

~~Charges Against Sandinistas~~

TOM BROKAW: Secretary of State George Shultz today led the administration charge against the role of Soviets and Cubans in Nicaragua. He called them a cancer. And he vigorously defended the contras -- those are the American backed rebels -- shooting down a Soviet built helicopter in Nicaragua. Fourteen people were killed, including two Cubans. And this was Shultz's reaction.

SECRETARY OF STATE SHULTZ: Thank goodness that they did get ahold of some weapons that can knock these choppers down and were able to use them. They have gotten ahold of missiles, surface-to-air missiles, and they have figured out how to use them, and they've used it effectively in this case. And I say fine; I'm all for it.

BROKAW: And NBC's Fred Francis reports from the Pentagon tonight that he's been told by intelligence sources and contra leaders that the contras -- these are the American backed rebels -- brought down two Soviet built helicopters this week.

According to these sources, the contras used a Soviet built surface-to-air missile, which is hand held, to bring down the choppers.

The contras are known to have a few of those missiles.

Nicaragua reacted with anger to these latest charges from the administration, recalling its Ambassador to Washington. And in Nicaragua itself, President Daniel Ortega said this is the beginning of a new and highly dangerous crisis.

NBC's Mike Boettcher is in Nicaragua tonight.

MIKE BOETTCHER: The workday was cut short by Sandinista leaders who asked thousands of their followers to protest at the U. S. Embassy. Managua was

making a point to Washington that it believes the contra's surface-to-air missiles have seriously escalated Nicaragua's war and perhaps the war in nearby El Salvador.

Responding to praise of the missile attack by Secretary of State Shultz, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said, quote, "The use of this missile by the contras opens the door to other guerrilla forces in Central America to use the same weapon." It was a clear reference to Salvadoran guerrillas who could use the same type of missile to shoot down U. S. made helicopters supplied to the Salvadoran army.

Ortega says the United States was mining Nicaragua's skies as it had mined Nicaragua's ports last year.

The contras proudly displayed a surface-to-air missile to an NBC camera crew last summer. Their inexperience with the weapon, evidenced then, apparently has been overcome. The missiles threaten a growing fleet of Soviet built helicopters on which the Sandinista army relies heavily. U. S. officials contend that many of the pilots are Cubans.

The contras have learned to fear the sounds of rockets blasting from the pods of Nicaragua's MI-8 and MI-24 helicopters.

The flow of Eastern bloc weapons to the Sandinista army has surged in recent months. So have contra arms' acquisitions. Both sides are recruiting more men and giving them better weapons, weapons which President Ortega now implies could be used by guerrillas

fighting Central American governments friendly to the United States.

Mike Boettcher, NBC News, Managua.