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# 'Contras' close to defeat as serious force, Sandinistas say

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## Managua, Nicaragua

Nicaraguan "contra" rebels are near to collapsing as a serious military force, according to government officials and Western observers here.

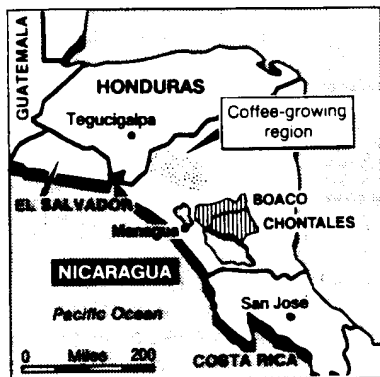
The contras' hopes for survival appear to hang on United States congressional approval of President Reagan's request for \$100 million more in aid.

But even with that money, Nicaragua's ruling leftist Sandinistas are confident that the contras will pose little real threat to them.

Managua is "very close to dealing a strategic defeat to the contras, if they haven't done it already," agrees one Western diplomat. "The government can deliver irreversible military damage to the contras in 1986 if they get no military assistance." This view contrasts starkly with the situation 12 months ago, when heavy contra presence in northern Nicaragua was taking a direct economic toll: The threat of ambushes prevented workers from reaching many farms to harvest Nicaragua's key export, coffee.

Then, Sandinista Army spokeswoman Rosa Pasos recalls, there were some 4,000 troops from the rebel Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) in the area. Today, there are no more than 50.

In the south, meanwhile, guerrillas of Edén Pastora Gómez's Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE) have lost their main base camps in Nicaragua, near the Costa Rican border, which were destroyed last August. Weakened by desertions, ARDE has been reduced to occasional forays against government troops. The only major concentration of contras, estimated at 1,500, remaining inside Nicaragua are in the provinces of Boaco and Chontales. But they are far from supplies in Honduras and un-



der heavy pressure from the Sandinista Army.

Government leaders are proud of the past year's military successes, during which US aid to the contras was limited to \$27 million in "nonlethal" assistance. In the past 12 months, the Sandinistas have gained and consolidated their military ascendancy with two major offensives in the north and south. Observers cite several reasons why these offensives struck home with particular force.

Most importantly, government troops are more experienced. "Our men are much more effective now, after four years of fighting," says Ms. Pasos. "And we know the contras better because our intelligence has improved." At the same time, says a senior Western diplomat, Cuban trainers "have been walking the Sandinistas up the learning curve. The best you can say for the contras is that they have bumped along on a plateau."

At the tactical level, government forces have made powerful use of Soviet built MI-24 attack helicopters and a growing fleet of troop transport helicopters.

"Their air support is strong and well-organized," comments one Western military expert. "This means that the contras can no longer move in large groups."

Having used more and better-trained troops to drive most of the rebels into neighboring Honduras and Costa Rica, the Sandinistas can now concentrate on interdicting cross-border infiltrations by rebels. This task has been made easier by the recent creation of special border units posted along a 250-mile stretch of the frontier with Honduras.

The question that now arises is: What use could the rebels make of any aid that Congress might approve?

"The Americans' problem is who they use to fight this war," says the military expert. "You need decent human resources as well as aid itself." Aside from supplies, the contras' main challenge is lack of training, foreign observers say.

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But training a competent officer corps is a long-term proposition, and may not show clear results for many months, diplomatic observers say. It would also require the involvement of US advisers in rebel bases near the Nicaraguan-Honduran border, if not inside Nicaragua.

Mr. Reagan's request that Congress give him complete discretion as to how the aid is used has reinforced suggestions that this is what he has in mind.

The costs of training the rebels would be paid from the \$70 million of the proposed package, as would weapon supplies. But logistical support, ranging from helicopters to boots, could come from the proposed \$30 million "humanitarian" portion of the aid. Should Congress agree only to this amount, it would be of dubious value to the contras' aims. Though

keeping the contra forces alive, the aid would not be enough to offer hopes of positive gains needed to boost morale.

"It cannot be easy to be a contra soldier, fighting for four years and having nothing to show for it," comments Pasos.

If the contras are not to disintegrate, they need the full \$100 million to "keep them together as a military force" long enough to at least carry out training programs, the Western diplomat says.

Sandinista leaders are upbeat about their military prospects in the face of anything short of a direct US invasion.

Hopes that US aid "can save the mercenary forces from total defeat" are "illusory," Defense Minister Humberto Ortega Saavedra said last week. "We are optimists. We are going to win, and we are on the right road."