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Moderate backs aid to contras

Nicaragua opposition leader: Political options narrowing

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WASHINGTON — Nicaraguan opposition leader Arturo Cruz, a moderate who has advocated a political settlement of the guerrilla war in his country, Thursday issued a surprising call for restoring U.S. aid to CIA-backed rebels fighting the Sandinista government.

"Unfortunately, political options are narrowing in my country, so I must be realistic and state what I state," Cruz told reporters at a news conference.

"It would be a terrible political mistake to withdraw aid," he added.

Cruz's endorsement of aid to the anti-Sandinista insurgents known as contras comes at a time when the Reagan administration may find it difficult to assemble congressional support for it.

A suspension of aid to the contras is in effect until Feb. 28. Though the president is expected to ask Congress for more money in March, getting the votes will not be easy. The House has voted in the past to cut funds to the rebels. In the Senate, the departure of two Republicans is expected to make it harder for an

aid package to pass.

Cruz said his goal remains a peaceful solution to the political schism in Nicaragua. But without a military threat, he doubted that the Marxist-inspired Sandinista government would be serious about negotiating.

"For any solution to be feasible, it is essential to discuss matters from a position of strength," he said. "Otherwise, the Sandinistas become more inflexible.

"Suspension of aid does not necessarily mean the end of the struggle, but certainly it could be critical."

Cruz, a development banker by training, was part of the opposition to late Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza, who was overthrown by the Sandinistas five years ago.

He served as a member of the governing junta and later as ambassador to Washington, a post he resigned because of disagreement with the increasingly Marxist orientation of the Sandinistas.

Cruz was selected as the candidate for an opposition coalition in Nicaragua's November election. But the coalition boycotted the vote, claiming the Sandinistas had stacked the deck in their favor.

Cruz called the CIA's covert assistance program a qualified success, although after three years and \$80 million, the contras are facing increasingly stronger Sandinista forces.