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U.S. seeks to isolate Nicaragua

Military force also discussed

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WASHINGTON — The Reagan administration is gearing up for a new push against Nicaragua aimed at isolating the country diplomatically, according to administration, congressional and rebel sources.

They said the eventual use of direct U.S. military force to assist Nicaraguan contra rebels also has been discussed by U.S. officials and the rebels, but no authorization given.

One possible military scenario would be surgical U.S. air strikes to destroy Soviet-supplied counterinsurgency helicopters and a naval blockade to interdict fresh military supplies such as the new Soviet Mi-25 Hind gunships Managua received in late October.

The new administration push against Nicaragua, the sources said, is aimed at enhancing rebel prospects of ousting the Sandinistas before President Reagan leaves office in 1989.

While no military action has been approved, the sources said the diplomatic offensive has been cleared by a new interagency committee that oversees the \$100

million contra aid program now in effect.

As it weighs its own break in relations with Managua, Washington also is encouraging its Central American allies to apply greater diplomatic pressure by recalling ambassadors, reducing embassy staffs, severing relations and joining the U.S. trade embargo against Nicaragua, the sources said.

The United States also is planning a campaign to persuade European allies and larger Latin American countries — among them Mexico and Brazil — to apply diplomatic pressure on the Sandinistas or, at the least, to allow the contras to open offices in their capitals and permit their leaders to visit and make public statements, the sources said.

The new interagency committee mapping strategy and overseeing the \$100 million includes nine members from the State Department, National Security Council, Pentagon and CIA.

Michael Armacost, undersecretary of state for political affairs, is program and committee supervisor, with Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, the coordinator.

Other members include William Walker, deputy assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs and Abrams' chief aide for Central America; Raymond Burghardt, senior director of the NSC's Latin American affairs branch; Nestor Sanchez, deputy assistant secretary of defense for inter-American affairs; and two unidentified CIA officers, one from the covert action staff the Directorate of Operations and another from the Western Hemisphere division.

The other two identified members include one representative each from the Pentagon and the White House National Security Council.

The CIA officers will manage the contra war on a day-to-day basis while Armacost and Abrams will provide oversight and guidance.

Sources within some of the agencies involved said the chief goal now is to train and arm the contras and marshal international support for their cause by isolating Nicaragua and helping the rebels form a genuine insurgency.

"History shows that a combination of nagging insurgent military pressure and progressive withdrawal of domestic and international support is what brings down or alters an unpopular government," CIA Director William Casey said in a recent speech. "This process already is under way in Nicaragua."

Collective rupture

The next step may be a U.S. break in diplomatic relations with Nicaragua, possibly in concert with similar action by Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica, the sources said.

They said that Abrams' trip to Central America two weeks ago was in part designed to set the effort in motion.

According to a Latin American diplomat in Washington, Abrams broached the possibility of a collective rupture with Nicaragua or some other form of isolation in conversations with regional leaders. A State Department spokesman declined to comment.

The effort continued last week with Armacost's first "orientation" trip to the region, the sources said, and is expected to accelerate after today's U.S. congressional elections.

The diplomatic drive represents a shift in plans. Originally, the United States envisaged breaking relations with the Sandinistas only if the contras seized a substantial portion of Nicaraguan territory and declared a provisional government.

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However, the sources said, the original plan was modified when hard-line members of the National Security Council proposed breaking ties over the Sandinista decision to put American mercenary Eugene Hasenfus on trial.

Hasenfus, 45, of Marinette, Wis., a former cargo handler for CIA-operated Air America, was captured in Nicaragua when Sandinistas shot down his camouflaged C-123 aircraft laden with weapons for the contras.

Ultimately, the sources said, the decision was made to keep the embassy open but to explore the possibility of persuading other countries to break relations in conjunction with the United States.

Sandinista sources said Nicaragua has already activated contingency plans for a U.S. break by naming Carlos Tunnermann, its ambassador to Washington, also as ambassador to the Organization of American States.

That way, if Washington breaks relations the Sandinistas can still keep their top diplomat functioning in the U.S. capital as a liaison with congressional leaders and journalists.

Paralleling the U.S. diplomatic offensive, disbursement of the new \$100 million for the contras also is beginning with automatic assault weapons, ammunition and uniforms reportedly being delivered last week to contra camps along the Nicaraguan border with Honduras.

Diplomacy ending?

President Reagan two weeks ago signed the paperwork activating aid. Documents sent to Congress include a 20-page White House report suggesting that diplomacy has come to an end and that the only avenue left is armed struggle.

Reagan also sent Congress a finding notifying the House and Senate intelligence committees that the CIA has resumed management of the contra war for the first time since the suspension of covert aid in October 1984.

The finding is secret, but congressional aides with access to classified information said the administration has several military goals for the contras.

These include training small units to spread the war throughout Nicaragua, seizing and holding territory, staging actions in large Nicaraguan cities, bringing down Hind helicopters and capturing Cuban military advisers. The strategy, the sources said, is to create the perception that the contras are an alternative to the Sandinistas.

U.S. officials said the first step in creating a bandwagon effect for the contras, is to give them a sturdy vehicle on which to ride to victory.

To do that, they said, U.S. military trainers will train contra officers. But honing them to crack performance levels will take some time.

"The Sandinistas have had seven years to construct and impose their totalitarian apparatus," Abrams said in Miami Sept. 15. "The Nicaraguan people cannot be expected to tear that apparatus down overnight. The next several months will be,

above all, a time for preparation, for developing effective political organizations, for active diplomacy, and for military training. The months immediately ahead are not likely to bring major military victories, much less the end of Communist rule."

Sources said the plan is for the contras to conduct a four-front war, staging attacks along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts as well as along the southern and northern borders. Gradually, units would move inland toward Managua and other large cities, the sources said. Harassment or capture of the Atlantic coast ports of Puerto Cabezas or Bluefields would be welcome but not necessarily a high priority.

The contras also are expected to attack economic targets such as the oil refinery and storage depots in Managua as well as oil tanks in the Pacific port of Corinto. The strategy is to further disrupt the battered Nicaraguan economy.

Other possible targets reportedly given to the contras by U.S. intelligence include provincial military barracks, storage facilities, highways, electronic listening posts, radar facilities and artillery emplacements.

Sources said targets were acquired from spies and from high-resolution pictures taken by military aircraft and satellites over Nicaragua and analyzed at the CIA's National Photographic Interpretation Center.

Those pictures show the exact parking location of the Hind helicopters at Sandino international airport and Punta Huete airbase near Managua.

Similar pictures reportedly have been incorporated into briefing books that U.S. combat pilots would receive in case the president orders an aerial strike, the sources said.

A congressional source frequently briefed by military planners said contingency plans for operations in Nicaragua were first drawn up in 1983 by the Panama-based Southern Command. The source said the plans are now ready.

Separately, rebel and administration sources said that in recent weeks there have been discussions at the Pentagon about the possibility of activating at least two components of the contingency plans: precision air strikes and a naval blockade.

A Pentagon spokesman confirmed the existence of Nicaragua contingency plans, but added that "there are no plans" to activate them.

A White House source said Pentagon military leaders are resisting the use of force in Nicaragua, especially a blockade, because it would be too expensive and require diverting many ships and sailors from other parts of the world.

A May Defense Department study titled "Prospects for Containment of Nicaragua's Communist Government," said a Nicaragua "quarantine" would cost about \$8.7 billion for the first year and force the Navy to deploy several destroyers, hydrofoils, patrol aircraft and carrier battle groups.

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Several administration sources said that while discussion of military action in Nicaragua may be premature, they noted that those in favor of it appear divided over whether it should occur before Congress returns in January or later next year to give the contras a chance to show their capability.

The sources said some hard-line administration advisers have suggested taking action before the 1988 presidential campaign begins so that if the operation is successful the Republican candidate can use it as a campaign weapon.

Administration sources said that while policy-makers wish to avoid the use of American force, they are conscious that the U.S. intelligence community continues to feel that only U.S. forces could truly resolve the Nicaraguan conflict militarily.

They are also aware that Reagan wants a "liberated" Nicaragua as one of his foreign policy legacies and as proof that a Moscow-backed regime can be rolled back, the sources said.