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Nicaragua Said to Seek More Soviet Helicopters

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua, April 6 — Nicaragua is negotiating with the Soviet Union to obtain new helicopters in anticipation of increasing warfare, according to Western intelligence reports.

Diplomats and military specialists said the Russians are likely to send Nicaragua 10 to 20 MI-17 helicopters in the coming months.

It would be at least the third shipment of helicopters that Nicaragua has received. The first arrived early in 1985 and a second last May and June. According to Pentagon officials, still another shipment arrived last October.

The helicopters include both MI-17's and MI-24 gunships. Although not as devastating as the MI-24, the MI-17 is considered highly effective and can carry up to 32 men at speeds of over 150 miles per hour.

According to military and diplomatic sources in Managua, the Sandinistas have a total of 40 to 50 helicopters, most of them MI-17's. Pentagon officials have put the number at 57.

Talks in Moscow Reported

Negotiations over the new helicopters, which are said to be taking place in Moscow, come as more than 10,000 United States-backed rebels are believed to have infiltrated into Nicaragua from bases in Honduras.

The rebels, known as contras, are regularly receiving supplies by clandestine airdrops overseen by the Central Intelligence Agency.

Helicopters are a vital part of the Sandinista Government's strategy to blunt the growing contra drive.

The arrival of new helicopters would further tilt the military balance in favor of the Government, but could cause some political difficulty.

"In Washington, this will be held up as proof of the incurable militarism of the Sandinistas," a European diplomat said. "Nicaragua's neighbors in Central America will love it. They will say it proves their point."

President Daniel Ortega Saavedra said Friday that the Nicaraguan conflict was entering "a truly dramatic and decisive moment." He said he feared President Reagan might try to use Nicaragua as a place to win a new political and military victory.

"He would be able to say to the American people, 'We wiped out the Sandinista Government and installed a democratic government,' and people would applaud," Mr. Ortega told a group of visiting Americans.

Mr. Ortega's office did not respond to inquiries about the reported negotiations in Moscow, nor did the Defense Ministry. The Government normally does not comment on military acquisitions.

As the Sandinista air force takes an ever-increasing role in the fighting, the

Government last month installed a new air force commander. He is Lieut. Col. Javier Pichardo Ramirez, formerly military chief in the western provinces of Leon and Chinandega.

According to diplomats, rebels now inside Nicaragua include sappers trained in the United States to attack targets that could include helicopters on the ground. The Sandinista army has formed a new unit with the specific mission of protecting parked helicopters.

Rebels Setting Ambushes

The contras are also making special efforts to shoot down helicopters while they are flying. Military specialists say contra teams with anti-aircraft weapons are setting ambushes along flight paths normally used by Government helicopters.

"The copters provide an immense superiority in firepower and are the most versatile weapon the army has," a military officer said. "Aerial patrols have been reduced out of fear of anti-aircraft guns, but the copters are still the key to the overall military strategy."

Sandinista helicopters can bring heavy fire to bear on contra units and can move men and equipment quickly to battle zones. But they are not equipped to intercept clandestine supply missions flown for the contras in close collaboration with American advisers.

On radar screens, Sandinista soldiers can spot many of the unmarked cargo planes that penetrate Nicaraguan airspace under cover of darkness to drop food, ammunition and money to groups of contras. But they often cannot respond, since Nicaragua has no fighter planes.

U.S. Warning on Planes

The Sandinistas have tried to obtain jet fighters from the Soviet Union and other countries, but have found no one willing to provide them. The United States has warned that it will destroy such fighters on the ground if Nicaragua ever receives them.

Diplomats who monitor the contras said planes were now dropping supplies to them three or four times a week. They said the flights originate from the Palmerola military air base in Honduras and from a secret installation in the Swan Islands off Honduras.

In recent weeks, contra demolition units have begun blowing up electric power lines in Nicaragua, and targets such as bridges and police stations are expected to be attacked in the coming months. But it is widely agreed that helicopters would be the most spectacular targets to destroy.

"The contras will be going on the offensive against the copters," a diplomat said. "They are not just going to sit and wait for them."