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Fighting Expands in North Nicaragua

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ABISINIA, Nicaragua, Jan. 6 — Just as Lorenzo Herrera Blandón had expected, the war in northern Nicaragua has begun to intensify.

Mr. Blandón, a draftee in the Sandinista Army whose unit was passing through this area today, said he and his comrades have seen more combat in the last two weeks than in the six months before that.

"It looks like the contras are trying to move a big force," he said, referring to rebels backed by the United States. "They're getting into the country."

According to American intelligence reports cited last week by Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, 2,000 contras have recently crossed into Nicaragua from their bases in Honduras. Their infiltration is the first step in what military officers and diplomats in Managua believe could become the largest contra offensive of the five-year-old war.

U.S. Supplies Reach Contras

Supplies bought with American aid have reached the contra forces, and the first contras trained in the United States have returned to Central America, according to diplomats and others who closely follow the conflict.

These factors, together with the contras' desire to make visible progress in the field to impress their backers in Washington and elsewhere, suggest that the coming months will be filled with violence.

As the contras slipped from Honduras into Nicaragua, some moved south through the rugged terrain that surrounds Abisinia, which is 35 miles from the border. Large numbers of Government troops have been deployed in the area to find and engage them.

"On Sunday, there was fighting for three hours," said Herminia López González, who lives in a small shack a few miles south of here. "The mortars were making a tremendous noise."

While soldiers exchange gunfire, civilians have altered their patterns of life out of fear of another weapon, the land mine. Officials with access to Western intelligence reports said the contras were planting mines on roads used by army trucks to hinder troop movements. Contra leaders have denied their troops use mines.

"Now you only leave town if it's an emergency," said Efigenia Castro as she looked up from baking bread in her hut in the village of Pueblo Nuevo. Last year at this time, Mrs. Castro was on the road every day, carrying food to coffee pickers working in nearby fields. This year, frightened by the prospect of running over a mine, she decided not to travel and joined a local bakers' cooperative instead.

Since Christmas, at least two mines have blown up near here. One of the explosions, on Dec. 26, caused no fatalities because, according to nearby resi-

dents, the mine was triggered by the rear wheel of a truck. At the site today, glass fragments and chunks of tire still lay on both sides of the road.

The other explosion, on Jan. 3, came not on a public road, but on a path inside the Government-owned La Sorpresa coffee plantation. Two of the seven passengers aboard a military truck, both of them soldiers, were killed as they were doing the job Mrs. Castro now refuses to do, bringing food to the pickers.

A third victim, Carlos Pérez, 20 years old, is recovering from shrapnel wounds and serious bruises in an unlit room with a dirt floor here. He said that he had been in the army for almost seven years, but that following his injuries he was told he would now be discharged.

'A Cowardly Tactic'

"I was thrown from the truck and lost consciousness, so I don't remember anything," Mr. Pérez said. "It's a cowardly tactic."

Dr. Maj Stormogipson, an American physician who last week completed 22 months of work at a hospital in Jinotega where mine victims have been treated, said fear of such explosions had "decreased the mobility" of people in this area.

"The mining is something new that began last year," she said. "The uncertainty of not knowing if the danger is there or not is deeper and more terrifying than ambushes or attacks. People think that if they come face to face with the contras, they might be able to out-manuever them or talk their way out, but you have no chance if you're caught in an explosion."

Though the danger has reduced the traffic, a number of jeeps and pickup trucks laden with goods or passengers were traveling this week on the dirt roads that wind through the mist-shrouded mountains here.

"People don't go out if they don't have to, but I have to," said Aristides Pineda, who travels to Jinotega once a week to pick up supplies for the privately owned La Pita coffee farm, where he is an overseer.

Coffee Harvest at Peak

The harvest of coffee beans, Nicaragua's principal source of export income, is now at its peak. Pickers include local peasants who have been doing this work for years, and also "brigadistas" who have been sent from their schools or Government jobs to assure that the red beans are picked before they spoil.

Until the mine explosion at La Sorpresa, the harvest had been calm, several pickers said. As they worked, soldiers armed with automatic weapons stood guard.

"It's going great," said one soldier, Francisco Ruiz Salgado, who was posted at the La Colonia plantation. "People are afraid after the mine explosion, but they're still working."

Although contras have succeeded in making the coffee harvest more dangerous, they have not systematically tried to disrupt it. According to diplomats and other foreign experts, their principal goal is not to fight here, but to move toward the interior and link up with units in the central part of the country.

Neutral diplomats in Managua estimate that the contra forces total between 10,000 and 12,000 men, as many as half of whom may now be inside Nicaragua.

The Sandinista Army is determined to prevent more contras from moving into Nicaragua and has blocked some traditional infiltration routes. But some contra units have apparently succeeded in entering at other points.

"The terrain around here favors irregular warfare," a soldier on patrol said. "You just can't station a man every 100 meters for the length of the border."

Weeks of Fighting on Border

The beginning of contra reinfiltration into Nicaragua comes after several weeks of fighting along the border. Nicaraguan forces crossed into Honduras in search of contra bases, and Honduran planes hit two targets in Nicaragua in retaliation.

Sandinista leaders deny that their troops entered Honduras, but a soldier guarding the Sandinista headquarters in Abisinia today said he had returned to Nicaragua on Dec. 24 after three weeks in Honduran territory. He said his squad had engaged mixed groups of contra and Honduran soldiers in a total of eight firefights. The Honduran authorities deny that their soldiers mix with the contras.

The soldier, Pablo Antonio Solano Cuadra, said he had been fighting in the area of Las Vegas and El Paraiso, where contras maintain bases. Asked to detail where he had fought, he rattled off the names of half a dozen Honduran hamlets in the same area.

In a speech two weeks ago, President Daniel Ortega Saavedra described the Nicaraguan conflict as a case of United States aggression. He said the Sandinista slogan for 1987 would be, "No one surrenders here."