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What they want

Nicaraguan rebel says he'd like it the U.S. way

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TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras — As their activities in Nicaragua draw increasing attention in Washington, the leaders of the largest anti-Sandinista guerrilla organization are attempting to align their stated goals more closely with the Reagan administration's Central American policy.

When he was asked in an interview here Friday what the insurgents' aims were, Edgardo Chamorro Coronel, one of seven directors of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), said his organization intended to replace the leftist government in Nicaragua with a multi-party democracy.

He did his best to emphasize his organization's moderation. "We are not trying to overthrow the Sandinistas," he said. "We want to give them a message."

Chamorro's tone was in stark contrast to remarks made not long before by another FDN official, who said of Cuban and East European advisers in his homeland, "We will kill them," and of one Sandinist official, "We will try him as a communist."

Instead, Chamorro seemed to be in accord with Reagan administration officials who have consistently denied that the United States is trying to unseat the Sandinistas. In fact, President Reagan said at a news conference two weeks ago that he did not believe that the insurgents were capable of doing so.

Although Reagan would not comment on whether the United States was supplying the rebels, he said U.S. policy in the region was intended solely to stop the flow of arms and supplies from Nicaragua to the Salvadoran guerrillas.

Nowhere in the FDN's glossy blue press kit, however, is there any mention of a desire to stem that flow, and Chamorro dismissed a recent Miami Herald report that said the CIA had told congressmen in closed testimony that the guerrillas had in fact reduced it.

"We are not paid policemen," he said. "We don't want to be used like that. We're not going to die to stop the flow of weapons." He added sardonically, "Why don't they use us to stop the flow of cocaine to the United States?"

By and large, though, the FDN's new campaign of moderation appears to have been fairly effective. It may have reached a public-relations peak on Monday, when a group of

visiting U.S. congressmen met here with an unidentified FDN leader and high Honduran officials.

At a news conference after the meeting, one of the legislators, Rep. Norman Y. Mineta (D., Calif.), said the goals of U.S. policy were to cut off supplies to rebels in El Salvador and to make the Sandinistas be concerned with their domestic commitments instead of being preoccupied with events outside Nicaragua.

Mineta noted that he had been very skeptical about administration policy toward Nicaragua, and that he still had not decided whether it complied with U.S. law. He implied, though, that the insurgents' desire to make the Sandinistas pay more attention to domestic affairs could be compatible with the administration's efforts to break the Nicaragua-Salvador supply route.

The FDN claims a membership of more than 7,500 and is allied with the Misurasata, which represents the three Indian tribes of Nicaragua and says it has 2,500 guerrillas in eastern Nicaragua.

In the last month, the FDN's directors say, they have been attempting to transform their organization from an expatriate rebel force trained in Honduras to a legitimate coalition of Nicaraguans from all levels of society, united in their determination to change the leftward drift of the Nicaraguan government.

The Harvard-educated Chamorro was dean of the School of Humanities at the University of Nicaragua and ran a public relations firm in Managua at the time of the Sandinista triumph over Anastasio Somoza in July 1979.

He belongs to a family that gave Nicaragua four presidents; among his cousins are several members of the Sandinista government, including Minister of Culture Ernesto Cardenal, a priest and prominent poet. Another cousin is Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, editor of La Prensa, Nicaragua's only opposition newspaper.

He says he opposed Somoza, but Chamorro left Nicaragua very shortly after the Sandinistas came to power. Now, he hopes to get a message back to those he left behind.

The message lies in the FDN "peace initiative," he said — those issues his group says would be the most important subjects of any future negotiations with the Sandinistas. They include an end to censorship and religious persecution, and elections for a National Constituent Assembly by September.

Chamorro spoke of a "scenario" in which the government would agree to negotiate, but he freely admitted that such was extremely optimistic. "We have in the past offered to negotiate with the Sandinistas," he said, "and they have ignored us."

Essential to bringing about negotiations would be the participation of the other major guerrilla organization, the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance. It is led by the charismatic former Sandinist commander, Eden Pastora, who is based in the south and has disdained the FDN as a legacy of the repressive past.

Of Pastora, Chamorro said, "We are fighting for the same goals: a negotiated settlement and free elections. It's very important to have this agreement."

He doesn't have it yet, and the fighting continues — with a force that Chamorro complained is inadequately armed and that, unlike the Sandinista troops, has no heavy mortars, recoilless rifles, helicopter gunships or tanks.

"We'd like to receive that," he said, "but that's wishful thinking. The aid we are receiving proves that the administration doesn't want to overthrow the Sandinistas."

Even if Congress decided to restrict the CIA's covert operations against Nicaragua, he said, the insurgency would not immediately grind to a halt. "Let's assume the aid does slow down. The problem will be later on. If your tank is full, you can keep going."

More important than military aid, he said, was popular support for the FDN within Nicaragua. He acknowledged that former members of Somoza's national guard were FDN members, but he insisted that none was the type who made the guard notorious for its brutality.

So their presence, he said, has not affected the organization's popularity among the civilians living in FDN-controlled areas. (In fact, some say it has enhanced it. Under Somoza, many guardsmen were recruited in several areas where the FDN says it has popular support.)

"We have a strong code of ethics, and we are seriously committed to a clean war," Chamorro said. "For that reason we have gotten the aid of the people."

Then, as if to underscore his confidence in that fact, he said, "I am of the opinion that if Congress wants to cut aid, fine."