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'Contras' strategy: Push for Managua

By Richard Whitmire
USA TODAY

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras — First, say the "contras," come guerrilla attacks, then possibly holding Nicaraguan territory and finally an assault on Managua.

With a boost from $100 million in U.S. aid, that's the strategy the contras — the guerrillas fighting the Nicaraguan Sandinista government — have planned for winning their war.

"We will be in Managua by the end of 1987," predicts Frank Arana, spokesman for the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the largest of the contra groups.

The immediate contra needs: small cargo planes, anti-helicopter rockets and money to expand their fighting force from 18,000 to 35,000.

If the war turns in their favor and they're able to hold Nicaraguan territory, then heavy artillery and anti-tank weapons will be needed.

No U.S. or Honduran official interviewed found "Managua by the end of 1987" a realistic goal. The tiny, ill-trained contra force needs far more than the $100 million before it's a match for the well-supplied Sandinista troops, they said.

Arana claims that half his 18,000 troops are inside Nicaraguan territory — a figure scoffed at by many.

"Maybe 1,500 at most," said Manuel Gamero, the editor of the Honduran newspaper Tiempo.

Many analysts think the contras will try to hold territory and declare a provisional government, a move critics call the "Bay of Pigs" option.

The logical beachhead would be Puerto Cabezas on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, argues David MacMichael, a former CIA analyst.

"They could be resupplied by sea," said MacMichael. "It's simply a Bay of Pigs scenario, and for that reason it's fraught with danger."

During the aborted Cuban invasion, former President John F. Kennedy decided against sending U.S. troops to rescue the U.S.-trained-and-equipped Cuban expatriates.

"Kennedy said no," said MacMichael, who then waved his hand in the direction of the White House.

"But I don't think anyone would give odds that these guys would say no."