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U.S. claims on Nicaragua called off base

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua—U.S. claims about the extent of terrorist activity in Nicaragua are exaggerated, and President Reagan's threats to strike back at targets in this country are not likely to be carried out, according to Western and Nicaraguan sources.

The Reagan administration long has accused the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua of "exporting" terrorism, especially in support of leftist guerrillas in El Salvador.

In mid-July, the administration said it would hold Nicaragua responsible for any terrorist attack against Americans anywhere in Central America. It also said Nicaragua's support for groups that have "inflicted terrorism" on Americans was a "focus" of planned antiterrorist action by the U.S.

But the sources, including members of the intelligence community, say Reagan's vow to strike targets in Nicaragua if terrorist attacks are carried out against U.S. citizens in Central America seems highly unlikely to be carried out.

It would be extremely difficult and potentially very costly in terms of American lives to carry out a successful raid on a terrorist base in this country, the sources said.

The cost of a full-fledged U.S. invasion of Nicaragua would be staggering: One analyst estimated that it would claim the lives

of 3,000 American troops in the first two weeks and would cost more than \$2 billion. Thus, the experts conclude, the most likely retaliatory action would be a bombing raid on a strategic target, such as an airfield.

But several sources said such a course could backfire by rallying support for the ruling Sandinistas and damaging the political standing of the internal opposition, which is generally viewed as pro-U.S.

In any case, the sources said, Nicaragua may not be the hub of terrorist activity that the admin-

istration has implied it is.

"I keep wondering why Nicaragua is always fingered when this talk of terrorism starts," said a Western analyst in Managua. "They [the Nicaraguans] are hardly big fish. They are not experts on terrorism. They are certainly not the people you want to learn from."

Several sources pointed out that given Washington's preoccupation with Nicaragua at the moment, it is not the safest place

to establish terrorist training bases.

"If you wanted to train Latin American terrorists, you would obviously want to do it in Cuba," a Western observer said. "What more secure place could you ask for?"

According to several Nicaraguan and Western sources with regular access to intelligence information, there is no evidence of established terrorist training bases in this country.

Reagan has called Nicaragua an "outlaw nation," along with Libya, Iran, Cuba and North Korea. But the administration has never publicly pinpointed a terrorist training base in Nicaragua.

"Some known terrorists do come through here," said a Western observer with access to intelligence reports on Nicaragua. "Some come here to go to ground [hide]; some come here to rest between jobs. But how much actual training and planning goes on here is another story."

The same source said his most reliable information indicated that the Nicaraguans maintain several safe houses for terrorists in Managua but that they are not occupied by the same people all the time and not always by terrorists.

That, together with the fact that the houses are in densely populated parts of the capital, makes it nearly impossible to carry out an effective raid on such a target

without running the risk of high-civilian casualties, several sources said.

The situation would be different in the case of a terrorist base outside the center of the city, but the prospects aren't much more attractive.

A Western military analyst offered the following scenario for a hypothetical attack on a remote terrorist training camp, far from populated areas, with 500 armed men in it.

The analyst, who declined to be identified, assumed a 3-to-1 ratio of U.S. to guerrilla forces. That would mean that 1,500 soldiers, probably marines launched from an amphibious unit off the Nicaraguan coast, would have to be brought by helicopter to the target.

He said bombing raids by aircraft-carrier-based fighter jets would first prepare the target area. [U.S. aircraft carriers and other warships frequently patrol near the coasts of Nicaragua in international waters. The Eisenhower was here last week.]

He estimated that the time needed to land the marines, secure the target, kill or capture the terrorists found there, and evacuate would be four to six hours.

"This is assuming that these people were there the day we arrived and that the operation could be carried out before the Sandinista army was able to reinforce," he said.

He said it was very difficult to say how many casualties would be sustained by the U.S. forces in such a raid, but pointed to the failed attempt to rescue the U.S.

hostages in Iran in 1980 as an example of the kinds of things that could go wrong.

"Don't let anyone tell you that kind of thing could not happen again," he said.

Several sources pointed out that though the United States is certainly capable of such a raid, or even of invading Nicaragua, the cost in lives and the political problems such actions would lead to made

them unlikely options for the Reagan administration as it approaches midterm elections next year.

Retired Marine Lt. Col. John Buchanan, a private military analyst in Washington, has done a study of what it would take to invade Nicaragua and what the casualties were likely to be.

According to his study, 2,880 U.S. soldiers would die in the first two weeks of the invasion and 17,150 would be wounded. Over three to five years, the time he estimated U.S. forces would have to stay in the country to secure the military and political goals of the invasion, a total of 6,348 U.S. servicemen would die and 38,230 would be wounded.

He estimated that an invasion force of 63,000 U.S. troops would be needed, plus 15,000 contra guerrillas. They would be backed by 250 airplanes, 700 helicopters and two battle carrier groups of seven or eight ships each. The cost of such an invasion would be \$2 billion to \$2.5 billion, plus \$3 billion more to replace destroyed equipment and \$6 billion to rebuild the Nicaraguan economy afterward.

Buchanan put Nicaraguan casualties at 31,740 killed and 191,150 wounded over three to five years.

He used computer projections based on casualty figures from World Wars I and II and the Vietnam War to come up with his estimates.

The high cost of an invasion or a commando raid leads most analysts to conclude that the likely U.S. option would be to bomb a strategic target in Nicaragua. This would reduce to nearly zero the chances of U.S. casualties, because Nicaraguan air defenses are minimal. If the targets were strictly military, such an option would also minimize the chances of killing civilians.

Likely targets for such raids include the Punta Huete military airstrip near Managua, the Puerto Cabezas strip on the Atlantic coast and the capital's international airport, among other sites.

But one Western observer argued that any U.S. attack against Nicaragua, while perhaps pleasing certain political groups in the U.S., would probably have the reverse effect here.

"It would give the Sandinistas another means of galvanizing waning political support at home," the observer said.