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Sandinistas Grow Stronger, Analysts Say

By MARJORIE MILLER,
Times Staff Writer

MANAGUA, Nicaragua—Five years into their war against the Sandinista government, the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan rebels are still a rudimentary and ineffectual force, unable to mount a real military threat to their well-trained and well-equipped opponents, diplomats and military analysts here say.

These observers say that the Sandinistas, on the other hand, have become an experienced, professional force. They describe the rebels, the so-called *contras*, as "almost a defeated army" and raise questions about how much pressure the rebels could put on the Sandinistas even with the \$100 million in military and humanitarian aid the Reagan Administration wants to give them.

Nicaraguan Confidence

"All you can be sure of is that it keeps them together as a fighting force for another year," said a diplomat who asked not to be identified. "You can't predict how they will use it."

The Sandinistas' confidence tends to reinforce this view.

Last April, when Congress was considering a request for \$14 million in military aid to the *contras*, the Sandinistas and their supporters were in a state of near-panic. The request was defeated, but Congress then approved \$27 million in so-called non-lethal aid after President Daniel Ortega traveled to the Soviet Union.

This time, the Sandinistas seem unruffled. The public mood is matter-of-fact, and Ortega, apparently untroubled by his experience of a year ago, is in Cuba.

"Before, with \$14 million, we felt they were going to kill us," a Sandinista supporter said. "Now we are sure they are going to get the money, but we are more sure that even with the money, we will defeat the *contras*."

To be sure, the war is causing problems for the Sandinistas, who must devote about 50% of their budget to the military and continue with unpopular military conscrip-

tion. By government count, they lost 1,143 soldiers and 281 civilians last year in clashes with the *contras*.

The military is given priority for scarce resources, causing shortages and discontent among civilians and limiting the government's ability to move ahead with other programs and services.

But none of the observers feel that the problems are being translated into internal support for the rebels or that such problems will force the Sandinistas to the bargaining table. Some say they worry mostly that a prolonged war could lead to increased restrictions on political freedom in Nicaragua.

Officials of the Reagan Administration, which financed the *contras* covertly through the CIA from 1981 to 1984, used to say that U.S. policy was designed to stop the Sandinistas from aiding leftist guerrillas in El Salvador. Now these officials say their aim is to pressure the Sandinistas to enter into negotiations with the *contras* and to remake their political system.

Privately, the *contras* make it clear that their intention is to overthrow and replace the Sandinistas.

Estimated Numbers

The Reagan Administration calculates the strength of the rebel force at 22,000 Nicaraguans, 6,000 of them in Nicaragua and the rest waiting supplies in Honduras and Costa Rica. Western observers here say that the total is about 15,000 and that, at most, 3,000 of them are in Nicaragua.

The numbers cannot be confirmed, because access to *contra* bases is restricted by the *contras* and the Honduran military. But whatever their numbers, the *contras* have not done well. They have failed to control any strategic part of Nicaragua, they have failed to win a major military victory and they have failed to create an internal front with urban opera-

Diplomatic and military observers attribute this to a combination of *contra* incompetence and Sandinista superiority.

Last year, the *contras* have managed to shoot down one government transport helicopter with a shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile, to open a new front in the central provinces of Boaco and Chontales and to keep up a stream

of ambushes. But in general they have been overpowered by the Sandinistas on the battlefield.

Coffee-Area Action

When the 1984-85 coffee crop was being harvested—coffee is Nicaragua's primary export—the *contras* attacked 59 farms and processing plants, causing a loss of \$60 million in equipment and coffee left on the trees to rot. This season, the Sandinistas concentrated troops in the northern coffee-producing provinces of Matagalpa and Jinotega, and the *contras* did not attack.

Also in the last year, the *contras* were forced to pull back their southern front on the Costa Rican border, and, according to observers, they botched some of their larger military operations.

"They have been incompetent and ineffectual militarily," one diplomat said. "And they don't seem to know what to do in a guerrilla war."

He pointed to an operation in the northwestern province of Esteli last August in which the guerrillas dynamited four bridges and interrupted traffic for a time but left with all four bridges still in place.

The *contras* say the Sandinistas' introduction of helicopters last year has been a key factor in the war. In the Esteli operation, the rebels attacked the town of La Trinidad, on the Pan American Highway, at dawn. They held the town briefly but, as they retreated, the Sandinistas surprised them with airborne troops and Soviet-built MI-24 gunships. As many as 150 *contras* were reported killed.

Heavy Losses Told

In November, again at dawn, the *contras* attacked the town of Santo Domingo in Chontales province, far from their havens on the Honduran border, but again the Sandinistas responded with helicopters, inflicting heavy casualties on the rebels.

"They should learn you don't go in at dawn," a military observer said. "You go in at dusk, because helicopters can't fly at night."

Success has been mixed on the *contras*' Boaco-Chontales front. Last year, the rebels vowed to cut traffic on the east-west highway linking Managua to the river port of Rama. The river empties into the

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Caribbean, and the Managua-Hama highway is a vital military cargo route for the Sandinistas, being the only paved link between the sea and the capital.

In November, the contras briefly occupied the cattle town of Presilitas on the highway but have failed since then to interrupt the route. Now, observers say, many contra troops are pulling out of the region because of supply shortages.

U.S. officials and contra leaders blame the rebels' lack of success on transportation problems, supply shortages and a need for training, all of which they hope to rectify with the requested \$100 million in U.S. aid.

"You can't run an army when today you have bullets but no boots and tomorrow you have boots but no uniforms," Aristides Sanchez, a rebel leader, said in a recent interview in Honduras. "If the aid is approved, we can disrupt the Sandinista army and put very effective pressure on them."

Of the \$27 million in U.S. aid approved last year, much of it is still unspent, and the supplies bought by some of it are backed up in a New Orleans warehouse. Last year, former Honduran President Roberto Suazo Cordova blocked deliveries to the contras, but the new president, Jose Azcona Hoyo, apparently has given his approval.

Observers describe the contras as needing what amounts to a thorough overhaul if they are to be turned into an army that could pressure the Sandinistas.

In addition to needing anti-aircraft weapons, artillery and ammunition, the contras need basic military and weapons training. They had SAM-7 surface-to-air missiles long before they shot down a Sandinista helicopter in December, but they were unable to use them because they did not know how to clean them. A foreign expert hired by U.S. fund-raisers taught them to do this.

Officer Shortage

Analysts say the contras are severely limited in what they can do in the field by an absence of trained mid-level officers and non-commissioned officers.

"You've got task force commanders who can't read a map," a diplomat said. "They can't move their forces from A to B because they can't read a map."

The contras also need help with building a logistical system to get supplies to their troops.

"The most common medical problem they have is hernia," the diplomat said. "They carry these 70- to 80-pound packs, and they come down with hernias."

Some military analysts believe that with adequate training and direction, the contras could attack strategic economic targets and could inflict more casualties on Sandinista troops. They say the Sandinista army is vulnerable to ambushes because their convoys travel close together and the troops set up their camps in clusters, "like a Boy Scout troop."

But other observers say that the contras' problems run deeper than training, transportation and supply shortages. They cite bickering among the top leadership of the rebel groups—the larger, Washington-favored Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), headed by Adolfo Calero; the United Nicaraguan Opposition, an umbrella group to which Calero belongs together with banker Arturo Cruz and engineer Alfonso Robelo, both former members of the Sandinista government, and a faction of the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance led by guerrilla leader Eden Pastora in Costa Rica.

Leadership Concern

Even U.S. officials in Washington admit privately that incompetent leadership is a concern. They complain that Col. Enrique Bermudez, military commander of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, spends more time in Miami and Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, than in the field.

Another problem, analysts say, is that the contras have not developed a social base inside Nicaragua.

They have no people to help them with communications and supplies, no safe houses that would be needed in the event of urban operations.

The contras get tacit support from Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo and from conservative opposition business and political groups in the country, but they have been unable to turn that into a mass base. The war and the government's state of emergency have prevented these groups from acknowledging their apparent sympathy.

For a long time, the contras had no political platform, although one was drawn up last year, and the Sandinistas, meanwhile, succeeded in branding them all as "Somocistas"—followers of the late dictator Anastasio Somoza. Several of the contra military leaders, including Bermudez, were officers in the

National Guard under Somoza.

"A major failure of the FDN is that no one knew what they stood for politically," a diplomat said. "Belatedly, they did something about it, but the impact it has had here is zilch."

"People are undoubtedly worse off economically. They find life difficult. But I don't think they are so disenchanted as to say, 'Let's join the contras,' especially when the contras are so nebulous."

Some observers believe that with a few battlefield successes, the contras could develop momentum and attract supporters. But others say Washington's contra policy actually discourages internal opposition.

"U.S. contra policy is preventing an internal front by fomenting an external front or drawing them out of the country," a diplomat said. "As long as the contras are organized and financed, it is easier to go to Costa Rica and Honduras than to stay here."

While the contras have lagged, the Sandinistas have improved, in the opinion of most observers, who say the strength of the Sandinista Popular Army has grown to about 60,000. Two years ago, the Sandinistas sent conscripts into combat with little or no training, but now draftees are given 45 to 90 days of basic training before going out in the field. The Sandinistas have trained noncommissioned officers, and their units reportedly are a mixture of experienced men and recruits.

"The Sandinista Popular Army is a growing army that increasingly has benefited from the expertise of Cuban advisers and from six years of their own experience," a military analyst said.

Also, the Sandinista army has complete air superiority over the rebels, a situation that, according to some observers, mirrors that in El Salvador. As occurred in El Salvador, where the United States supplied the helicopters, Soviet-supplied helicopters in Nicaragua have changed the nature of the war, giving government forces mobility and intense firepower and preventing the rebels from building up in large numbers.

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The Sandinistas are reported to have about a dozen functioning MI-8 transport helicopters and at least six armed MI-24 gunships. Observers say that more helicopters have been delivered recently, but they are not sure what kind or how many.

On the ground, the Sandinistas have long-range artillery and about 14 specially trained counter-insurgency battalions they use to seek out the contras rather than waiting to respond to attacks.

Sandinista troop morale is said to be high because distribution of food and other supplies is good and

because they feel they are winning. A soldier near El Espino on the Honduran border told reporters he was getting weekends off because there wasn't much fighting in the area.

Observers say that the Sandinistas have excellent intelligence. They easily intercept communications and have thoroughly infiltrated the contra forces. In addition, their internal security apparatus is highly developed, making it almost impossible for the contras to set up an internal front and urban operations. Penalties for involvement in contra activities are up to 30 years in prison.

Contra leaders have said that their attempts to establish internal operations have all been stymied by the Interior Ministry, headed by veteran Sandinista leader Tomas Borge.

And while the contras have not developed an internal base of support, the Sandinistas have worked very hard to do so, with projects and propaganda. Times may be difficult, a diplomat said, but people are not starving, and there are no bodies at the sides of streets.

"One of the successes of the government has been to blame all its problems on Uncle Sam and the contras," this diplomat said. "People largely accept that their misfortunes are the result of extraneous forces."

Another diplomat, however, said that strength, not propaganda, is what wins a war.

"What the contras need," he said, "is success on the battlefield. . . . It is the Leninist idea of consolidation of forces. Once you start a war, you damn well better be winning."