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WITH THE CONTRAS

A look at goals, origins of rebels

Second of three articles about the anti-Sandinista rebels.

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ON HONDURAS-NICARAGUA BORDER - When Mike Lima rides by on his bay horse with his steel spurs jangling and his Doberman guard dog loping along beside, the guerrilla fighters he leads watch him admiringly.

The 25-year-old field commander for the anti-Sandinista Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), with his camouflage fatigue and his easy grin, is the epitome of a Nicaraguan rebel.

For three years in the late 1970s while a popular uprising against the former Nicaraguan ruler, Gen. Anastasio Somoza Debayle, was gathering momentum, Mike Lima was a cadet in the military academy of Somoza's National Guard. The youth did not fight in the revolution, and, concluding their reforms were communist, fled to Guatemala three months after the Sandinistas' July 1979 triumph.

In 1982 he adopted the nom de guerre "Mike Lima" (now the only name he will use) and led small bands of volunteers on the first forays into Nicaragua's jungles. By October 1983 he had commanded one of the rebels' most destructive incursions, to date, at the town of Pantasma, where he robbed a bank, executed three persons and left behind a swath of smoldering farm vehicles and government buildings.

Later Mike Lima blew off his own right hand and killed four of his men in a mortar accident. Now, he has a steel hook. After

he learned to shoot his AR15 rifle left-handed, a Sandinista grenade last year fractured his left hand and leg. But he's still leading 2700 guerrillas, the FDN's largest single unit.

Recently FDN leaders allowed reporters an extensive visit to their headquarters in the wet forests along this border. The visit was allowed on the condition the exact location of the camp not be published.

President Ronald Reagan, comparing the rebels, or contras, with the founding fathers of the United States, is urging Congress to release \$14 million in Central Intelligence Agency aid for them, mainly for the FDN. But Reagan is facing stiff opposition in Congress.

Critics charge the FDN, the largest of the rebel armies, is made up of US-financed mercenaries drawn from Somoza's National Guard who have committed atrocities against Nicaraguan civilians. Supporters described the FDN as a grass-roots insurgency capable of stemming the development of communism in Nicaragua by forcing the Sandinistas to "say uncle," as Reagan said.

In three days of interviews at the base, FDN leaders said their basic goal is to defeat and oust the Sandinista government. There is little support among FDN military commanders for peace negotiations.

Leaders of the contras, a word that comes from the Spanish for counterrevolutionaries, describe the evolution of the FDN from a core of former National Guard officers contacted in 1981 by the CIA.

Later, the CIA forced out some officers because they were incompetent, undisciplined or too closely associated with Somoza, but many of the original guardsmen

remain in key positions. They have been joined in recent years by civilians who had little to do with either Somoza or the Sandinistas, as well as by some former officers in the Sandinista army.

The FDN also includes thousands of conservative Nicaraguan peasants whose traditional subsistence farming was disrupted by Sandinista policies of collectivism. The FDN claims to have 14,000 fighters.

Decentralized

The FDN runs a decentralized, loosely controlled army in which the commander-in-chief, Enrique Bermudez, often does not know until weeks later what operations his men carried out. Field commanders like Mike Lima handle the war, and would be in positions of power if the FDN overthrew the Sandinistas.

According to its founders, the embryo of the FDN was a group of about 60 former National Guard officers who banded together in March 1980 to form the September 15 Legion, named for Nicaragua's Independence Day. Former National Guard Capt. Armando Lopez, now Commander "L-26," head of logistics for the FDN, recalls that in 1981 legionnaires went in groups of 20 for refresher training courses to Argentina, "the first country that believed in us."

"We weren't Somoza followers, we were a professional army," argued "L-26." "We couldn't be expected to create guerrillas to fight the Sandinistas from bakers or shoemakers."

FDN military chief Bermudez also was among the first legionnaires. A US-trained 27-year veteran of the National Guard, Bermudez spent most of his career as an instructor or administrator, never heading his own combat unit. He was Somoza's military attache in Washington for three years to 1979.

Bermudez, who wears no insignia to mark his rank on his simple green-blue Sears Roebuck uniform, said 13 former National Guard officers have top military posts in the FDN.

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Formed in Guatemala in September 1981, the FDN united the September 15 Legion with conservative civilians like the brothers Aristides and Enrique Sanchez, now the organization's secretary general and chief of psychological warfare, respectively. In 1979 Enrique Sanchez was a congressional deputy from Somoza's Liberal Party. Their family lost three large farms in the Sandinistas' first expropriations, aimed at Somoza and his closest associates.

Arms from CIA

In early 1982 the CIA began equipping the FDN with rifles and mortars. "We fell on each other with hugs, we kissed the rifles, we jumped for joy," "L-26" remembers. At first through Argentine intermediaries, then with its own agents, the CIA issued battle orders, trained contra commandos to plant mines and gave them the explosives to do it, and tried to fashion an internationally acceptable political face for the FDN.

Until early this year Reagan justified US support for the contras - which totaled \$80 million before funding ran out last June - as a way of stemming the flow of arms from Nicaragua to El Salvador's leftists guerrillas. But contra leaders, mentioning the interdiction of arms only as an afterthought, say the FDN's professed goal is to "expel the Marxist-Leninist Sandinistas and restore the rule of law" in Nicaragua.

By late 1983 the CIA faced a crisis, because the rebels were not advancing as rapidly as Washington had hoped. Power disputes flared among the commanders. In

Nicaragua, villagers reported rapes, mutilation of prisoners and unwarranted destruction by the guerrillas.

Under CIA pressure, the FDN court-martialed and executed a former guardsman, Commander "Suicide," and two of his lieutenants. "They committed many abuses against the civilian population," was Bermudez' only comment.

In December 1983, the CIA pressed the FDN to form a new "national directorate" to give a more prominent role to civilians like businessman Adolfo Calero, squeezing out at least seven former guardsmen.

"In order for us to get aid, it was logical for our benefactor to demand something in return, to guarantee the investment," said

"L-26." "We were just an armed group. The national directorate was hand-picked and selected [by the CIA], and we accepted happily."

But Calero, now the FDN's top civilian, bristles at the suggestion he was recruited or imposed by the CIA.

"That's the damnedest lie in the world," said the former executive, who managed an 800-worker Coca Cola plant in Nicaragua, and was jailed four times by Somoza. "I had qualifications few people had - experience, a personal way of life over many years. None of the Americans I associated with in this was older than me, or had more education."

What the contras are fighting against is clearer than what they are fighting for. A triumphant FDN, Bermudez said, would break down farming cooperatives formed by Somoza's properties and distribute them among individual peasants. Enrique Sanchez said he expects to regain his expropriated lands. "I'm Nicaraguan, too," he said. "The one right the FDN logically defends is respect for private property."

Bermudez said the FDN would hold internationally supervised elections. The Sandinistas, he said, would become "citizens with the same rights as everyone else." But he said, "I doubt they'll accept that - they're fanatic Marxist-Leninists."

Meanwhile, Bermudez sits atop a burgeoning insurgent army in which regional commanders plan many of their own operations and recruit their own troops.

FDN training includes no systematic teaching about the group's political goals, or about the rules of war. Asked whether his troops get such courses, Mike Lima said, "Negative. We don't have any political goal except preserving the individual freedom of each person. Our fighters don't have much culture or education. All they need to know is that the Sandinistas are bad."

The FDN is weighing plans to seize territory in Nicaragua to declare a provisional government to

be headed, according to Aristides Sanchez, by Calero and Arturo Jose Cruz, a conservative banker who signed a pact with the FDN earlier this month. But Bermudez said the contras do not yet have sufficient guarantees of international recognition to attempt the move.

While Bermudez said the FDN would impose "no limitations" on a possible peace dialogue, many commanders spoke vehemently against it.

"We'll fight this war to the finish if we have to use picks and shovels," said "L-26." "We won't hold peace talks over the graves of our dead."

Next: Can the rebels win?