

30 January 1986

# Most Contras Reported To Pull Out of Nicaragua

By JAMES LaMOYNE

Special to The New York Times

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras, Jan. 28 — At a time when they once promised to begin a major offensive, Nicaraguan guerrillas are instead back in their camps in Honduras, checked by improved Sandinista tactics and a critical shortage of supplies, rebel officials and Western diplomats here say.

Two years ago the American-backed guerrillas shut down much of the economically vital coffee harvest in the fertile mountain valleys that slice across northern Nicaragua. This year the harvest appears to be in full swing, without serious threat from the rebels.

A guerrilla spokesman said that only some 40 percent of rebel troops were now in the field. Western diplomats put the number far lower, saying the great majority of rebel forces were inside Honduras.

The only active rebel front is around the Rama supply road in the central Nicaraguan departments of Boaco and Chontales, according to rebel and Sandinista officials.

Guerrilla recruiting also appears to be far below the 1,000 new combatants that Reagan Administration officials once asserted were entering rebel ranks each month. The same officials also contended that the rebels had nearly 20,000 men ready to fight.

## Rebels' Growth 'Detained'

Knowledgeable Western and Congressional sources now say the guerrillas probably have no more than 14,000 armed men and may have fewer. A senior rebel official conceded that the guerrillas' growth "has been detained," contending that their absence from the field made it impossible to recruit inside Nicaragua.

Those already bearing arms will have serious difficulties in fighting this year if Congress does not approve renewed military aid to the rebels, guerrilla officials say. They add that the private donations they have used to buy weapons have fallen off sharply at a time when a growing Sandinista army, equipped with helicopter gunships and heavy weapons, is proving a formidable foe.

Administration officials have told

leading members of Congress that even with renewed American military aid it could take the guerrillas two to three years to become a significant military threat to the Sandinistas. The Central Intelligence Agency funneled million of dollars in military aid to the guerrillas before Congress cut off such help two years ago.

Rebel officials say they have been most severely set back by a shortage of basic supplies because much of the \$27 million in so-called humanitarian aid voted by Congress last year has not reached them.

"We have thousands of men who don't even have a pair of boots or a poncho," said a rebel spokesman, Frank Arana.

## Honduras Blocks Aid

The Honduran Government has blocked the aid since last October in an effort to persuade the Administration to make concessions on a number of contentious economic and political issues, according to well-placed sources in Honduras and Washington.

Rebel supply runs have also been set back by the loss of a large transport plane over El Salvador last week. After a camouflaged cargo jet crashed under mysterious circumstances, the Salvadoran Air Force quickly cleaned up the wreckage and refused to identify the plane's origin and destination or say who was flying it or what it was carrying.

The new President of Honduras, José Azcona Hoyo, is believed to have discussed the Nicaraguan rebels during a three-day visit to Washington this month that included meetings with senior Administration officials. Mr. Azcona is now expected to allow deliveries of American aid to the rebels.

But some American officials and members of Congress worry that the Hondurans will use the issue to put pressure on the United States in the future. If Congress approves military aid to the rebels and their forces begin to grow rapidly, it would mark an intensi-



Reuters

Rosa Hernández, a Government worker from Managua, picking coffee beans at a plantation 125 miles from the Nicaraguan capital. She is one of several thousand workers who have volunteered to help with the harvest. She and others in her group were armed in case of a rebel attack.

fication of Honduran involvement with the Nicaraguan guerrillas, who would almost certainly outnumber the 15,000-man Honduran Army.

The American funds that have already arrived here are being spent mainly to buy food, uniforms, boots and medicine for the rebels from private companies in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, according to sources who monitor the guerrillas.

Two planeloads of goods reached Honduras in October, they say, but the second was returned to the United States to demonstrate Honduran anger that an American television crew had been allowed to fly in on the plane and film it unloading goods for the guerrillas at the country's main public airport in the capital.