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Latin America: Nicaragua Seen A Burning Fuse

Central America is a powder keg that could explode within the next few months. The impact could make El Salvador's civil war seem like a backfiring automobile.

It could be precipitated by Nicaragua. The principal combatants would be the leftist Sandinista regime in Managua and its opponents in exile in neighboring Honduras. They already have had numerous bloody clashes.

There is grave danger that the skirmishes could precede open conflict between Honduras and Nicaragua. The Honduran forces, armed with U.S. equipment, probably would have a military edge over the Sandinistas.

Nicaragua therefore might call on Cuba for help. The appearance of Cuban soldiers would be countered by increasing U.S. involvement. The Cubans, of course, rely on the Soviet Union for armaments. This could bring a confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union.

A principal catalyst in this explosive equation is Jose Francisco Cardenal, leader of the anti-Sandinista Nicaraguan Democratic Force. He is

a former Nicaraguan businessman, popularly known as "Chicano," who organized opposition to the late dictator Anastasio Somoza. After Somoza's overthrow three years ago, Cardenal served briefly as vice president of the Sandinistas' council of state.

In an interview with my associate Jon Lee Anderson, Cardenal said he quit his council post and took up arms in exile because "Marxist-Leninist elements had begun to monopolize what was supposed to be a council representative of all sectors of Nicaraguan society."

He said his force, which is already conducting guerrilla operations in Nicaragua, is composed of patriots who want to rid their homeland of its communist rulers.

Cardenal admitted that his troops include former members of Somoza's detested National Guard. "We take anyone who comes to us as a Nicaraguan ready to fight," he explained. "We have ex-guardsmen, sure—just like we have ex-Sandinistas."

The exile leader said he has 2,000 to 3,000 active fighters operating in Nicaragua's northern province, and claimed, "We have eight to 10,000 more waiting for the word inside Nicaragua. They are under training and waiting for the arms we shall get to them."

"One doesn't negotiate with the communists," he said. "You don't

win a war by talking, you win it by killing, and that is what we are doing, every day, inside Nicaragua. We will triumph, too. We will have Managua in six months."

How can he be so confident? There are whispers that Cardenal is the principal beneficiary of the reported \$19 million in covert CIA funds that President Reagan approved to destabilize Nicaragua.

Cardenal denies this. "We'll take money from any democratic institution or agency," he said. "We need the U.S. government to help us with political pressure. The CIA could help us by relaying information back to Washington. But their direct involvement would hurt more than help us because of their bad reputation in Latin America."

He would not specify the amounts and sources of his arms supplies, other than "several Latin American countries." Sandinista diplomats in Washington say Cardenal, and other exile groups, are getting their arms and funds directly from the Honduran military.

A Honduran official in Washington insisted that his country is taking a neutral position between the contending Nicaraguan groups. "But Nicaragua is trying to provoke a war," he said. "There have been a series of violations of our territory."

Then he added an ominous warning: "If we are attacked, we'll attack." And the chain reaction would begin.