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## Key issues behind Reagan push for US aid to 'contras'

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**Washington**  
President Reagan's aid package for Nicaragua faces its first hurdle in Congress tomorrow.

To help readers understand the debate, here are some basic questions and answers relating to the controversial issue:

### What is President Reagan's goal in Nicaragua?

The President stops short of saying he seeks overthrow of the Marxist-leaning Sandinista government.

But he has said that its "structure" must change and that it must negotiate with the insurgents with a view to holding free elections and establishing a pluralistic political system.

Critics say they believe the President wants to replace the Sandinista government with one drawn from the "contras."

### Is Nicaragua trying to export revolution and destabilize Central America as Mr. Reagan asserts?

There is evidence that the Sandinistas briefly supplied arms to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador in 1980 and '81.

They are also training leftist guerrillas from El Salvador and other countries. Publicly the Sandinistas trumpet the triumph of Marxist revolution throughout the hemisphere.

However, the arms exports to El Salvador appear to have slowed to a trickle since 1981. The administration, possibly because of intelligence concerns, has not provided hard evidence of Nicaraguan subversive activities since then.

Many lawmakers in Congress, including members of the intelligence committees, dispute the alleged seriousness of the Nicaraguan threat.

### Does the Soviet Union seek to establish a "second Cuba" in North America?

The administration estimates that the Soviets have supplied more than \$500 million worth of arms, including tanks and other heavy equipment, to Nicaragua since the Sandinistas came to power.

Last year Moscow provided advanced Hind MI-24 helicopter gunships to help combat the rebels. There are about 200 Soviet advisers, some 7,500 Cubans (including teachers and construction workers), and various personnel from East Germany, Bulgaria, Libya, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Nicaragua.

Nicaragua claims that only 200 of the Cubans are military advisers.

Despite this Soviet-bloc presence, State Department officials say privately they see no evidence that Moscow is trying to establish a military base in Nicaragua.

The Soviets know that the US would never tolerate a threat to its national security, say US specialists, and the Soviet role in the region generally has been low key. Much of the Soviet aid is used equipment from Cuba.

### Does Nicaragua threaten the security and vital interests of the US?

The President affirms that the Soviets and Cubans, using Nicaragua as a base, could become the dominant power in Central America, threatening the Panama Canal, interdicting Caribbean sea lanes, and ultimately moving against Mexico. He also raises the specter of thousands of Nicaraguans fleeing across the border into the US.

Critics, while not discounting a Nicaraguan threat, charge the President with resorting to hyperbole and scare tactics. If a clear and overt threat ever arose, it is argued, the US would quickly resort to military force to remove it.

### Have the Sandinistas betrayed the revolution which overthrew former dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle?

The Sandinistas have gradually squeezed out the moderate, democratic elements in the government and imposed an increasingly oppressive regime on the Nicaraguan people.

They have curbed the press, demobilized political parties, harassed the Roman Catholic Church and other religious groups, and instituted tight surveillance of ordinary citizens.

Supporters and critics of US policy agree the Sandinistas are organizing society along Cuban-style totalitarian lines.

### How did the counterrevolutionaries or contras arise and what is their strength?

The contras were organized two months after Mr. Reagan came into office. Initially they were drawn largely from the ranks of Somoza's National Guard and organized and financed by the Central Intelligence Agency.

As US-Nicaraguan relations deteriorated, the contras have grown and now number up to 20,000 men. But because of lack of weapons and training, only 6,000 are estimated by the administration to be still in Nicaragua.

### Are the contras still dominated by "Somocistas"?

The administration says that of the 153 most senior military leaders of the largest resistance group, about 53 percent are civilians, 27 percent served in the Somoza National Guard, and 20 percent were comrades in arms of the Sandinistas.

Edén Pastora Gómez, one of the contra leaders, based in Costa Rica, will not coordinate with the main insurgent group because of its ties to the former Somoza regime.

Edgar Chamorro, a former leader of the principal contra force, resigned last year because he said the contras were controlled by Somoza officers.

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### **Do the contras enjoy popular support?**

Popular discontent with the Sandinista regime is growing, but there has been no rush of support for the contras, who are viewed by many Nicaraguans as a throwback to the former National Guard.

The rebels have drawn most of their support from the peasantry but failed to gain it in urban areas and among the middle class.

The administration argues that it is harder for an opposition to develop under a Marxist-dominated regime than in such countries as the Philippines, where opposition forces had greater freedom of action.

### **What are the contras' chances against the Sandinista government?**

US military experts do not think the contras could oust the Sandinistas or do them much damage. The Nicaraguan regime has an army of 60,000 well-equipped men plus a militia force of 60,000 — the largest military force in Central America and twice the size of the Somoza National Guard at its height.

Opponents of aid contend that US military support for the contras would be met with greater Soviet and Cuban help for the Sandinistas and escalate the conflict. More contra aid, they argue, will drive the Sandinistas toward increased dependence on Moscow.

The administration says the contras, if well trained and armed, could bring enough pressure to bear on the Sandinistas to force them to negotiate.

### **How much aid would it take for the contras to become a force capable of exerting such pressure?**

Experts agree that \$100 million would be only a start, given the strength and determination of the Sandinistas.

To overthrow the Nicaraguan regime and install a pro-US government would require the commitment of US troops, say military analysts.

### **Is the US training the rebels?**

The administration rules out sending American advisers to help train or fight with contras inside Nicaragua. But it would like to use the Army's Special Forces to train contras in Honduras, where the contras have bases and from which they mount raids into Nicaragua.

Some of the requested \$70 million in military aid would be used to pay for US military trainers.

The US maintains a strong military presence in Honduras and regularly conducts exercises with Honduran forces.

### **Why did Congress cut off covert military aid to the contras?**

Lawmakers were angered by US mining of Nicaraguan harbors and the disclosure of a CIA manual in Nicaragua containing instructions on the selective use of assassination — contrary to US law.

In October 1984 Congress cut off all funds to the contras from any agency involved in intelligence activities.

The administration then encouraged funding of the contras by private groups, an action which critics say violates US neutrality laws.

### **What has happened to the \$27 million in so-called humanitarian or nonmilitary aid which Congress appropriated in 1985?**

It's not clear; some of it is unaccounted for. The State Department says \$5 million still has not been spent. The Honduran government has resisted channeling the aid to the rebels, fearing that it might lead to a direct conflict with Nicaragua.

### **Would \$100 million in contra aid add to the federal budget deficit?**

The President is not asking for a new appropriation. He seeks approval to use funds already assigned to the Defense Department.

But congressional concern has arisen that he intends to tap into a CIA contingency fund which is used to initiate covert operations.

### **Are the contras a unified political force?**

There are several different political groups, including the US-sponsored United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO).

There is considerable conflict among the exiles.

Opponents of contra aid charge that the resistance movement has no unified political leadership and no political program that could win the support of the people.

### **Do the contras commit atrocities?**

Reports by human rights organizations, including America Watch, show that both the Sandinistas and the contras engage in violence and brutality against the Nicaraguan people.

### **Do the nations of Central and Latin America support US aid for the contras?**

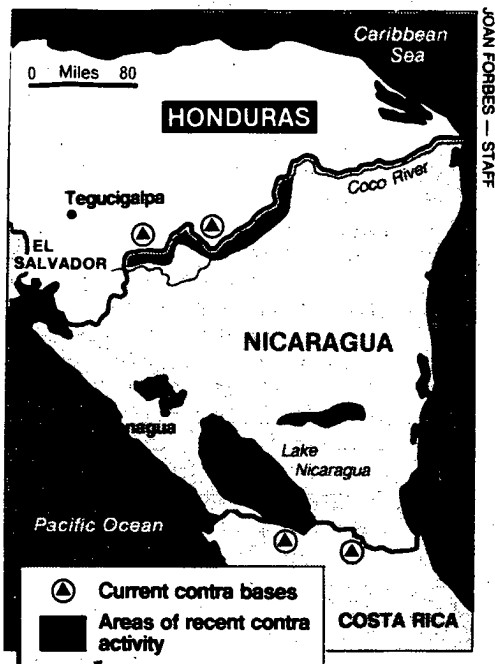
Eight Latin American countries earlier this year called on the President to halt such aid and opt for a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

The administration claims that several countries support US policy privately but are reluctant to do so publicly for domestic political reasons.

US special envoy Philip Habib, just back from Central America, says that a recent poll finds that most people in the region support the Reagan policy and favor pressure on the Sandinistas.

Administration critics are dubious. They feel the nations of the region should be willing to support the US if they perceive the Sandinistas to be such a danger to regional stability.

Instead the Latin Americans are pressing for negotiations. And while they do not like a Marxist government in their midst, they are concerned that a unilateral US intervention would be even worse for regional stability and the US image.



### What is the Contadora process?

Four countries — Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, and Mexico — met on the Panamanian island of Contadora in 1983 to begin drafting a peace treaty that would cut off all arms imports, expel all military advisers, end support for guerrilla movements, stop arms

smuggling, bar foreign military exercises, limit the size of armed forces, and set up verification procedures.

### What has happened to that process? Has the US made a good-faith effort to pursue a diplomatic solution?

Last September the four agreed on a Contadora treaty, which was accepted by Nicaragua.

The US rejected the draft treaty, however, calling for stronger verification and execution mechanisms. Nicaragua and Guatemala refused to sign the new version, produced by diplomats from Central American countries.

### Where does diplomacy now stand?

In an effort to break the stalemate, the Contadora countries and four "support" countries (Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Uruguay) in January met in Carabelleda, Venezuela, and signed a declaration restating many of the Contadora objectives and calling on the US to stop aid to the contras and resume negotiations with Nicaragua. The Central American countries have backed the appeal.

The US has turned it down, saying it would reopen bilateral talks with Nicaragua only if Nicaragua opened bilateral talks with the contras.

The administration blames Nicaragua for breakdown of the diplomatic process, but it recently sent Mr. Habib to Central America to explore the diplomatic possibilities, including Salvadorean President Duarte's proposal for talks between his government and Salvadorean rebels if Nicaraguan leaders hold simultaneous talks with the contras. The results of the Habib trip are not known.

Skeptics say the Habib mission is more a political move designed to win congressional votes than a serious diplomatic effort.