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Nicaragua Arms Called Peril to Area

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 2 — The Reagan Administration is portraying Nicaragua as a serious threat to Central America because of a military buildup directed by Cuba and the Soviet Union.

A senior official, quoting intelligence reports, told reporters today that Nicaragua was "on the verge of becoming a superpower in Central American terms." The official also said that Nicaragua was fostering left-wing insurgencies in Honduras and Guatemala as well as El Salvador. Like other Administration officials and military analysts interviewed on the subject, the official spoke on condition that he not be identified.

Other Administration officials said that President Reagan was considering the question of whether to order United States military forces to combat the threat or to rely on a variety of other means ranging from diplomacy to covert action.

Administration Is Divided

The Administration, officials acknowledged, is divided along lines that reflect an unusual reversal of roles. Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr., supported by the White House counselor, Edwin Meese 3d, has become the leading advocate of using force, the officials said.

But Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger, with strong support from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has argued against using military force because it might lead to a protracted involvement like that in Vietnam. The military leaders fear that the American public would not support military action and might turn against the Administration's plans to modernize the armed forces.

According to an assessment widely shared by military and intelligence analysts, Nicaragua has expanded its military manpower and received a steady flow of military equipment from the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies through Cuba.

Long-Term Threat Is Seen

The objective, the analysts said, is to make Nicaragua, led by the left-wing Sandinist Government, the dominant power in Central America. Some analysts said that the military buildup might constitute a long-term threat to Mexican oilfields to the north and to the Panama Canal to the south.

The buildup, the analysts said, has been made possible by the greatest shipment of weapons and equipment from the Soviet Union to Cuba since the missile crisis of 1962. They said that about 56,000 tons of military supplies had arrived in Cuba since the first of the year, including shipments from Eastern Europe.

Much of the most modern Soviet equipment, they said, has remained in Cuba. But these new supplies, they said, have permitted Prime Minister Fidel Castro's Government to ship large quantities of older weapons and equipment to Nicaragua.

The Reagan Administration is most concerned, the senior official said, by the prospect of Nicaragua acquiring MIG-17 and MIG-21 Soviet jet fighters from Cuba. He said that Cuba had recently received 17 later models of the MIG-21, thus making the older planes available to Nicaragua.

Other officials said they expected Nicaraguan pilots now in training in Bulgaria or other Eastern European nations to return to Cuba, pick up the fighter planes and fly them to Nicaragua. The senior official said that was expected next spring.

The officials said they had aerial pictures of at least three airfield runways being lengthened to accommodate high-performance jet aircraft. In addition, they said, the Nicaraguans have received antiaircraft guns and small surface-to-air missiles from the Soviet Union to protect the airfields.

In addition, military analysts said, Nicaragua has a military assistance agreement with Vietnam under which Hanoi has evidently promised to send to Nicaragua 1,000 United States helicopters, transports and light fighter planes seized after the Vietnam War.

Doubts on Ability Expressed

But some analysts expressed serious doubts about whether Nicaragua would be able to strike deep into neighboring countries, largely because it does not have the trained men to fly or to maintain the aircraft, weapons and sophisticated radar and communications equipment.

Some officials were also dubious about the ability of the Vietnamese to furnish the 1,000 aircraft they pledged to Nicaragua and about the condition of those planes. They questioned whether they would be able to fly and whether Nicaragua could absorb all or even a large part of them.

On the other hand, other Central American nations are so lightly armed that a few MIG's might be a formidable force. The senior official meeting with reporters said that those MIG's would tip the balance against Honduras, for instance.

In addition to weapons, the Soviet Union and its allies have provided large numbers of military advisers to Nicaragua. The senior official said that the capital, Managua, "has become an international center with East Germans there, Bulgarians there, North Koreans there, Soviets there, Cubans there, and even the P.L.O.," or Palestine Liberation Organization.

Other officials said that 4,000 to 6,000 Cubans were in Nicaragua, 500 to 600 having arrived in the last few weeks. They were said to be training the Nicaraguan Army while East Germans were supervising the training of internal security forces.

The Nicaraguan Army, the officials said, has grown from about 7,000 men when the new government came to power two and a half years ago to about 80,000 today, a mixture of regular forces and militia. They said the objective seemed to be a regular force of 50,000 and a militia of 200,000.

The analysts said that seven military headquarters had been spotted around the country. Some were patterned closely after Soviet military posts, with barracks, workshops, supply depots and athletic fields laid out in the Soviet fashion.

The Nicaraguan Army has about 25 older Soviet tanks, the officials said, shipped from Cuba and replaced there by newer Soviet models. They said the tanks appeared to be intended to maintain control over a restless population since they would not be effective in the Central American jungle.

Nicaragua has also received antitank weapons, howitzers, medium and heavy mortars, automatic rifles and trucks. The analysts said they expected Nicaragua to receive armored reconnaissance vehicles, armored personnel carriers, more artillery and more trucks in the future.

Most of the shipments from Cuba, they said, have been unloaded at the ports of Puerto Cabezas, on the northeast coast of Nicaragua, and Bluefields, on the southeast coast. Small shipments have also gone in by air, they said.

Some of the small arms coming from Cuba have been passed on to guerrilla forces in El Salvador, the officials said. They have identified at least five overland routes to El Salvador, they said, plus sea and air routes.

A new tactic for shipping arms into El Salvador, they said, was for helicopters to take off during daylight in Nicaragua and to time their arrivals in El Salvador for dusk. They would then be unloaded and take off under cover of darkness to return to Nicaragua.