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Contras No Match for Them, Analysts Say

Sandinistas Preparing for a Bigger War

By MARJORIE MILLER, Times Staff Writer

MANAGUA, Nicaragua—The signs of preparation are everywhere:

—At a training camp near Managua, 800 new army reservists kicked up clouds of dust, marching on a sun-scorched field. The men, some middle-aged with thickening girths, practiced awkwardly with 82-millimeter mortars. "Every day we are more qualified to overthrow imperialism," said Jose Espinoza, 34.

—To the north, in the rich farm countryside of northern Esteli province, a few dozen peasants lugging AK-47 rifles dug latrines and hammered houses for the cooperative they were building in the war-battered region. "We are here to produce as well as to defend," said Froylan Cruz Reyes, 50.

—At the 25th-anniversary celebration of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, the front's nine commanders reviewed the Soviet-built tanks, trucks, artillery and helicopters that rolled by. About 7,000 troops, militia and reserves marched past a crowd of thousands

that chanted a revolutionary slogan: "A free fatherland, or death!"

For months, the Nicaraguan government has been preparing politically and militarily for a stepped-up war with the *contras*, the U.S.-backed insurgents fighting the Sandinistas in the countryside. Army reserves, farm cooperatives and a growing arsenal are all part of the Sandinistas' readiness campaign.

"They are like a runner on his mark at the starting line of a race," a European diplomat said.

American officials in Washington use similar imagery to describe the *contras*, likening them to "a coiled spring" about to be released by \$100 million in U.S. military aid and training by U.S. Special Forces. Under the direction of the CIA, the *contras* plan to broaden their guerrilla war to overthrow the Marxist-led Sandinistas.

But Western military analysts and military officers say that while the *contras* undoubtedly will make more war with their added re-

sources, they are not a match for the Sandinista Popular Army.

Since the last time the CIA ran *contras* operations in 1984, the Sandinista army has grown in size and strength and improved its mobility, firepower and intelligence capabilities to fight a conventional war as well as a guerrilla war. Through the army and civilian mass organizations, the Sandinistas have developed a militant political base, with tens of thousands of supporters determined to defend the seven-year-old revolutionary regime.

It is difficult to quantify political support for the Sandinistas. Opinion polls are not allowed here, and many opposition figures have left the country. Certainly the revolutionary government has lost its glow and promise for many since 1979, when the Sandinistas spearheaded a popular uprising to oust dictator Anastasio Somoza and end more than four decades of rule here by the Somoza family.

Many Nicaraguans are dissatisfied with the Sandinistas' leftist politics, bureaucracy and state-controlled economy. Particularly here in the capital, complaints about inflation and scarcity are widespread.

The *contras* say that the extent of anti-Sandinista sentiment is kept hidden because of repression. They say Sandinista army desertions are high. They and some of their backers believe that if the insurgents begin to show success on the battlefield, they can create a "bandwagon effect," drawing political support from civilians.

Included in the new U.S.-*contras* program is a 50,000-watt rebel radio station that sources say will be based in El Salvador to carry the *contras*' message to ordinary Nicaraguans.

Return to the Past

But discontent with the Sandinistas does not necessarily translate into support for the *contras*, whom many view as a return to the past. Members of Somoza's old National Guard figure prominently among the *contras*' military leaders. Among their financial backers are members of the old oligarchy and onetime major landowners.

Some analysts say that the extensive Sandinista intelligence network, together with the *contras*' lack of a clear political program, will stymie the rebels' progress.

"The [*contras*]' principal limitation is their incapacity to create an internal front to gain the necessary support within the towns in the areas where they operate, this being a vital factor in a guerrilla war to operate effectively in cells or small independent units," one Latin American diplomat reported to his government.

"Because of a lack of doctrine, they lack true motivation, which influences their moral and combat ability," he wrote.

Two-thirds of Nicaragua's estimated 3 million people live in the countryside and provincial cities. Early in their regime, the Sandinistas angered many independent peasants by imposing price controls and forcing them to sell their produce to state agencies. They introduced collective farming—a foreign concept that many viewed with hostility—and in 1984 some of these farmers provided food and cover for *contras* operating in the mountainous northern provinces.

But in the last two years, the Sandinistas have forcibly relocated

tens of thousands of peasants from the area, isolating the *contras* from their potential social base and reducing their logistical support. Last spring, the Sandinistas arrested dozens of opposition political party workers on charges of aiding the *contras*, sending a clear message to others who might consider helping the rebels.

Meanwhile, new collective farms, such as La Union in Esteli, have been built by Sandinista supporters; on these farms, peasants are armed with rifles as well as hoes.

Many farmers have been won over to the Sandinista side—or at least wooed away from the *contras*—with an ambitious agrarian reform program. Agriculture and Agrarian Reform Minister Jaime Wheelock says that the government has distributed 4.6 million acres to 9,700 families.

And while the government still prefers collective farming, Wheelock says "the tendency is to hand over land to individual farmers"—the way the farmers prefer to work.

"They have changed the whole land tenure system of the country," a Western diplomat said.

"The Sandinistas can go out to the farmers and say, 'You may hate or love us, but do you want the contras to come and bring all of the landowners back from Miami, or do you want to keep what we've given you?' It's a very powerful tool," he said.

The government also sends Peace Corps-style Sandinista work brigades into the countryside to build warehouses and breed political good will. The contras, meanwhile, risk losing support in the countryside by using land mines that have killed or wounded scores of civilians this year.

One issue that has pushed hundreds and possibly thousands of farmers into the ranks of the contras is Nicaragua's conscription into the armed forces of young men 17 and older. Many still leave the country to avoid the two-year military service, but the Sandinistas have taken steps to lessen the blow of the draft.

The Sandinista newspaper *Barriada* widely publicizes the return of soldiers at the end of their tours of duty. "They Went and They Conquered," said a recent headline when 300 draftees were released from service. The unwritten message: Your boys will come home.

Along with full-page ads announcing draft registration, the newspapers run ads for the Sandinista equivalent of the GI Bill, offering benefits to about 8,000 veterans.

Defense Minister Humberto Ortega said in a recent interview published here that nearly 300,000 Nicaraguans are under arms in the army, reserves and militia. Military observers say the true figure is about half that.

"What we have are thousands of men in their territory, in their cooperative, in their militia, in the reserve—organized," Ortega told a Mexican television reporter. "This is the capacity [we have] to dominate our topography, our cities, our towns, to defend them from an aggressor."

The backbone of the army's counterinsurgency campaign is 12 to 15 Irregular Warfare Battalions, led by experienced army regulars

and filled with draftees, many of whom have been replaced in the last five months.

"When the contras hit them, they will be replenished units with combat experience, without turnover problems in the middle of a contra offensive," said a military analyst.

Commander Enrique Bermudez of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the largest contra organization, said the Sandinista army has a morale problem because recruits are pressured to join. When the war picks up, so will draft evasion and desertions, he recently predicted.

In the last year, the Sandinistas have increasingly called up 25- to 40-year-olds for 30 to 45 days of reserve training. The men, as well as some women volunteers, are organized into reserve battalions and trained to use rifles and artillery to defend the cities against an attack.

Like the army, the reserve training includes political education. Each night after dinner, the reservists hear a 10-minute lecture on topics from agrarian reform to the constitution.

"We let them know the historic values of the revolution and how the Sandinista Front won the right to be the vanguard of the revolution," said Lt. Rolando Lopez, director of the Pancasan Military Training Center.

The military, which eats up nearly half of Nicaragua's national budget, is a huge strain on an economy squeezed by mismanagement, regional economic problems and a U.S. embargo. Agriculture Minister Wheelock says that 200,000 men and women work for the military rather than in productive jobs, and he puts the total cost of the war at almost \$2.4 billion.

The economy is one of the Sandinistas' more vulnerable points, and the contras hope to exploit it, forcing further military spending and zeroing in on economic targets such as farm cooperatives.

Last June and July, the economy hit an all-time low, with soaring inflation and most basic foods in scarce supply. The government, well aware of rising public anger and even hunger, reallocated some export crops for internal consumption, and, diplomats say, the Soviet Union and other countries stepped in with food donations.

Now there is more food in the markets, and lines for many items have disappeared, although inflation continues to be a serious problem.

Ortega acknowledges that the country is vulnerable to military assaults on economic targets such as the country's oil pipeline offshore at Puerto Sandino, the oil refinery on the outskirts of Managua, the port of Corinto on the Pacific Coast, bridges and energy pylons.

Analysts who monitor the contras say the rebels currently do not have the ability to carry out such commando raids, although they could be trained to do so.

To show their might, the contras must increase their presence in Nicaragua with more ambushes and attacks on military and political targets such as the Sandinista Front offices and state security stations. They must broaden their areas of operation, occupy a town, distribute propaganda and leave graffiti, cut a strategic road or launch a spectacular raid, analysts say. And, they say, the rebels must also reduce the number of civilian casualties they cause.

A Different Strategy

Some strategists would like to see the contras take territory, most likely in the north or along the Atlantic Coast, to install a provisional government that would allow the Reagan Administration to break diplomatic relations with the Sandinistas and officially recognize the contras.

"I wouldn't ignore that possibility, but right now I wouldn't give it more than a 20% chance," a Western diplomat said.

The towns most often mentioned as likely targets are Jalapa or Ocotal in the northern province of Nueva Segovia and Puerto Cabezas on the Atlantic.

The contras are up against an army that can mobilize much more quickly than it could in 1984, using East German Ifa trucks and about 34 Soviet MI-8 and MI-17 transport helicopters, according to Pentagon figures. The Sandinistas also have 10 to 15 MI-24 armored helicopter gunships.

Although the Sandinistas are said to have a shortage of trained pilots and problems with ground-to-air communications that have resulted in the shooting down of their own aircraft, the Soviet-supplied helicopters have been as

important to the Sandinista army as American-supplied helicopters are to El Salvador's armed forces.

In both countries, the helicopters have given the army the advantage of mobility, medical evacuation and firepower.

In the last two years, the Sandinistas also have developed thorough military and urban intelligence. The Interior Ministry, which oversees state security, has uncovered CIA agents and several attempts to set up an internal front. The army has infiltrated contras units and regularly intercepts contras communications—a practice the CIA hopes to end with computer-coded radios.

"Secure communications—that is one of the biggest things the CIA can do for the contras," said a Western diplomat.

Sampling of Artillery

At the Nov. 8 anniversary celebration of the Sandinista Front's founding, the army paraded a sampling of its artillery, which analysts say was used effectively in six days of bloody combat in late October. According to the analysts, at least 70 people were killed and 350 were wounded in fighting that took place across the border in Honduras.

More and more, the Sandinistas have been fighting the contras near the rebels' base camps in Honduras in an effort to keep them from penetrating into the interior of Nicaragua and to try to prevent them from resupplying their men already inside this country.

Ten days ago, the fighting flared into a border battle between Honduras and Nicaragua, with Nicaragua attacking Honduran army outposts and Honduran planes bombing military installations up to 16 miles inside Nicaragua.

The jungles of Nicaragua's frontiers, along Honduras to the north and Costa Rica to the south, provide good cover for guerrillas, something the Sandinistas themselves took advantage of in their fight against Somoza.

The Sandinistas contend that there are fewer than 6,000 armed contras and that only 2,400 of those are inside Nicaragua—1,500 of them in the Jorge Salazar Front in central Boaco, Chontales and Zelaya provinces. The contras say they have 5,000 men in the Jorge Salazar Front and a total of 18,000 armed rebels.

The Sandinistas also are trying to stop the contras from supplying their forces in central Nicaragua by

air. On display at the military parade were SAM-7 ground-to-air missiles like the one used in early October to bring down an American-piloted transport plane that was carrying arms and ammunition to the contras.

The Sandinistas were reported to have acquired more powerful anti-aircraft missiles, but they have not been shown publicly. Pentagon spokesman Robert Simons said last month that "there are indications" that the Sandinistas now are operating SAM-14 ground-to-air missiles, which have a range of 14,000 feet.

Military analysts say that the downing of a C-123 transport plane Oct. 5 hampered supply flights, but the CIA is expected to furnish the contras with larger planes, equipped with electronic devices to confuse radar and heat-seeking missiles.

Risk of Confrontation

In focusing their fighting on the border, the Sandinistas not only risk further confrontations with Honduras but also the possibility of giving the Reagan Administration a pretext for escalated U.S. involvement in the war. If the contras prove unable to threaten the Sandinistas militarily, even with extensive U.S. aid and training, the Administration will be left with two options—to negotiate with the government or to intervene.

The Sandinistas have long believed that direct U.S. intervention here is inevitable, either in the form of air strikes or the sending of U.S. troops. They believe that Honduras has relinquished sovereignty over its southern border area, leaving the zone to the contras and, thus, open to attack. But should the Reagan Administration opt for intervention, officials could invoke regional treaties to defend Honduras against attack.

Diplomatic sources in the region speculate that any decision by the United States to intervene would not be made for at least a year, or until it becomes clear how the contras will manage with their new aid.

Analysts say that if they were to conduct an air strike, the Americans would probably lose some aircraft but would likely achieve their military objective. Nicaragua has no intercept aircraft, and the Reagan Administration has threatened to destroy any advanced combat jets delivered to Nicaragua.

A site often mentioned here as a likely target for any possible air strike is the Punta Huete military air strip on the northeastern edge of Lake Managua.

Analysts, however, agree with the Sandinistas when they say that the nationalistic Nicaraguans would fight fiercely against any invasion by U.S. ground troops.

"We have a strategy of active resistance to confront a Yankee intervention—not of a classic war of positions, not a conventional war in a battle of Waterloo, where logically we would lose to the enormous material power of the United States—but we would act in undefined lines, in an irregular war of active movements, in a war of mosquitoes, continuously bleeding the invader," Ortega said.

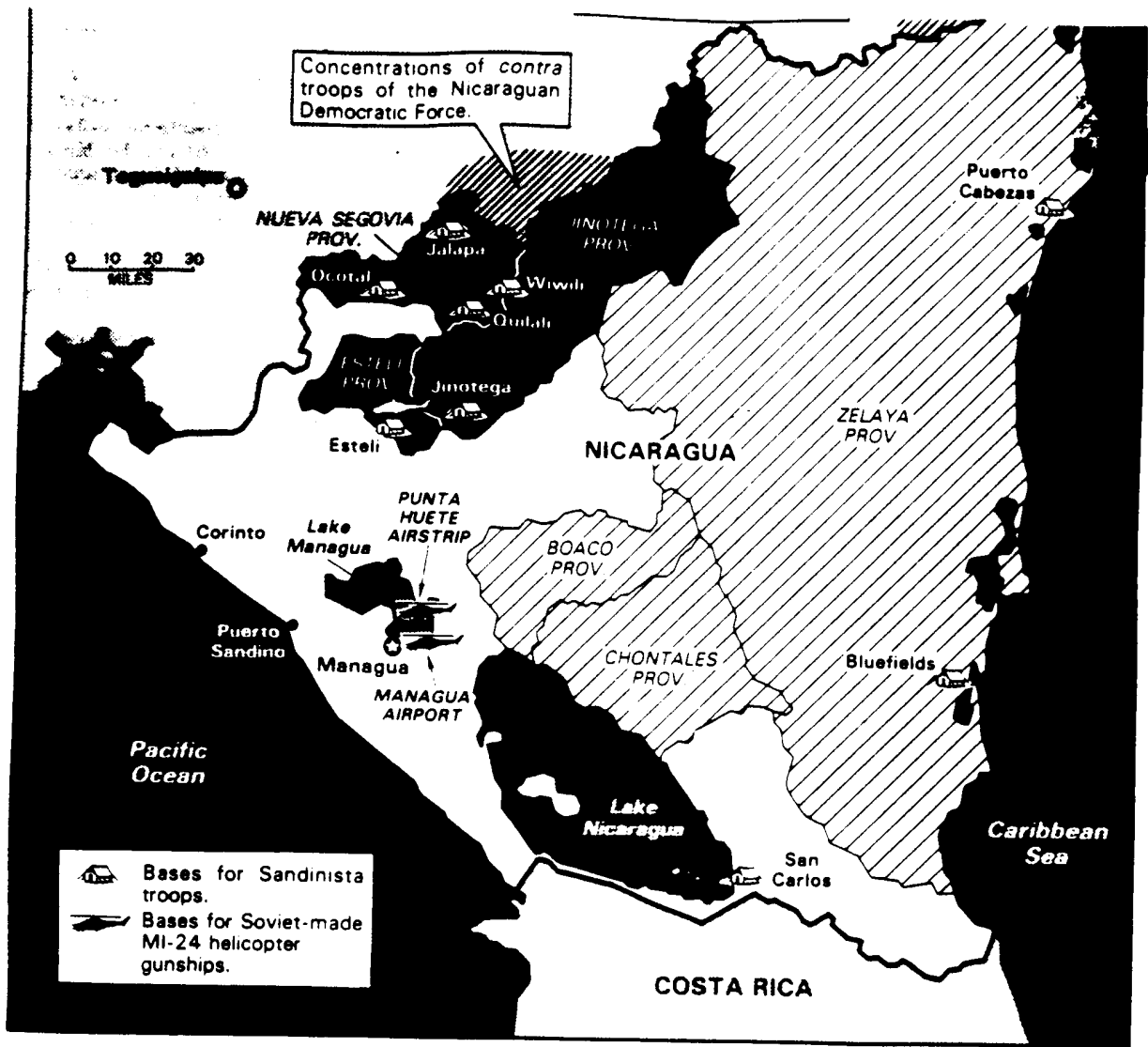
The army, reserves, militia and armed farmers all would be called out for such a war to protect the cities as well as the countryside.

"In an urban war around Managua," said a European diplomat, "it would be a dogfight between the Marines and secondary school students."

Even one of the Indian contras leaders, Brooklyn Rivera, said in an interview that despite his dislike of the Sandinistas, he and his Misurasata rebels would fight against American intervention.

Veterans of the guerrilla war just released from the army said that they, too, would be willing to fight again in case of any direct U.S. intervention.

"We served and we will keep on serving," said Isidro Mejia, 23, on the day of his release. "The struggle is not over. In the mountains or in the city, we are ready."



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