

31 March 1986

REFORM THE CONTRAS

BY ROBERT LEIKEN

CONGRESS FACES AN excruciating dilemma in its vote on aid to the Nicaraguan rebels. Should it approve President Reagan's proposal for military aid and underwrite a mainly reactionary leadership unable to gain the full support of the Nicaraguan or the American people? Or should it vote down military aid and face the inevitable consequences—both for Nicaragua and eventually for Central America, Mexico, and the United States—of a consolidated, Soviet-backed expansionist Sandinista regime?

In recent weeks the Sandinistas have launched a major diplomatic and public relations campaign aimed at convincing the world that they are David fighting the U.S. Goliath, and that they will be responsive and fair to their people just as soon as the gringo guns are lowered. But few are still naive enough to believe Sandinista promises.

On October 15 President Daniel Ortega announced "emergency measures" that virtually suspended all civil liberties, including the rights of speech, assembly, personal security, freedom of the press, movement, to form labor organizations, and to strike. Ortega blamed "U.S. imperialism" and rebel "sabotage and political destabilization" for the new crackdown. The real target of this latest crackdown is Nicaragua's political opposition, independent press, labor unions, and above all, its religious organizations.

From February 8 to 15, I participated as an observer on a mission to Nicaragua of the International League for Human Rights. There was overwhelming evidence of an intensifying campaign of intimidation, harassment, and coercion. According to Monsignor Bosco Vivas, auxiliary bishop of Managua, more than 100 Catholic lay and religious workers and 50 priests have been detained and interrogated since October. Evangelical ministers and lay workers have been subjected to the same treatment. The Sandinistas have prohibited open-air Masses, shut down the Catholic radio station, suppressed its newspaper, confiscated its printing press, seized its social welfare office, prevented the establishment of a human rights office, illegally drafted seminarians into military service, and imprisoned and deported priests.

Opposition political parties and labor unions have also been singled out. Two Social Christian Party activists were brutally murdered in November. The International League for Human Rights has a list of 57 members of PLI (Independent Liberal Party) from Condega in Esteli province

Robert Leiken is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

who are under detention. The Sandinista attacks and intimidation have focused on less visible opposition activists in outlying provinces. But the campaign has been sweeping—virtually all political parties have felt its effect, including not only the right wing and the center, but also the Communists, Socialists, Social Christians, and Social Democratic parties. In response, a broad civil anti-Sandinista front is slowly emerging. The once-enormous popular support for the Sandinistas has virtually vanished, and their power now depends on a military and security apparatus built by Moscow and Havana.

After talking to many professionals, and to union, party, and religious leaders and activists, it was clear that there is a major Sandinista effort to infiltrate opposition groups and to coerce members into collaborating with Sandinista-created "internal fronts" of the FDN (Nicaraguan Democratic Force). Later these activists are pressured to denounce fellow members as FDN agents to justify repression against their organizations.

We also talked to scores of political prisoners and their families. The International League for Human Rights estimates that there are now between 3,500 and 7,000 political prisoners in Nicaragua, not including the 2,500 National Guardsmen. It is impossible to be more precise because of the secrecy of Nicaragua's prisons and its state security system, which controls the clandestine state security prisons. Political prisoners are subject to solitary confinement in subterranean cells without sanitation facilities. They are denied food and water for as long as four days at a time. We heard of cases of simulated executions, threats to family members of prisoners, including their pregnant wives, and a gamut of psychological torments known in Nicaragua as "white torture." We also spoke to individuals who had suffered physical torture.

In the remote Indian communities of the Atlantic coast, Sandinista repression is less discreet. The Sandinistas are waging an air war involving bombing and strafing of villages and noncombatants. On February 8, 1986, *New York Times* correspondent Steven Kinzer described "craters made by rockets and 500-pound bombs" dropped by government planes on Indian villages while pursuing Miskito leader Brooklyn Rivera. Rivera succeeded in escaping through the remarkable cooperative efforts of Miskito villagers. Rivera's Misurasata group receives no support of any kind from the U.S. government. In fact, the U.S.-backed FDN (with U.S. government and Honduran government compliance) has prevented Rivera from entering Honduras to meet with Indian refugees and leaders there.

Continued

Misurasata had met several times with the Sandinista government in an effort to reach a peaceful settlement recognizing Indian rights. Despite their promises of peace and reconciliation, Sandinista troops carried out this recent search-and-destroy operation with the full knowledge of the government in Managua.

Leaders of Nicaragua's internal civilian opposition believe that the Sandinistas are out to destroy them, and that the rebels are at the very least a necessary evil. One left-of-center leader told me that if there is any chance for negotiations now with the Sandinistas, the U.S. would be "foolish" to remove the one instrument of pressure that has a real effect on the Sandinistas: the armed resistance.

THE PROBLEM confronting Congress and the American people is with the "instrument of pressure" designed to moderate or to remove the Sandinistas. The Nicaraguan armed opposition has been divided into as many as six different groups, with varying ideological orientations, political bases, and military potential. The United States has by and large supported the FDN, formally under the umbrella organization UNO, United Nicaraguan Opposition.

The FDN was created by Argentine military and security agents and by the CIA. Strong ties of loyalty, or fealty, have developed between CIA officials, acting as imperial patrons, and their colonial adjutants in the FDN. Most of the FDN High Command was drawn from the National Guard. These officers are intensely loyal to Commander in Chief Enrique Bermudez, and have the allegiance of some of the field commanders. However, Bermudez—along with Aldofo Calero, who was installed as the political leader of the FDN by the CIA, and Aristides Sanchez, a former landowner—forms part of a cabal closely linked to a shadowy network of expropriated landowners, businessmen, former associates of Somoza, and U.S. right-wing donors. These exiles influence the FDN leadership through family ties or as former or current employers.

These leaders have been reluctant to unite with the other resistance organizations and are in turn distrusted by them. They have resisted efforts to democratize the FDN and UNO apparatus, and thus have often stood in the way of the effort to create a unified, democratic national resistance to the Sandinistas. Above all, the struggle in Nicaragua is a national struggle, yet to date it has been led by a small ideological sector of pre-revolutionary Nicaragua.

This is true even though the popular base of the resistance has grown enormously. There are some 20,000 armed insurgents in a Nicaraguan population of three million, of which the FDN makes up some 12,000. The FDN claims that 40 percent of its troops are former Sandinista soldiers and fewer than two percent are former National Guardsmen. Among the rebel groups there is much unhappiness with the current CIA-imposed leadership. Commandantes in the field often share their troops' resentment of the FDN's leadership. A former associate of rebel leader Eden Pastora has described these field commanders as "a mixed bag of Zapatas and Pancho Villas" type

troops' peasant revolutionaries and rebel brigands.

Recently the FDN has suffered serious military reverses. These have been due to the intensive Soviet-Cuban training of the Sandinista forces, to their acquisition of Soviet helicopters, and to the introduction of Soviet heavy artillery. The FDN troops are poorly trained and suffer from a lack not only of equipment but of combat officers. The ratio of officers to troops is about one to 200. This means that the FDN cannot break down into small units in the face of Sandinista bombardments and artillery, and it has lacked the trained organizers necessary to create a political and military infrastructure.

Nonetheless, the FDN receives information and aid from local residents and is enjoying substantial and growing support among Nicaragua's small farmers and campesinos. FDN fighters are peasants with deep economic, political, and ideological grievances against the regime. They have maintained high morale despite a lack of military equipment and training—and sometimes boots and food. The FDN, in short, is a movement with a peasant base, populist middle-echelon officers, and a mostly reactionary leadership imposed and maintained by the United States.

The most important groups outside of UNO are BOS (Southern Opposition Bloc), led by Alfredo Cesar and Eden Pastora, and Misurasata. The political tendencies of these groups is social democratic. They have also enjoyed strong local support and fight on without U.S. funding. Only the unity of all anti-Sandinista forces and the establishment of strong southern and Atlantic coast fronts will turn the armed resistance into a militarily viable enterprise.

The disunity of Nicaraguan resistance forces and their failure to develop a democratic leadership have helped to isolate internationally our Central American policy. The administration's own policy and rhetoric have contributed to this isolation. The national and democratic character of the Nicaraguan civilian and armed struggle has often been drowned in a torrent of administration invective that has conveyed both impotent rage and hegemonic presumption. This rhetoric buttresses those among the Nicaraguan civilian and armed resistance who prefer to wait passively for an imagined U.S. invasion. And it has offended the dignity of Latin American governments, which are sensitive to U.S. bullying and mired in debt to U.S. banks.

* * * * *