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Contra Political Sideshows Strain Support Inside Nicaragua

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras — This week's capture of an American who was flying over Nicaraguan territory in a contra supply plane once again highlights the U.S. role in the conflict between the Sandinista government and thousands of anti-Marxist rebels fighting in and around Nicaragua. It's still not clear exactly who was coordinating the captured American's actions. However, the question of direct U.S. involvement in Nicaragua may now, as it has in the past, act as an impediment to

sparked a temporary outbreak of public tranquillity.

However, last week UNO directors met again to argue over who will wield the most clout in the organization. The meetings threw into high relief two things that U.S. policy makers would just as soon forget: The UNO alliance, cobbled together in Washington in response to U.S.—not Nicaraguan—political exigencies, shows severe signs of strain. And opposition leaders within Nicaragua increasingly feel estranged from the armed rebels. The latter may be the more serious problem.

UNO soldiers fighting and dying in the mountains of Nicaragua are far removed from, and generally ignorant of, the political sideshows that their leaders periodically stage in the U.S. But opposition groups in Managua grow more discouraged by these political wranglings every day. Nicaraguan businessmen and political leaders speak of UNO's political infighting with anger and disgust. "Obviously we can't have an open relationship with the contras," says one. "But we could have a kind of mental relationship. I'll tell you, no mental relationship exists. No relationship of any kind exists."

Ultimately the contras, to have a chance to win, must open an internal political front in Nicaragua's cities. Before they came to power, the Sandinistas staged armed raids on Anastasio Somoza's patrols in the mountains for years without any visible effect on the regime. It was only after they linked up with businessmen, middle-class professionals, students and labor unions in the cities that the revolution gained momentum. But the way things are going, the internal opposition leaders are unlikely to make even an informal alliance with the armed rebels.

Many Nicaraguan dissidents, while agreeing on the necessity of U.S. aid, have long resented the meddling that comes with it. That meddling started literally on the first day that the U.S. got involved, when CIA agents in Miami rewrote the first public statement by the directors of the FDN to delete what they regarded as unpleasant references to the sanctity of private property.

The most dramatic example of U.S. control over the contras was the Central Intelligence Agency's undermining of Eden Pastora, the charismatic former Sandinista war hero who joined the contras in 1983. Mr. Pastora had by far the biggest popular following inside Nicaragua of any of the contra leaders, but his refusal to accept U.S. advisers and their instructions led the CIA first to cut off his money and then to bribe his subordinate officers to

desert to a rival contra group with their units. Mr. Pastora, to be sure, had his eccentricities—he once made a radio broadcast suggesting that Sandinista soldiers quit shooting at his men and save their bullets for the FDN—but his treatment by the CIA undermined an effective, popular movement against the Marxist Sandinistas.

The "elimination" of Mr. Pastora left a bad taste, even among those opposition leaders who didn't like him. And the U.S. insistence that Mr. Calero placate Messrs. Robelo and Cruz has aroused anger among much of the internal opposition, both because it affronts their pride and because they are leery of the last two men.

Many opposition leaders think Mr. Cruz, who has spent most of the past two decades in Washington as an official of the Inter-American Development Bank, has few political roots in Nicaragua. Mr. Robelo, who served in the Sandinista's first governing junta before breaking with them, is viewed with suspicion and even open hostility by some of the opposition. They still remember his eight months in the junta, when he helped engineer the nationalization of Nicaragua's banks, when he traveled to Cuba to meet with Fidel Castro, and when he presided over a flood tide of expropriations.

Curiously, Mr. Calero—who has become to contra critics something of a symbol of supposed anti-democratic tendencies of the rebels—is the one rebel leader who seems to have the greatest popular following inside Nicaragua. Far from being a Somocista, he was a longtime opponent of the regime—he was even jailed once for helping to organize a general strike—but stayed aloof from the Sandinistas as well after they took power. He was an activist in the anti-Somoza conservative party, which still exists and is generally thought to be the largest of the domestic opposition groups still active in Nicaragua.

But Mr. Calero, like the others, comes under fire from the opposition for placing too much emphasis on military operations at the expense of a sound political program, and for spending too much time fussing over UNO's internal pecking order: "UNO is only an armed movement," says a leader of an opposition party. "They come and they go, but they never write on the walls to say, 'we were here.'"

Mr. Garvin is the Latin American correspondent for the Washington Times. In July, he was expelled from Nicaragua after being held incommunicado for nine hours, but he has since been allowed back in Nicaragua twice.

The Americas

By Glenn Garvin

the final release of \$100 million in U.S. aid to the rebels. And while U.S. aid to the contras has widespread support in Central America, the issue of rebel independence from the U.S., particularly as concerns the rebel leadership, is of no small matter to the beleaguered supporters of the contras within Nicaragua.

The extent of U.S. involvement in selecting the leadership of the contras has long been a sore point among dissidents within Managua. Many U.S. critics of President Reagan's support for the rebels have argued that U.S. agencies exercise too little control over them. But inside Nicaragua, the feeling is that they exercise too much control.

Last year the U.S. forced the creation of the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) as an umbrella group that would subsume several other anti-Sandinista organizations. UNO was placed under the control of three directors: Adolfo Calero, head of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), the largest contra army; Arturo Cruz, who had organized non-armed opposition movements within Nicaragua; and Alfonso Robelo, who had been one of the leaders of a smaller contra group. The three men didn't show much interest in working together until it became a condition of further U.S. aid. Predictably, they have not gotten along well.

When the three leaders of UNO met in Miami in May to broker for power among themselves—under the constant, if distant, scrutiny of U.S. "administrators"—opposition groups within Nicaragua listened for more than two weeks. Finally, they sent a delegate to Miami. "We told them, 'If you can't get this thing resolved, don't come back to Nicaragua,'" recalls one opposition leader. "We told them we would publicly denounce them if they didn't stop all the bickering." That harsh message