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Nicaragua Rebels, in Retreat, Viewed as a Reduced Threat

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TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras, March 4 — The main Nicaraguan rebel force is in its worst military condition since its formation in 1982, according to several Western diplomats and senior guerrilla officials.

The officials, interviewed here in recent days, said the Honduran-based insurgents will need extensive training, new tactics and a possible change of commanders if they are ever again to pose a significant threat to the Sandinista Army.

The guerrillas' mass retreat has raised questions about their fighting ability even if they should receive renewed American military assistance.

Forced Out of Nicaragua

As many as 10,000 Honduran-based rebels, constituting most of the United States-backed guerrilla force, have been forced out of Nicaragua in recent months by supply shortages and improved Nicaraguan Army tactics and more sophisticated armaments as well as the insurgents' own ineffective strategy, diplomats and rebel officials say.

Many of the those who commented on the rebels' decline noted that it comes, paradoxically, when dissatisfaction with the Nicaraguan Government is growing at home and abroad. But the rebels have been unable to take advantage of this discontent to become a broad-based movement capable of challenging the Sandinistas.

"I felt I was looking at a paralyzed army, maybe a defeated army," said a rebel official who visited the largest guerrilla camp last week.

"This is going to take more than \$100 million because they are no match for the Sandinistas," added the officer, one of the movement's most senior officials.

He was referring to the \$70 million in military aid and \$30 million in nonlethal help that President Reagan is asking Congress to provide to the rebels.

Interviews with rebel officials, diplomats and political leaders in Honduras and Costa Rica over the last three weeks have left an impression of a poorly led guerrilla force that has stumbled after three years of on again, off again United States backing, internal disputes, inadequate training and a record of human rights abuses, as well as little political direction and faltering public appeal.

Several of the sources had expressed optimistic views of the guerrillas' ability as recently as last year.

In 1984, before Congress cut off military aid, the rebel forces operated in one-third of Nicaragua. Today, all but a very few have retreated into Honduras, and there is only one remaining active front, in Chontales Department south-east of Managua.

Col. Enrique Bermúdez, the top military commander of the main guerrilla group, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, has blamed a shortage of boots and other supplies for the rebels' retreat. But such explanations have exasperated American officials, who say that in fact the rebels are demonstrating that they cannot fight a guerrilla war.

Several American and rebel officials say they believe the American-backed effort against the Sandinistas could collapse this year.

"1986 is the year of definition," a senior guerrilla official said in an interview. "One way or another, this can't go on as it has before."

Sandinistas Relocate Peasants

Some of the rebels' problems can be traced to the origins of the movement, which was first organized in 1982 with the help of the Central Intelligence Agency and Argentine Army intelligence officers.

Reagan Administration officials said at the time that the rebels' chief objective was as the interdiction of arms supplies from Nicaragua to El Salvador. The Administration later said the rebels' objective was to "pressure" the Nicaraguan Government into introducing democratic reforms and entering into negotiations with the insurgents. But rebel leaders have long made it clear that their aim is the overthrow of the Sandinistas.

The rebels appear to have more support than their harshest critics concede. They have been described as little more than mercenaries, but in fact most combatants are conservative Roman Catholic peasants from northern Nicaragua who reject the Sandinistas' leftist program and who have volunteered to fight against it.

They have been able to win enough support in the countryside to lead the Sandinistas to forcibly relocate tens of thousands of peasants in the last year from mountainous areas of northern Nicaragua to keep them from aiding the guerrillas.

But the rebels have failed to attract the support in urban areas and among the middle class that would enable them to build a political movement, as well as an army, able to reach into the towns and cities.

Instead of growing at the rate of 1,000 men a month, as senior Administration officials repeatedly claimed, the rebels concede that their forces are barely growing at all. Instead of fielding an army of 20,000, as Administration officials also claimed, the rebels probably number fewer than 12,000 combatants, according to several rebel and diplomatic officials.

Ex-Guardsmen Are Leaders

The Reagan Administration has twice changed the rebel civilian leadership, seeking more appealing spokesmen. But the fact that the rebels are widely seen inside Nicaragua and abroad as a purely military force led by former members of the defeated Nicaraguan National Guard and civilians who were loyal to Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the Nicaraguan dictator, has been a persistent obstacle to improving their popularity.

The rebels' most influential military commanders are in fact former National Guardsmen. And a number of the civilian leaders were strong supporters of the Somoza regime. Their past associations have kept more moderate anti-Sandinista exile organizations based in Costa Rica, including the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance led by Edén Pastora Gómez, from uniting with them.

The Nicaraguan Democratic Force is managed mainly by three men: Adolfo Calero, Colonel Bermúdez and Aristides Sánchez. According to several rebel sources, their leadership is based on the long Latin tradition of personal loyalty rather than loyalty to an organization or broader principles.

"If you criticize the top people they take it as a direct attack on their personal power," said an influential Nicaraguan exile who has lobbied in Washington for the rebels and who thinks they should be given American aid. "It's dangerous to confront them."

The Background of Leaders

Mr. Calero, the former manager of the Coca-Cola company in Nicaragua, is a businessman who actively opposed Mr. Somoza, but at the same time maintained ties with the C.I.A., according to several Nicaraguan exile sources. Mr. Sánchez is a large landowner who was an avid backer of Mr. Somoza. His brother, Enrique Sánchez, is also a leading rebel civilian official.

The main backers of these civilian leaders are Nicaraguan exiles in Miami, many of whom were loyal supporters of Mr. Somoza or who profited from his Government.

Colonel Bermúdez served in the National Guard, as did the most powerful military field commanders who serve him. The colonel was Mr. Somoza's last military attaché to Washington and, according to rebel sources, had close ties with the C.I.A.

Between 1981 and 1984 he helped oversee a rebel counterintelligence unit commanded by Ricardo Lau, another former National Guardsman, that two American officials say killed dozens of people suspected of being leftists.

Mr. Lau is described by American and Honduran officials as a fanatical rightist and hired killer. The Honduran Army reportedly forced him to leave Honduras late in 1984, but Colonel Bermúdez and Mr. Calero have defended him in interviews and say they have no reason to condemn his actions.

In an effort to improve the rebels' political appeal, the Reagan Administration backed the formation of a new rebel front, known as the United Nicaraguan Opposition, last spring. But bickering within the group has left the guerrilla army essentially in the hands of its old leaders.

Sandinistas an Efficient Foe

Besides their many internal problems, the rebels also have been badly set back by the efficiency of the Sandinista security forces. The Sandinista police have arrested many guerrilla supporters, according to both rebel officials and Western diplomats.

And the 100,000-man Sandinista Popular Army and militia, trained and advised in the field by Cuban officers, have learned to deploy veteran counterinsurgency battalions rapidly by helicopter. These have been backed by gunships and mobile rocket batteries in a lethal combination of tactics and firepower.

This matériel, along with automatic weapons, mortars and long-range artillery, have been supplied by the Soviet Union and Soviet bloc countries.

The rebels have been squeezed to a point where, for the first time in three years, they have not even tried to disrupt the economically vital coffee harvest in Nicaragua despite the fact that many coffee farms lie just across the border from guerrilla bases.

Both Western diplomats and rebel officials say the guerrillas need supply planes to re-equip troops inside Nicaragua, surface-to-air missiles to use against helicopter gunships and mor-

tars to counter Sandinista artillery.

But even more important, they say, will be thorough retraining in how to wage a guerrilla war and new tactics, including a political program that the rebels understand and can explain to Nicaraguans they meet inside the country. Even with such help, diplomats estimate it could take two years for the rebels to become an effective fighting force.

To highlight the Nicaraguan guerrillas' incompetence, several diplomats noted that leftist guerrillas in El Salvador, with probably fewer than 6,000 men and no secure bases or supply lines, have wrecked the economy and badly blooded the Government army. But they are politically committed fighters who have organized public support and waged a war based on genuine grievances.

The Nicaraguan rebels have been handicapped as well by factors beyond their control, especially prolonged cut-offs in their supplies. Congress ended American military aid to the rebels in 1984, forcing them to scrape by on private donations for a year until Congress granted them \$27 million in nonlethal aid to be spent by the end of this month, mostly on food, boots, uniforms and medicine.

The help has been slow in coming, the rebels say, and was suspended by the Honduran Government last October in an effort to press the United States to make concessions on a number of economic and political issues, a tactic that Honduras could repeat at anytime.

Despite such difficulties, rebel officials say that they do not lack guns and bullets and that the shortage in other gear is now being made up in part by supply flights from El Salvador using

rented planes. The State Department's insistence on receipts for rebel purchases has kept the guerrillas from taking the easier step of buying directly from the Honduran Army, which would gladly sell to them, according to sources here.

Western diplomats say that American nonlethal assistance has had the unfortunate effect of encouraging the guerrillas to sit in their camps, where they receive American-bought food, instead of marching into Nicaragua to fight. A senior rebel official echoed the criticism, saying nonlethal help that is not matched by military aid is a curse rather than a blessing.

"It gives us enough to hang on, to prolong this so that more Nicaraguans die," he said bitterly. "But it doesn't give us enough to end it. I'd rather have no aid at all than only receive this so-called humanitarian aid."