

MIAMI HERALD
3 March 1985

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ON PAGE 1-A

World's leftists find a haven in Nicaragua

Some sought on charges of terrorism

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua — Scores of left-wing militants from around the world — some of them wanted on terrorism charges in their home countries — have settled in revolutionary Nicaragua since the Sandinista triumph of 1979.

Some are treated by the Nicaraguan government as virtual diplomats, representing their organizations. Others are fugitive militants, granted jobs, identification papers and safe haven.

An overwhelming majority are simple political exiles or leftist sympathizers come to express solidarity with the Sandinista revolution and mingle with ideological brethren in a friendly environment.

Several Sandinista officials acknowledge, however, that a significant minority, mostly Latin Americans, are active guerrillas, plotting the overthrow of home governments. They hold strategy meetings and, sometimes, undergo military training here and in Cuba, the officials say.

The Reagan administration has used the presence of so many people with ties to left-wing groups as proof that Nicaragua has become a nest of international terrorism. U.S. officials say they will focus on these links in asking Congress to resume U.S. assistance to anti-Sandinista rebels. Anti-Sandinista leader Alfonso Robelo calls Nicaragua "the center of terrorism in Latin America today."

But several knowledgeable sources interviewed in Managua, elsewhere in Central America and in the United States argue that Nicaragua is less a terrorists' training ground than a tropical sand-and-surf watering hole for the international revolutionary set.

One leftist intellectual close to both exile circles and the Sandinista leadership called Nicaragua "a winter barracks for over-repressed guerrillas." Training of foreign terrorists, he said, "is not government policy."

Whether they are guerrillas-at-ease or terrorists-in-waiting, it is clear that Nicaragua is attracting them by the droves.

On almost any day, Argentine and Uruguayan guerrillas gather at the Yerba Buena, a beatnik-style coffee shop-bookstore in the heart of Managua. Salvadoran rebels can often be found dining at the Los Gauchos restaurant. Italians and Germans gather for small house parties.

Some are indeed fugitives: Italians from the Red Brigades and Unita Combattente Comunisti; West Germans linked to the Baader-Meinhof Gang; members of Spain's Basque ETA separatist guerrillas; leaders of Honduras' Cinchonero guerrillas; militants from Peru's Shining Path; Montoneros from Argentina; Tupamaros from Uruguay; and a hodgepodge of Salvadorans, Costa Ricans, Colombians, Chileans, Guatemalans, Paraguayans and Bolivians.

On Feb. 8, the Italian government handed the Sandinistas a list of 22 left-wing Italian extremists believed to be living in Nicaragua, some already sentenced in absentia to 22 years in prison, some wanted on arrest warrants, others described only as "subversives."

'Clean conscience'

The Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry has denied any knowledge of the 22 Italians. Sandinista officials also say their "conscience is clean" regarding the Reagan administration allegations they consider most damaging to their image: Reputed links to Libyan strongman Moammar Khadafy, Iranian Moslem extremists and Colombian drug traffickers.

However, one ranking Sandinista official acknowledged that "we can't deny everything.... It is perfectly possible that on special occasions there would be [training] courses scheduled." The official, like almost every other knowledgeable source contacted, agreed to talk about the sensitive issue on promise of anonymity.

Some Nicaraguan officials, though not many, say they regard the aid to leftists as retaliation for U.S. support for anti-Sandinista guerrillas. And they say the European leftists are fighting NATO, "the symbol of American imperialism in Europe."

Conversations with a variety of sources indicate that the Sandinistas draw a careful distinction

between guerrilla movements that have armies in the field and terrorist organizations that specialize in bombings, kidnappings and assassinations. Guerrillas, especially those from El Salvador and other Central American countries, can get training and guns. The others, mostly from Europe, are kept at arm's length.

Help was denied

But on occasion the Sandinistas have even denied help to Latin American guerrillas. Leaders of Colombia's April 19 Movement have told friends they were denied permission to use Nicaragua as a staging base for their 1981 incursion into Colombia's Cauca province. A Peruvian writer known to be close to Shining Path guerrillas was expelled from Nicaragua last year. And Salvadoran rebels said that the Sandinistas almost refused them permission to use the Managua airport as a stopover last month for 10 crippled guerrillas traveling from Costa Rica to Europe for medical treatment.

Despite these occasional rejections, Nicaraguan government officials said, the Sandinistas have built an extensive, intricate and highly discreet system for maintaining and cultivating contacts with the foreign leftists and funneling different kinds of assistance to them.

Many Sandinista officials acknowledge that in a sense they are repaying past favors. The Palestine Liberation Organization trained at least 150 Sandinistas in Lebanon during the 1960s and 1970s, said a former Israeli intelligence agent who used to live in

Nicaragua. And Argentina's Montonero guerrillas sent 20 to 30 foot soldiers to fight in the revolution, said Eden Pastora, a one-time Sandinista turned opposition guerrilla leader, in a Miami interview.

Cuba relationship

The Sandinistas' relationship with Cuba dates back to 1961, when Interior Minister and Comandante Tomas Borge underwent guerrilla training there. Hundreds of Sandinista rebels eventually trained in Cuba. And in 1979, Havana sent several planeloads of guns and ammunition for the final offensive against President Anastasio Somoza.

Controlling today's aid system in Nicaragua is the Sandinista Front's Directorate for International Relations, supervised by Bayardo Arce, like Borge one of the nine *comandantes* who have ruled Nicaragua since 1979. Arce is regarded as one of the most radical of the nine, which also include Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.

The directorate, all of the sources agreed, manages the Sandinista party's "fraternal" relations with everybody from official ruling parties, to loyal oppositions, to broad front coalitions, leftist alliances, guerrilla groups and bands of terrorists.

"This includes groups battered by repression because of their

active opposition to their governments," said one Nicaraguan official. "Many of these are underground groups."

And many of them are still virtually underground in Nicaragua, under Sandinista orders to stay out of public view. Long-time Sandinistas said this is the same wink-and-a-nod arrangement the Cubans imposed on them when they lived in exile in Havana in the 1960s and 1970s.

The sources said at least 30 of the clandestine groups have *delegados* in Managua who are officially recognized by the directorate. A *delegado* has three duties: maintain official contacts with the Sandinista Front; organize his group's meetings, publications and other political work; establish links with other foreign groups and potential sponsors.

PLO embassy

The Palestine Liberation Organization has an embassy and diplomatic staff in Managua. Colombia's April 19 Movement has a political office. The Salvadoran guerrillas have three news and propaganda offices, as well as a clandestine radio transmitter.

Once a *delegado* has established himself, his key job is to find work for down-and-out compatriots living in Nicaragua, Sandinista officials said. The directorate will not help here, but allows the *delegado* to exploit his personal contacts within the government.

One Latin American exile living in Managua said that Montoneros in 1980 offered to use some of their savings, amassed in dozens of ransom kidnappings, to build a Managua factory that would employ some of their guerrilla countrymen. There is no indication whether the project was carried out.

Several of the *delegados* have taken advantage of the Sandinistas' hospitality to summon followers abroad to strategy-setting sessions in Managua. Peru's Shining Path held a "spiritual retreat" last year to study Von Clausewitz's book *On War* and "the theory of betrayal" according to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, said one person who attended.

Sandinista officials usually stay away from such revolutionary seminars, sources said, although they almost certainly know about them. "They are notoriously careful about who they let into the country, so it must be with their knowledge," one official said.

A former official of the Nicaraguan Interior Ministry who now lives in Costa Rica said the directorate also occasionally helps fugitive guerrillas and terrorists by arranging financial aid through labor unions and other Sandinista-run organizations. It also can provide safe houses, false passports, Nicaraguan identification cards and false license plates, he said.

The Interior Ministry's General Directorate for State Security and the Sandinista army, the source added, both have officers specially assigned to help any foreign leftist that gets into trouble — a car accident or a drunken brawl.

For the first four years of the revolution, the sources said, the Sandinistas provided a steady flow of aid and assistance to their leftist friends, especially the Salvadoreans.

'Ripe for revolution'

"The Sandinista triumph brought a certain revolutionary euphoria," said one Sandinista official with close ties to the exiles. "We thought all Latin America was ripe for revolution,

so there was a lot of assistance going out. Those people could count on support."

But by mid-1983, the official said, and especially after the U.S. invasion of Grenada in October of that year, the Sandinistas "began to realize that the tide of Latin American history was moving against us."

On Nov. 20, 1983, the Sandinistas gave the Salvadoran guerrillas two days to transfer some of their people out of Nicaragua and close down some safe houses. They moved some of their logistics operations, including a radio station, to more discreet locations on the outskirts of Managua, Salvadoran rebel officials said.

A year later, however, the Sandinistas moved in still another direction after noting that controversial U.S. policies — the Grenada invasion and deployment of U.S. cruise missiles in Europe — had gone forward without effective international opposition.

Seeing themselves as the next target for U.S. aggression, Nicaraguan officials said, the Sandinistas sought closer links with the radical European left, the failed anti-missile movement, other Latin American leftists and even U.S. liberals.

Visitors from the United States, Europe and Latin America now return home, said one official, "sensitized to the Central America problem, and if they've spent any time at all here they have passionate sentimental links to Nicaragua."

Some of the visitors leave with more than passions. According to several of the sources, there is a second level of Sandinista assistance to Latin American leftist volunteers — one that includes military training.

Continued

Cuba's top military representative in Nicaragua, Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa, runs this program through two parallel chains of command, according to the former Interior Ministry official and two present Sandinista government officials.

'Cuban Force'

One, the "Cuban Force," is made up entirely of Cuban officers. The other, the "International Force," has only Latin American exiles, many of them Argentines, Chileans and Uruguayans, who live in Cuba and hold officers' rank in the

Cuban military. All foreign military advisers are issued Nicaraguan identification cards, the defector added.

Sources with access to the People's Sandinista Army's payroll records said about 700 Cuban military advisers and 555 International Force officers were in Nicaragua in 1980. The number tripled the following year, they added.

The pick of the Latin American volunteers go to Cuba for instruction in special camps in the western province of Pinar del Rio and an installation near Guanabo, close to Havana, known as "Base 00," the defector said. In 1983, he said, he saw Cuban military officers at the Managua airport escorting 10-12 Costa Rican volunteers aboard a plane for a flight to Havana.

Second-level prospects, the sources said, are trained in Nicaragua, either in groups from the same country or as individuals integrated into regular Sandinista army units. Several Honduran guerrillas captured in 1983 and 1984 described 2½ years of training in Cuba and Nicaragua, followed by several months of fighting with the Nicaraguan army against anti-Sandinista rebels.

Still, most foreign leftists living in Nicaragua did not come to hone military skills or hide out.

The majority are political exiles who fled right-wing governments, or they are militant leftists who moved to Nicaragua because of what one South American intellectual called a "moral imperative" to support the Sandinista revolution.

Many of the exiles, usually professionals and technicians who would have difficulties working in more developed countries, also came to Nicaragua because they can find jobs here, replacing a managerial class rapidly fleeing Sandinista rule.

And Nicaragua is a safe haven, a place where enemies cannot easily watch them, where they can gather in groups and perhaps persuade the government to grant them the kind of international solidarity that the Sandinistas enjoyed during their long struggle against Somoza.

"The Sandinistas received a lot of help when they were guerrillas," said a one-time high-ranking Sandinista security official now living in Costa Rica. "Now the others are collecting the debt."

The International Connection

Nicaragua's network of the left

PLO — A PLO faction trained as many as 150 Sandinista guerrilla fighters in the 1970s, including the late head of the Nicaraguan telecommunications office. A Sandinista, Patricio Arguello, was killed during a Palestinian hijacking attempt. The PLO now has an embassy in Managua.

Red Brigades — Sandinistas reportedly first met members of Italy's Red Brigades in Palestinian training camps. The Italian government has claimed that 22 terrorists and political extremists now are living in Nicaragua, a claim the Sandinistas say they will investigate.

Baader-Meinhof — Sandinista contacts with Baader-Meinhof terrorists also began in Palestinian training camps. Two West Germans now in the Sandinista army reportedly have said they were Baader-Meinhof members. Other Baader-Meinhof members are reported to have visited Nicaragua since the revolution.

Montoneros — Former Sandinista fighter Eden Pastora says 20 to 30 of the Argentine guerrillas joined Sandinistas fighting Somoza. A Montonero commando team assassinated Somoza in Paraguay. Several Montoneros now live in Nicaragua.

