

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 1-AMIAMI HERALD  
18 June 1986

# Rebels' efforts sputter in cities

By **TIM GOLDEN**  
Herald Staff Writer

**MANAGUA, Nicaragua.** — Crippled by Sandinista infiltrators, spied on by Cuban-style defense committees and unable to project either a winning image or a political message that inspires would-be supporters, the Nicaraguan rebels have failed to set up shop in Nicaragua's major cities.

Nicaraguan Interior Minister Tomas Borge says he "could not count" the number of times that contra groups have tried to carry

## THE CONTRAS



POLICY AT A CROSSROADS

Last of four parts

out military operations or establish sabotage cells in the cities. But he is certain of one thing:

"Every effort to establish an internal front in this country has failed," Borge said.

There is little evidence to dispute him.

In the south, former Sandinista hero Eden Pastora's Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE) shelved its internal front plans after Sandinista state security agents rounded up one cell after another as they readied sabotage plans. Borge says several of ARDE's leading saboteurs were really Sandinista agents.

In the north, the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) also has watched its internal front dreams turn nightmare. The most tangible result of FDN efforts so far has been to provide Sandinista officials with ammunition against domestic political critics, who often are accused of involvement in cracked sabotage rings even when evidence is lacking.

To many, including U.S. officials involved with the rebel program, the contras' failure is predictable in a small country run by Communist-trained, conspiracy-

minded former guerrillas who have made rigorously controlling peoples' movements a national security priority.

To contra critics and even some backers, however, the rebels' failure to display a military and political presence in Managua or other major cities is perhaps the clearest sign of the limited threat of the insurgent movement.

"It would be one thing to not have blown up [President] Daniel Ortega's house after five years," said one Western diplomat. "But they [the rebels] haven't even gotten anyone to spray-paint mean things about his mother."

The Sandinistas know well the importance of an urban presence to a guerrilla movement. Even when their war against President Anastasio Somoza was going poorly, spectacular attacks in Managua kept attention focused on their cause and gave the impression of popular support.

The tale of the FDN's first effort to set up an internal front is typical.

The FDN only tried to establish its Managua front in 1983, and even then the effort was almost an accident. An anti-Sandinista rebel, Adan Rugama Acevedo, who fights under the nom de guerre Aureliano, became separated from his contra unit during a March 1983 battle in the northern Nicaraguan town of Cua. Not knowing what to do, he eventually hopped a bus to Managua, and using a phony drivers license as identification began organizing sabotage cells on his own.

In an interview last year at the FDN's main base camp on Honduras' border with Nicaragua, he boasted of having left Managua with lists of some 500 5-person cells he had established.

But Sandinista security officials scoff at the claim. They say Aureliano's network was broken up with the arrest in 1984 of about 20 suspects, including Aureliano's brother, Manuel Rugama Suazo, and a priest, Luis Amado Pena. All were charged and convicted for planning acts of sabotage as FDN internal front members.

## 'Fish' is hooked

The key to breaking the case, Sandinista officials suggested at the time, was the arrest of Pedro Espinoza Sanchez, whom they described at a press conference on June 20, 1984, as the "chief of the general staff of the internal front." Today the contras are convinced that Espinoza, whom they called The Fish, was a Sandinista plant.

The Interior Ministry declined repeated requests to interview Espinoza.

But in a jail house interview with Colombian author Carlos Rincon and in court documents, Espinoza told how he joined the Honduras-based FDN in the Nicaraguan city of Matagalpa in 1982. He split off a few months later to join an urban rebel group organized by Jose Francisco Cardenal, who had left the FDN in a dispute over authority and money.

When Cardenal could not finance the urban group, Espinoza turned again to the FDN, shortly after Aureliano had arrived in Managua. Espinoza said that when Aureliano returned to Honduras, his urban rebel cells were placed under the command of Carlos Acevedo, a leader of an opposition labor union called the Nicaraguan Workers' Central (CTN).

Before long, Espinoza said, "internal conflicts" developed between himself and Acevedo. As a result, Espinoza said, he was beaten and tortured as an FDN "prisoner" in Honduras.

Fearing the contras would kill him, he had "a brilliant inspiration" and fled to the Nicaraguan Embassy in Tegucigalpa. Armed with a phony driver's license, Espinoza asked for amnesty. It was granted, and Espinoza was squired back to Managua by the economic attache of the Nicaraguan embassy in Tegucigalpa.

Espinoza said after lying low for two weeks, he resumed his contra activities. He made contact with a group that included Luis Amado Pena, a Catholic priest. Sabotage plans were drawn up, Espinoza said. Shortly before the plans were to be carried out, 10 Sandinista secret service agents showed up at his door, Espinoza said.

At the June 20 press conference,

Continued

2

Espinoza implicated Pena and leaders of the CTN, another opposition union and the opposition Democratic Conservative Party.

### A Sandinista plant?

Enrique Sotelo Borge, a Conservative Democratic Party leader and lawyer for some defendants in the case, said he is all but certain that Espinoza was an informant working for Sandinista state security.

Sotelo noted that after being sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment, Espinoza was mysteriously pardoned along with Pena. Pena's freedom had been sought by some members of the Nicaraguan Legislative Assembly, but no request had been filed on Espinoza's behalf, he and other opposition politicians said.

Opposition politicians and diplomats said that one of the government's key strategies has been to discredit figures in the mainstream Catholic church — the strongest political threat to the Sandinistas — and to dissuade and intimidate opposition activists most likely to consider ties with the contras.

Perhaps the clearest example of this came last October when Interior Minister Borge announced the arrest of five people implicated in an FDN plot to carry out terrorist bombings in the capital. Only days before, with opposition union, political party and Catholic Church political activity on the rise, President Ortega had reimposed sweeping restrictions on civil liberties to control "internal allies" of the contras. Borge in explaining the emergency decrees explained that a dangerous internal front could be "terrorist, political or ideological in nature."

At a January news conference, Sandinista state security officials said the five and 20 others were part of "a vast terrorist plan" called Plan Scorpion.

The key witness to the plot, Guillermo Aguilera Rodas, told the press conference that he had been recruited to reorganize the internal front by the labor leader Acevedo during a trip to Honduras.

Among those Aguilera said he had met with during the "organizational period" was Jose Altamirano, then the deputy general secretary of the CTN. Altamirano was among the 25 people eventually arrested for involvement in the cell.

But Aguilera later admitted in a jail house interview arranged by the Sandinistas that although he had approached Altamirano on recommendation from Acevedo, Altamirano had firmly refused to be involved.

In later interviews in Managua, Altamirano, 43, said that after he was arrested for involvement in the plot, Sandinista state security agents had ordered him to confess at the press conference to being a "contra leader . . . involved in Plan Scorpion." When he balked at doing so at the January press conference, Altamirano said state security officials told him he would be jailed "for 20 years minimum."

### Carter intervenes

He was released at the request of former U.S. President Jimmy Carter when Carter visited Nicaragua in February.

Costa Rica-based ARDE's most spectacular urban assault took place back in 1983 when it blew up an electrical substation. Two saboteurs were killed in the process.

In October 1983, ARDE rebels flubbed an attempt to burn down the Managua bull ring. They also tried to kill several Sandinista

comandantes with an incendiary bomb at a Managua youth celebration. But that caper failed too.

A Managua cell organized by Silvio Robelo, a cousin of Alfonso Robelo, then an ally of Eden Pastora and now a director of the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) coalition that governs most rebel affairs, was perhaps the most technically advanced of the urban-based rebel organizations.

Its tools included incendiary bombs, tape players and megaphones to broadcast recorded fire fights to panic busy neighborhoods, and a powerful FM transmitter that enabled them to break into government radio broadcasts with a taped Pastora speech, according to rebel sources and Nicaraguan news accounts.

Despite the elaborate gadgetry, six cell members were arrested in February 1983. State Security chief Lenin Cerna said the group was detected while practicing with the FM transmitter just down the road from the Interior Ministry.

ARDE officials said they are convinced that Sandinista agents had infiltrated the group.

Two former ARDE officials who were involved in the urban front blamed their CIA patrons for their cell's ineffectiveness.

"They insisted on maintaining a line of command to the outside and on knowing all the names," one of rebels said. "In a police state like Nicaragua, it just won't work."

"We did beautiful things against Somoza," another ARDE official said, fondly recalling his days as a Sandinista guerrilla. "I could carry a bomb around like it was a lunch bag."

But today, the people who govern Nicaragua are more vigilant, perhaps because they have seen an insurgency from both sides.

Said the ARDE official: "Everything the Sandinistas did they know can be repeated."