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Nicaragua Guerrillas Ponder Chances Without U.S. Help

By JAMES LeMOYNE

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TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras, March 17—At their sprawling mountain headquarters on the border between Nicaragua and Honduras, Nicaraguan guerrilla commanders soberly assessed their chances of victory last week and spoke anxiously of the debate on their future in Washington.

The apparently impregnable military camp, shrouded by dense jungle and gray rain clouds, is far from Washington. But the rebels' keen awareness of the heated debate they have generated in Congress almost seems to narrow the distance between their base and the American capital.

Loss of Aid Is Hurting

The border camp is the command center for the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, by far the largest exile army. The group received most of the \$80 million the Central Intelligence Agency reportedly spent on the war until financing was ended last June. A C.I.A. spokesman said the agency declined to comment on its activities or on the Nicaraguan rebels.

The goals of the rebels, the number of former officers of the Nicaraguan National Guard in their ranks and reports of human rights violations have become major issues in the debate between the Administration and Congress on whether to renew aid to the guerrillas.

President Reagan has called the rebels freedom fighters who are the "moral equal of our Founding Fathers."

With the support of advisers from the C.I.A., Argentina and Honduras and a handful of Cuban-Americans, rebel

leaders said, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force has grown in four years from a marauding band numbering a few hundred into a veteran army of 12,000 to 14,000 men whose ambushes and sabotage have turned much of northern Nicaragua into a war zone.

But the loss of American aid has created serious supply problems for the guerrillas, according to their commanders and to Western officials here, limiting their military activity and raising strong doubts about their prospects.

'Our Situation Isn't Good'

"Our situation isn't good," said a 25-year-old commander who uses the name Mike Lima, a four-year veteran who leads the 2,700-man Diriangen regional guerrilla force. He added that his men needed "guns, boots, everything."

Despite such problems, the rebels appeared far better equipped than comparable anti-Government guerrilla forces in El Salvador and Guatemala. Unlike those groups, the Nicaraguan

rebels appear to enjoy secure supply lines to their headquarters base. Their chief problem seems to be maintaining supplies to their large army.

A three-day visit to the camp was arranged by rebel officials on the condition that its location not be revealed.

No other restrictions were placed on several reporters' freedom to carry out interviews or visit the camp's installations, which included a firing range, warehouses, an armory, a training school, a long-range radio center, a map room and a hospital. Some 4,000 rebels appeared to be in the camp and its environs.

The top guerrilla military commander, Col. Enrique Bermúdez, had just returned from a visit to Washington and seemed shaken by the debate he had heard and its effect on support for the guerrillas.

Second article of a series on the
Nicaraguan rebels.

'A Terrible Image'

"We have a terrible image there," he told an unshaven rebel unit that had just returned from a long combat patrol. "They say we are violators of human rights, rapists, destroyers of farms who have hurt the civilian population."

Senior guerrilla leaders said their objective is now and always has been to overthrow the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua. The colloquial Spanish name by which the rebels are known, the contras, means counterrevolutionaries. Administration officials originally said the guerrillas' goal was to cut off the supply of arms from Nicaragua to leftist rebels in El Salvador.

But Colonel Bermúdez said in an interview that his troops were fighting against the "Sandino-Communist system." Asked if the Sandinista revolution had produced any positive changes for the people of Nicaragua, he replied, "Absolutely not."

Such views appear to limit the prospects of a negotiated end to the fighting.

"He who speaks of dialogue with the Communists speaks of wasting his time," said Capt. Armando López, Colonel Bermúdez's second in command.

Officers' Past Is Issue

The influence of former National Guard officers in the rebel movement has become an important issue because their presence appears to have limited the rebels' popular support inside Nicaragua and obstructed repeated efforts to form a united front with other rebel groups.

A former Sandinista leader, Edén Pastora Gómez, who leads an estimated 2,000 rebels on the Costa Rican border, has refused for two years to unite with the Nicaraguan Democratic Force because he says it is dominated by National Guard officers who cannot win popular support in Nicaragua.

Interviews with over 40 rebels indicated that the majority were peasants from northern Nicaragua angered by severe rationing and the Sandinistas' socialist program. Their morale seemed high and the depth of their opposition to the Sandinistas made it appear likely that a bitter war will be waged in northern Nicaragua for years to come.

Continued

"The problems of fear and affliction began in 1982 when the Sandinistas came to our village," said a rebel who identified himself only as Culebrina, 33 years old, from the department of Jinotega.

But the founders of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force and its most senior commanders are almost all former members of the Nicaraguan National Guard, an army known for its corruption and unswerving loyalty to the Nicaraguan dictator, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, until he was toppled by the Sandinista-led insurrection in 1979.

National Guard officers formed the nucleus of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force when it was organized in 1981, according to Captain López. The group was based on the 15th of September Legion, a band of 60 exiled National Guardsmen, he said. He added that 15 of the founders were still active, including himself and Colonel Bermúdez.

Besides Mr. Bermúdez, the heads of logistics, intelligence, operations, special warfare and training and several key combat units are all former National Guardsmen.

But the rebels' chief political official, Adolfo Calero, was an outspoken opponent of the Somoza regime. Mr. Calero was jailed for organizing a strike of businessmen against Mr. Somoza in 1978.

"We have been called Reagan's army, the C.I.A.'s army, every army but our own," Mr. Calero said. "The fact that we continue to exist and operate successfully means that we are here of our own free will. We are no one's creation."

Edgar Chamorro, who was a leading member of the rebels' National Directorate until he was forced to resign five months ago, said in an interview that one of his disagreements with the organization was its reliance on National Guard officers.

"They lack social sensibility," he said. "The Guard wants to take vengeance and settle accounts. They don't realize things have changed in Nicaragua."

Supplies Fall Short of Needs

The loss of American support has forced the rebels to begin learning to wage a smaller-scale guerrilla war, their commanders said. Their chief problem appears to be a reduced flow of supplies rather than a complete cut-off of aid. Lack of supplies and aircraft forced rebel units to begin withdrawing from their deepest bases inside Nicaragua late last year, according to rebel officials.

Although weapons are still arriving in the rebel camp, the supply does not match the needs of an army that fires one million bullets in two or three days of combat, according to Captain López, who is head of logistics. The leader of one rebel unit, a Commander Dimas, said his men had been waiting five months for supplies.

A 72-man rebel unit that marched into the camp after a two-month patrol in Jinotega showed the effect of such shortages. The guerrillas' toes stuck through torn American-made boots. Without ponchos, the men were soaked by the constant drizzle. Most were nearly out of bullets.

Brooklyn Rivera, a leader of one faction of an estimated 1,000 Miskito Indian rebels on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, and rebels in Mr. Pastora's Sandino Revolutionary Front said in interviews that their forces were also critically short of supplies.

Complaints Against Sandinistas

The foot soldiers of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force are volunteers between the ages of 13 and 30 who fight without pay, belying Sandinista claims that they are mercenaries.

Several said in interviews that their lives had been better under the Somoza regime. They cited the military draft in Nicaragua, rationing, state control of agricultural production and Sandinista political pressure as reasons for their decision to join the guerrillas.

The rebel army appears to have no trouble attracting recruits. But the peasant rebels seem to represent a socially and geographically limited segment of the Nicaraguan population, raising questions about the breadth of popular support for the guerrillas. Few middle-class youths or residents of the populated southern half of Nicaragua have joined the rebel ranks.

There have been several reports of human rights violations by the rebels, including the killing of unarmed civilians. Colonel Bermúdez dismissed the reports in an interview as "lots of misinformation."

Reporters met two recently captured Sandinista prisoners who said they had been well treated. Mr. Calero said the prisoners, Rufo Adrian Hernández from the town of Masatepe and Miguel Angel Romero from Diriamba, would be allowed to return home if they wanted to.

But rebel fighters described a more ruthless war in which neither side normally takes prisoners and suicide is preferable to capture. Two rebels, Sancio and Devoción, said that guerrillas often killed Sandinista prisoners and Government officials and that they believed the Sandinistas would kill them.

In the Field for 5 Months

Rebel units go into the field for up to five months and their independence from central command would appear to make it difficult to control their actions. The guerrillas appear to be an exclusively military force with almost no political direction other than the goal of overthrowing the Sandinistas.

With the loss of American financing, Mr. Calero said his main task now is raising money and buying supplies. Private businessmen in the United States and "political sectors" in other countries have given the rebels \$5 million in the last nine months, he said.

He visited the headquarters camp last week with a retired United States major general, John K. Singlaub, who said he was trying to funnel assistance to the rebels in his capacity as president of the World Anti-Communist League and the United States Council for World Freedom, based in Phoenix.

Mr. Calero said a shipment of 40,000 hand grenades being unloaded in the camp had been bought from a South American nation that was told they were going to a country in Africa.

The rebels bribed a ship's captain to carry the grenades and bought proper documentation for the shipment for between \$3,000 and \$5,000, he added. Friendly army officers in Central American countries also helped the guerrillas, he said.

Reporters saw one box of 40-millimeter ammunition marked "Quartermaster of the Guatemalan Army." Several other boxes of ammunition were covered with Arabic writing and one case was marked "Montreal, Canada."

The rebels operate under a traditional hierarchical military command in 8 regional units divided into at least 40 "task forces" of 200 to 1,000 men, according to Captain López. With 12,000 to 14,000 men, the rebel force is larger than most national armies in Central America before war enveloped the region in 1979.

Rebel commanders said that as many as 1,000 guerrillas had died in four years of fighting and that the guerrillas had fought over 200 times in January and February.

When asked if dwindling supplies might lead the rebels to give up, Captain López replied: "Never, never. The war will go on, even with picks and shovels."