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New Anti-Sandinista Unit Forming on South Border

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SAN JOSE, Costa Rica, Aug. 24 — A major effort is under way to organize and arm a new Nicaraguan anti-Government rebel unit on the Costa Rican border that will be directly allied with the powerful Nicaraguan Democratic Force operating out of Honduras, according to members of the new unit and senior rebel officials.

The new guerrilla force, which is estimated to have from 300 to 400 fighters, is part of the recently formed United Nicaraguan Opposition, known as UNO. The rebel unit is being organized in a renewed effort to open a two-front war against the Sandinista Government, according to a senior United Nicaraguan Opposition official.

The official said the plan was to increase the size of the new rebel unit sharply in the year ahead, with the backing of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force in Honduras. But it is not clear how much the rebels can grow, given the neutralist stance of Costa Rica, which has been less hospitable to rebel forces than Honduras has. The new guerrilla unit calls itself the United Nicaraguan Opposition — Nicaraguan Revolutionary Armed Forces.

Coalition Backed by U.S.

The United Nicaraguan Opposition was formed this year with United States backing. It is a coalition directed by three exiled leaders, Arturo Cruz, Alfonso Robelo and Adolfo Calero. The dominant presence in the UNO, however, is the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, which Mr. Calero heads. Edén Pastora Gómez, the leader of a guerrilla group that appears on the brink of military collapse, has refused to join the new coalition.

Several rebels and rebel officials said the new guerrilla unit had been aided by an American rancher who owns extensive farmland along the border. One former guerrilla said the rancher handled large sums of money and had told him he was supporting the rebels with the help of the National Security Council in Washington.

In an interview, the rancher, John Hull, vehemently denied the rebels' assertions.

Weapons Shipments Reported

Reagan Administration officials said recently that a member of the National Security Council, identified as Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North, had been advising Nicaraguan rebels.

Rebel officials aware of the new unit's development say the guerrillas in Costa Rica have been getting money and plane loads of G-3 automatic rifles and other weapons for the last month.

A reporter was with two rebels belonging to the new group last week as they listened to a radio in a Costa Rican border town monitoring a nighttime airdrop of weapons. Two other rebel officials confirmed the airdrop.

The creation of the new rebel force appears to fulfill longstanding goals of the Reagan Administration, which has struggled for three years to promote a united Nicaraguan rebel movement that is able to stage coordinated attacks from the borders of Honduras and Costa Rica.

Divisions Among Rebels

But deep divisions remain among the diverse groups making up the armed rebel movement, and a political struggle appears to be under way in Costa Rica as the United Nicaraguan Opposition tries to bring different rebel groups under its command.

Personal and political differences between Nicaraguan rebel exile leaders may make it difficult for the UNO to attract and maintain an army.

For the last three years, the main rebel group operating from the border has been the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance, led by Mr. Pastora. But Mr. Pastora has refused to align himself with the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, charging that it is led by extreme right-wing officers from the army of Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the former Nicaraguan dictator.

His refusal led the Central Intelligence Agency to cut off all support to him 16 months ago, according to American and rebel officials.

Officials of the United Nicaraguan Opposition said they would ignore Mr. Pastora if necessary and use their ample resources to try to recruit the some 1,000 rebels in Mr. Pastora's army into their group. According to two of Mr. Pastora's close aides, some of Mr. Pastora's rebels inside Nicaragua are already collaborating with the Nicaraguan Democratic Force to get supplies and ammunition.

The men who have already joined the UNO rebels appear to be a mixture of guerrillas formerly loyal to Mr. Pastora, members of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force and a small unit left by Fernando Chamorro, who once was allied with Mr. Pastora.

Indications of U.S. Backing

There are several indications of official and unofficial United States backing for the United Nicaraguan Opposition and its new rebel unit on the Costa Rican border. Mr. Robelo said American officials had told him that the UNO would handle all of the \$27 million in nonlethal aid that the United States Congress has approved to send to Nicaraguan rebels. None of the money will go to Mr. Pastora, according to Mr. Robelo and Administration officials. Mr. Robelo said he expected the money to begin arriving next week.

The senior UNO official said Mr. Robelo and Mr. Cruz had been given money in the past by the Central Intelligence Agency to carry out what the official called "political work." The C.I.A. is prohibited by Congress from having direct contact with the rebels. When asked to comment on the report of C.I.A. backing, Patti Volz, an agency spokesman, said in a telephone interview that the agency "adheres to Congressional obligations and restraints."

Another rebel official, who has proved accurate in the past, said that recent weapons shipments to the UNO guerrillas had been flown from El Salvador and that he believed the C.I.A. had made the arrangements. When asked to comment on the assertion, Miss Volz replied that the agency was adhering to Congressional restrictions promoting contact with the rebels.

An American and an Englishman who have been arrested by the Costa Rican Government for aiding the rebels on the border said in a jailhouse interview here that the guerrillas of the United Nicaraguan Opposition were also being assisted by Mr. Hull, the American rancher on the border, who they contended is the main contact in Costa Rica for the Nicaraguan Democratic Force. Their account was supported by three other rebels.

Ties With Police Reported

Mr. Hull denied the accounts, using strong language. He said that he had never helped guerrillas and that he did not understand why anyone would make such accusations.

Mr. Hull, who is married to a Costa Rican, has lived in Costa Rica for several years and supports the local civil defense force. He has close ties to Costa Rican police officials.

In a two-hour interview, the two prisoners, Steven P. Carr of Naples, Fla., and Peter F. Glibbery of Birmingham, England, said Mr. Hull had arranged air drops of weapons and stored arms for the guerrillas and had visited them twice at a camp near the border town of Los Chiles.

Mr. Glibbery said that he had spent several days on Mr. Hull's ranch near the border and that Mr. Hull had told him he was being supported by "a friend on the National Security Council" in Washington.