Francisco Faillos, according to Angela Saballos, an embassy spokesman.

Incident Viewed as Serious

She said that Mr. Faillos took custody of Mr. Tardencillas in a brief meeting at the State Department. She said that Mr. Tardencillas had left for Nicaragua at midmorning and was being accompanied by an embassy official.

Although some Administration officials joked about Mr. Tardencillas's appearance — one senior official told reporters this morning that he was late for a meeting because he had "to wipe the egg off his face" — others seemed to view the incident as a serious problem.

They noted that the Administration has attempted in recent weeks to present evidence of outside interference in El Salvador to Congress and the public in hopes of building support for its policy of providing military and financial aid to the junta that governs the country.

"You can't throw away credibility the way we did yesterday and still expect to convince people," said one senior official who asked not to be identified.

Critics of the Administration's policy said today that they were not surprised by Mr. Tardencillas.

"The whole Administration effort has been a comedy of errors," said Representative Michael D. Barnes, Democrat of Maryland, who is chairman of the House subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs.

Administration officials said today that the C.I.A. and the State Department appeared to share responsibility for not thoroughly questioning Mr. Tardencillas before making him available to the press.

How U.S. Learned of Captive

According to these sources, Mr. Tardencillas was first discovered by the United States Government last week when the Salvadoran authorities informed the American Embassy in San Salvador that they had been holding a Nicaraguan captive for more than a year.

Mr. Tardencillas first came to public attention in February 1981, when he was brought before a news conference in San Salvador and told reporters that he had been sent to El Salvador to train guerrillas. He said that other Nicaraguan instructors had been sent to El Salvador.

After he was questioned at the embassy by intelligence officials, Mr. Tardencillas was flown to Washington last Monday, where he was questioned again. On Friday, only hours before his appearance, Mr. Tardencillas was questioned by senior State Department officials. They recommended that he be made available to the press, these sources said.

"Nobody picked up a hint that he would recant," said one official familiar with the discussions.