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Contras Debate How to Widen Group's Appeal

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MIAMI, May 22 — Top Nicaraguan rebel leaders are debating how to broaden their political appeal in light of a widespread perception that their movement is dominated by those loyal to the deposed dictator, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, according to several rebel and Congressional sources.

The issue, on which the rebels are deeply divided, is said to be a focus of talks that began here a week ago. Also under discussion at the talks, which are sponsored by the Reagan Administration, is the question of how to insure civilian control of guerrilla military units, the sources said.

'Patently Misleading'

They said the debate among rebel officials had been spurred in part by the perception that the main rebel army, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, represents only the most politically conservative sector of Nicaraguan society and is dominated by former soldiers of Somoza's National Guard.

Apparently in an effort to enhance the standing of the rebels, the State Department recently made public a report contending that most rebel officials are not former National Guardsmen, who are sometimes described by critics as Somocistas for their ties to the defeated dictatorship and their conservative political views. The report

was made public on Feb. 28.

"To continue to associate Nicaragua's resistance forces with Somoza is patently misleading," Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams says in a note that serves as the introduction to the report.

But critics of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, both inside and outside of the rebel movement, disagree. They say that the rebel army is still managed by a small group of officials who are far more politically conservative than most Nicaraguans and that several of these were either members of the National Guard or had close ties with the Somoza regime.

'The Style of Somoza'

"The problem is that the leaders of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force seem to have a very narrow political and ideological perception of what happened in Nicaragua," said Robert Leiken, a senior associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace who monitors the rebel movement and who is a critic of the rebel army's leaders. "They are concerned with recovering the land and property they lost. The politics they practice is the style of Somoza — relying on cliques rather than institutions."

Such concerns have divided the three leaders of the United Nicaraguan Opposition, which was set up 11 months ago in an effort to broaden the appeal of the rebel movement and as a conduit for United States aid. Two of the leaders, Arturo José Cruz and Alfonso Robelo, are demanding greater civilian control of the rebel army. They are reportedly being resisted by the third, Adolfo Calero, who is also the political head of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force.

In an interview, Mr. Calero dismissed criticisms of the rebel army leadership as "political accusations."

In its report, which was made public on Feb. 28, the State Department says that only 41 of 153 senior officials in the Nicaraguan Democratic Force are former members of the National Guard. The rest are civilians or former Sandinistas, it contends, adding that the vast majority of rebel foot soldiers are peasants angered with the Sandinistas. The report also contends that the rebel forces are growing and now total about 20,000 men.

Report Called Misleading

Several rebel sources, as well as Congressional critics of the rebel movement, charge that the State Department report is highly misleading. They say that by focusing on statistics it fails to examine or reveal the way power is actually exercised in the rebel army. The report also neglects to say that the rebel army was formed from the remnants of the National Guard by the Central Intelligence Agency, which then helped select the top leaders.

"They can use the numbers to prove whatever they want," said a rebel official critical of Mr. Calero. "But the fact is that a handful of people around Calero make most of the decisions and the top commanders are National Guardsmen."

That view is supported by several visits to rebel camps by reporters over the last three years and by a careful reading of the State Department study.

According to the report, the 41 former National Guardsmen in the rebel command structure hold most of the key positions. The five most important military officials — the supreme commander, Col. Enrique Bermúdez, and the heads of operations, logistics, intelligence and personnel — were all former members of the National Guard until six months ago when, the report says, one was replaced by a nonmember, a shift that could not be confirmed.

In addition, the report says, the heads of counterintelligence, air intelligence, the rebel air force, medical service and naval force are also former National Guardsmen.

Directorate Lacks Power

Many lower-level combat commanders and service personnel are not former National Guardsmen, according to the report, and a few senior combat commanders are either former Sandinista supporters or civilians.

But most of the officers commanding the largest and most important rebel units are former National Guardsmen, according to the report, which in its analysis treats all commanders as statistical equals, regardless of the power they exercise.

Although the rebel army has a C.I.A.-selected civilian directorate, that body has remained powerless, according to several rebel and American officials. Instead, Mr. Calero rules through a handful of followers, most of whom are related to him, the same sources said.

The key group includes Mr. Calero's brother, Mario Calero; Mr. Calero's brother-in-law, Enrique Sánchez, and Mr. Sánchez's brother, Aristides Sánchez, as well as Colonel Bermúdez. These are all viewed as extreme political conservatives in the Nicaraguan context who seek the military destruction of the Sandinistas. According to several rebel and American sources, they were originally approved as rebel leaders by the C.I.A., which financed them.

Brothers' Role Barely Noted

Mr. Calero, the former manager of the Coca-Cola bottling plant in Nicaragua, was a longtime conservative opponent of the Somoza dictatorship. But he also maintained close ties to the C.I.A. in Nicaragua for several years and opposed the Sandinistas from the outset, regarding them as Marxists, according to several rebel and Congressional sources.

The Sánchez brothers, Enrique and

Aristides, were large landowners who were among the most committed backers of the Somoza dictatorship. The State Department report barely mentions them or their dominant influence on the army as aides to Mr. Calero.

Colonel Bermúdez served as military attaché in Washington under General Somoza. He too had close C.I.A. ties, according to rebel officials, and is an extreme political conservative.

Colonel Bermúdez relied on another National Guard officer, Ricardo Lau, to set up counterintelligence operations that Honduran officials say used death squads to kill dozens of people suspected of being leftists in Honduras. Mr. Lau, who was one of the most feared men in Honduras, was forced by American officials to leave the rebels a year and a half ago, but Colonel Bermúdez continues to defend him.

While it is true that the rebel army is mostly made up of peasants with real grievances against the Sandinistas, the

pace with which it has grown is disputed. American officials in Central America estimate that, rather than the 17,000 to 20,000 that the State Department report contends it has, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force has no more than 12,000 armed men and probably fewer than 10,000.

But even its critics say they believe it could recruit numerous volunteers to fight the Sandinistas if it were able to broaden its political appeal and received adequate American financing.

Followers of Mr. Cruz and Mr. Robelo say that it is not possible to radically change the rebel military command in the middle of a war.

A senior American official said Mr. Robelo and Mr. Cruz would have to show that they are willing to spend time with the rebel army and take the risks that Mr. Calero and his followers have taken in forging the only rebel fighting force that has proved willing to challenge the Sandinistas.

Nicaraguan Rebel Leaders

United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO)



Arturo José Cruz

A leading Nicaraguan banker, he went to Georgetown University and worked for the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington . . . He supported the Sandinista revolution and was a major force in persuading the middle class and foreign countries to back it also . . . From 1980 to 1981, a member of the governing Sandinista junta . . . From June to December 1981,

Nicaraguan Ambassador to Washington; he resigned to protest Sandinista policies . . . A presidential candidate in 1984 elections in Nicaragua but in the end refused to run, charging that the election was flawed . . . Joined UNO and became a rebel political leader in 1985 . . . Now viewed as the most politically moderate rebel leader in the group . . . He is willing to negotiate a political settlement with the Sandinistas and believes the revolution has brought some good to the Nicaraguan people.



Adolfo Calero Portocarrero

Graduated from Notre Dame University . . . A member of the old Conservative Party in Nicaragua that opposed the Somoza Government . . . He was manager of the Coca-Cola bottling plant in Nicaragua and at the time of the 1978-79 Sandinista revolution was jailed for leading a strike of businessmen against the Somoza regime . . . At the same time, he

opposed the Sandinistas because he considered them Marxists . . . According to several rebel and American sources, he maintained close contact with the Central Intelligence Agency for several years . . . When the C.I.A. selected a new civilian leadership for the guerrillas based in Honduras in 1982, he left Nicaragua and became political head of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force rebel army . . . He continues to hold that position while serving as one of the three co-leaders of UNO . . . Viewed as a political hard-liner who believes the Sandinistas must be overthrown militarily.



Alfonso Robelo Callejas

A highly successful Nicaraguan businessman who founded the Nicaraguan Democratic Movement, a political party made up of moderate businessmen opposed to the Somoza dictatorship . . . He supported the Sandinista revolution and served on the first Sandinista junta, but resigned in 1980, charging that the Sandinistas were Marxists and that Cuban

influence in Nicaragua was growing . . . In 1982 he went into exile in Costa Rica where he joined forces with the rebel leader Edén Pastora Gómez and helped manage C.I.A. support for him . . . He later split with Mr. Pastora and in 1985 joined UNO.