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Latin Focus

Despite Fears of U.S., Soviet Aid to Nicaragua Appears to Be Limited

White House Still Will Push To Aid Contras to Lessen Risk of Region Revolution

Managua Shuns Puppet Role

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Staff Reporters of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

MANAGUA, Nicaragua — The Soviet bloc is much in evidence here, but the Reagan administration's talk of a descending Iron Curtain seems overdrawn.

Sandinista soldiers wielding Soviet-made AK-47 rifles travel in East German trucks and are coached by Cuban advisers. Postage stamps honor the Soviet space program, and supermarkets sell cans of Bulgarian rabbit and Polish pate. The recent death of Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko was observed with a period of official mourning.

Despite the clear Soviet presence, most signs indicate Moscow is moving cautiously in Nicaragua. The Soviets are already bogged down with a military standoff in Afghanistan, unrest in Poland and economic problems at home. The last thing they want, many analysts believe, is to see Nicaragua become another distant burden like Cuba. And while nearly everyone agrees the ruling Sandinistas are committed Marxists, they don't seem to be "eager puppets" of Moscow or a serious military threat to neighboring countries, as President Reagan claims.

Old Hardware

According to U.S. estimates, the Soviet bloc supplied some $250 million in military aid to Nicaragua last year. That is double the figure for 1983 but only a small fraction of the estimated $4 billion in annual Soviet subsidies received by Cuba. The Soviet bloc also provides Nicaragua with a smaller amount of economic aid, but that figure has declined in recent years.

Most of the Sandinistas' military hardware is relatively old, and Moscow has repeatedly turned down their requests for advanced jet fighters. Also, Sergio Ramirez, Nicaragua's vice president, says that the Soviets haven't obligated themselves to defend Nicaragua in the event of a U.S. invasion. "There is no treaty of mutual defense," he says.

"In revolutionary circles, Moscow wants to be seen to have done everything to ensure (the Nicaraguan regime's) ability to survive and defend itself, but the bottom line, that the regime must ultimately defend itself, is explicit," writes C. G. Jacobsen, the University of Miami's director of Soviet studies, in a June 1984 report commissioned by the State Department.

If the Soviets don't feel unduly committed to the Sandinistas, the reverse also appears to be true. Although Soviet aid has been a boon to the Nicaraguan regime, which is struggling with a collapsing economy and a guerrilla war, it hasn't been enough to make Managua a slave to Moscow, according to many independent observers in Nicaragua.

No Mortgage

"Nobody is running this thing except the Sandinistas," says a senior Western diplomat in Managua. The Sandinistas, he states, aren't letting their Cuban advisers control the ministries, and "they aren't mortgaging the revolution."

The Reagan administration, of course, thinks the Sandinistas are doing just that and more. The specter of Nicaraguan aggression in Central America—financed by the Soviet Union—has become the keystone of the administration's uphill campaign to persuade Congress to resume aid to the "contra" guerrillas who are trying to overthrow the Sandinista regime.

The effort to persuade Congress to give the contras $14 million in aid is expected to receive major attention from the White House in the weeks ahead. President Reagan, in his weekly radio broadcast last Saturday, said that failure to approve the aid would send the signal that the U.S. was "incapable of stopping Communist aggression in our own backyard."

Most people agree the Sandinistas would welcome regional revolution. They have, for instance, given aid to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador although the amount is a matter of debate. Still, many experts maintain the Nicaraguan arms buildup is primarily a defensive move—a reaction, among other things, to increased activity by the contras.

Secret Visit

A classified U.S. intelligence report prepared late last year reaches the same conclusion. The report, a copy of which was reviewed by this newspaper, states that "the overall buildup is primarily defense-oriented, and much of the recent effort has been devoted to improving counter insurgency capabilities."

Soviet military involvement in Nicaragua began in August 1979 when four Soviet generals secretly visited Managua only weeks after the revolution that brought the Sandinistas to power. Shipments of East German military trucks and Soviet small arms began around that time. Most of the equipment has been Warsaw Pact hand-me-downs that are technologically obsolete, but last fall the Soviets are said to have delivered between five and 12 MI-24 Hind helicopter gunships. The helicopters are sophisticated anti-insurgency aircraft that the Soviets have been using against guerrillas in Afghanistan.

The Soviet bloc, principally Cuba, has also sent advisers. U.S. estimates put the number of Cuban advisers as high as 10,000, of whom as many as 3,000 are believed to be working with the Nicaraguan army. The others are believed to be civilians such as physicians and teachers and engineers.

The Sandinista regime claims there are only about 1,500 Cuban advisers in Nicaragua, but most independent observers agree that Cubans are a significant presence in both the military and the Interior Ministry, the government's police arm. Hugo Torres, the Sandinista army's top political officer, doesn't apologize for the presence of Soviet-bloc advisers. "We had to begin from zero," he says. "Somebody has to train us to use a tank. That doesn't fall from the sky."

Since 1979, military aid to the Sandinistas from the Soviet bloc has totaled over $500 million. And some analysts are worried that the burgeoning Communist presence could eventually pose problems for the United States. (U.S. aid to the contras totaled about $80 million when Congress stopped further assistance last June after disclosures that the Central Intelligence Agency had been involved in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors.)

Should the Soviets ever supply the Sandinistas with modern jet fighters, for instance, they could be used to intimidate neighboring Honduras and Costa Rica and support insurgencies. One of the more disturbing developments in Nicaragua is the construction of several airstrips that could handle any warplane in the Soviet inventory. (The Sandinistas say they need the airstrips for economic reasons.)

Nicaragua's neighbors are clearly concerned. Isidro Tapia, Honduras's ambassador to Nicaragua, says the Cuban and Soviet involvement there "undoubtedly means a threat to all Central American nations, especially in military terms."

The Reagan administration agrees. During recent congressional testimony, Secretary of State George Shultz, referring

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to Nicaragua, said, "We see a government that is being armed by the Soviet Union, developing an army—including reserves—that far exceeds anything remotely needed for defense in Central America." Administration officials also dispute the Sandinistas' independence from the Soviet bloc. The Cuban advisers "have the final word on most things" in Managua, says a U.S. official who is a chief architect of the president's Central American policy.

Such rhetoric, however, seems designed mainly to inflame the public debate and influence Congress. The classified U.S. intelligence report prepared late last year contradicts Secretary Shultz. And figures in the report suggest the increase in Soviet aid to Nicaragua may have been prompted by the escalation of the CIA-backed contra war.

Soviet military aid to the Sandinistas began as a $5 million trickle in 1979 and rose slightly to $7 million in 1980, according to the report. In 1981, when Congress authorized covert support of the contras, Soviet-bloc aid soared to $45 million. The amount of Soviet aid and the intensity of the contra war increased sharply in succeeding years.

Guerrilla Tactics

Nicaragua currently has about 60,000 soldiers on active duty. That's far more than its neighbors, but those soldiers have to deal with an estimated 15,000 contras whose guerrilla tactics have successfully compensated for their smaller numbers. (Nicaragua also has another 60,000 militiamen and reservists, but they are considerably less well-equipped.)

Nicaragua's air force, according to the U.S. intelligence report, is "one of the smallest and least capable in the region." Lacking air support, the Nicaraguan army would probably find it difficult to launch an attack against Honduras or Costa Rica. Several U.S. military experts note, for instance, that if Nicaragua's T-54 and T-55 tanks began a push north on the one usable road to Honduras, they would be easily picked off by the vastly superior Honduran air force.

Based on a visit to Nicaragua in February, Lt. Col. Edward King, a retired U.S. army officer and critic of Reagan administration Central American policy, dismisses the Sandinista threat. "With its well-worn Warsaw Pact castoffs, (Nicaragua) isn't capable of launching an offensive anywhere in Central America," Lt. Col. King says.

Economic Aid

On the nonmilitary front, Soviet aid to Managua has actually been declining even though the country is in dire need of such help. Shortages have led to food rationing, and the country's currency has virtually collapsed. Damage to export crops like coffee and cotton caused by the contra war has severely reduced the supply of foreign exchange to pay for needed imports.

Economic aid from the Soviet bloc peaked in 1982 at about $253 million, according to the Sandinista government. It totaled about $146 million in each of the last two years. Sandinista figures are generally considered accurate by the University of Miami's Prof. Jacobsen. The Soviet bloc is playing a bigger role in Nicaraguan trade, but the U.S. is still Managua's biggest trading partner. Last year, U.S. goods accounted for about 20% of Nicaragua's imports, and Americans purchased a similar percentage of the country's exports. (The U.S. share is falling rapidly, however.)

The Soviet bloc has also sent civilian advisers to help some sectors of the Nicaraguan economy. The Soviets are advising the fishing industry, for instance. Bulgarian agronomists are sharing information on raising tobacco and hope to eventually blend their varieties with Nicaraguan strains.

Friendship Hospital

Soviet economic aid is winning friends and influence in Nicaragua. In the foyer of the Soviet Friendship-Hospital in Chinandega, a display of World War II battlefield scenes depicts "The 40th Anniversary of the Soviet Union's Defeat of Fascism." Down the hall, Carlos Ramirez, a 24-year-old corn farmer, is recovering from a slipped disk. "I used to work for Americans and didn't know anything about the Soviet Union," he says. "Now I know Soviets are calm people who treat people well and equally."

Sandinistas still complain that the Soviet economic aid is insufficient. Cesar Arostegui, Nicaragua's vice minister of external cooperation, says Nicaragua needs another $500 million in annual aid to pay the interest on its foreign debt and to meet domestic needs. "It's very difficult for the Soviet Union or any other country of the Socialist community to give us $100 million at one shot," he says.

Some Soviet experts in the U.S. put the problem differently. Moscow doesn't want to take on another burden like Cuba, and it isn't in a position to force the Nicaraguans to do its bidding, says Cole Blasier, a University of Pittsburgh political scientist who specializes in the Soviet role in Latin America. "So there are real limits," he says, to what the Soviets "will do economically or militarily" for the Sandinistas.

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