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'Contras' accused of rights abuses

By Robert Parry
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WASHINGTON — For the second time this week, a private American human rights group has accused U.S.-backed Nicaraguan *contras* of widespread human rights abuses, including "terroristic violence against unarmed civilians."

In a report released yesterday, the Washington-based International Human Rights Law Group said it had interviewed more than 30 Nicaraguans who claimed to have firsthand information and had found sufficient evidence to believe "the *contras* are committing serious abuses against civilians."

One subject, a 28-year-old woman from El Jicaro in northern Nicaragua, said the anti-Sandinista rebels broke into her house early on the morning of Oct. 24, 1984, and slit her husband's throat while their three children watched.

"As he lay bleeding to death, their little girl ran up to her father and

said, 'What's happening to daddy?'" the report said.

The report also recounted allegations that *contras* had raped female captives and had fired indiscriminately into vehicles carrying civilians.

Rebel leaders have denied that their forces commit such crimes and have called the recent human rights allegations part of a propaganda campaign by the leftist Sandinista government. The rebels also have accused the ruling Sandinistas of atrocities.

After the release of the report, rebel spokesman Bosco Matamoros called for independent investigations of the charges by the Roman Catholic Church, an independent Nicaraguan human rights commission and the Organization of American States.

At a news conference, Matamoros accused some of those involved in the report of "directly or indirectly supporting the government of Nicaragua" and added, "We have not tolerated abuses."

On Tuesday, the Americas Watch Committee said that all sides in the Nicaraguan conflict had violated the laws of war but that the Sandinista government had reduced its abuses while those of the *contras* remained unchecked.

A senior State Department official, who spoke on the condition he not be identified, said the International Human Rights Law Group was a respected organization, but he questioned its latest findings.

While acknowledging that some *contras* had committed human rights abuses, the official said the reports released this week "greatly exaggerate" the frequency of such actions. He added that the *contras*' success in recruiting soldiers could not have happened if they were terrorizing the population.

In urging renewal of U.S. aid to the rebels, President Reagan has praised them as "freedom fighters" and the "moral equal of our Founding Fathers."

But two lawyers from the International Human Rights Law Group, Donald T. Fox and Michael J. Glennon, said their investigation last month found credible witnesses to atrocities allegedly committed by the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the largest rebel group.

The report urged Congress not to approve additional funds for the *contras* until it had fully investigated the allegations.

A third report, initiated by the law firm representing the Nicaraguan government in its case against the United States before the World Court, also cites affidavits from Nicaraguans who said they had been victims of *contra* attacks.

Citing 145 sworn statements, the report lists alleged cases of killings, rapes, kidnappings and indiscriminate attacks blamed on the rebels. That report also was released yesterday.

State Department officials noted, however, that the authors of the report had stayed in houses owned by the Nicaraguan government during their investigation and that the document itself was typed in the law offices of Reichler & Appelbaum, which represents the Sandinistas in the World Court.

The State Department official called that report "a piece of Nicaraguan propaganda bought and paid for by the Nicaraguan government."