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# Nicaragua: Military Supply Links



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An Intelligence Assessment

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GI 83-10194C

August 1983

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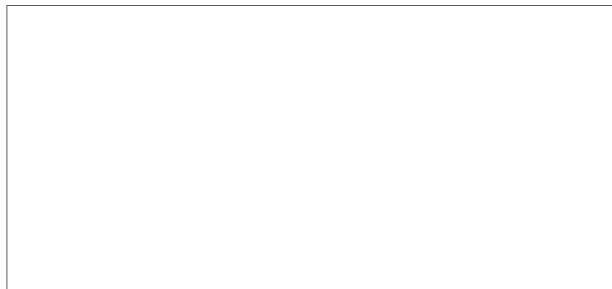
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# Nicaragua: Military Supply Links



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**An Intelligence Assessment**



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**Nicaragua:  
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**Key Judgments**

*Information available  
as of 12 August 1983  
was used in this report.*

Nicaragua probably will receive about 10,000 to 15,000 tons of military equipment from the USSR and its surrogates in 1983, if current trends continue. Moscow, the ultimate source for most military material provided to the Sandinistas, has been cautious in its selection of methods of delivery.



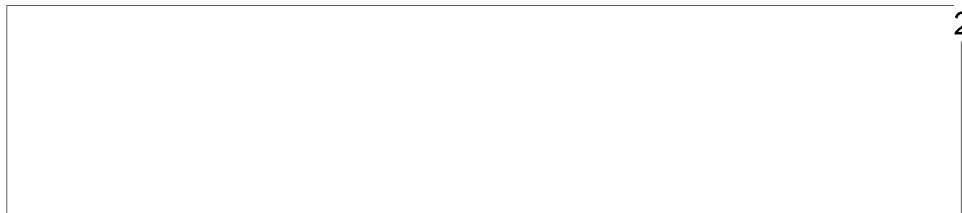
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 The USSR apparently has provided only military support equipment—such as trucks and transport aircraft—directly on its own vessels.

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Thus far the supply system has been relatively easy for Managua and its suppliers to operate. Some 20 oceangoing ships a month deliver cargo at Nicaraguan ports; while most do not carry arms, all are in a position to carry goods of value to the Sandinista military. Vessels are always available to carry such equipment under charter. While many ship operators would not be inclined to carry material such as military explosives or combat equipment, almost anything else would be acceptable in the depressed shipping business. Nicaragua's allies have consequently had no difficulty arranging the supplemental transportation they need.

As long as delivery needs remain at current levels, this approach fits the requirements of both Moscow and Managua. Should supply needs escalate substantially, however, the logistic ease with which Managua has been able to obtain supplies during the past four years would deteriorate, and Moscow would find it increasingly difficult to avoid more obvious involvement. For example, a larger number of the commercial vessels now serving Nicaragua might have to be drawn into the military support effort.



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The weakest link in Nicaragua's supply system is its poor internal transport infrastructure, which is susceptible to disruptions. If the Sandinistas are unable to maintain effective control of the two east-west highways or to sustain the flow of arms upriver from El Bluff, Managua's ability to move arms and munitions to the interior would be significantly hampered. Resupply to both coasts would have to be accomplished in a more visible fashion by sea and airlift, complicating Soviet efforts to remain in the background.



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**Nicaragua:  
Military Supply Links**



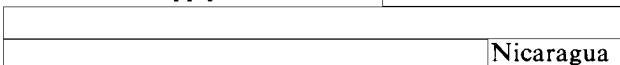
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**Introduction**

Nicaragua continues to receive large inflows of military equipment from abroad. If delivery patterns observed through July 1983 continue, total military deliveries will equal some 10,000 to 15,000 metric tons this year—a pace of supply for Nicaragua's armed forces that, per capita, is slightly greater than the recent substantial rates of resupply for Cuba's military. Deliveries to Nicaragua in 1982 were estimated at 7,000 tons. The equipment delivered to Managua since 1979 has ranged from tanks, other armored vehicles, and rocket launchers to military-associated supplies such as trucks, transport helicopters, and expendables including munitions and medical goods.



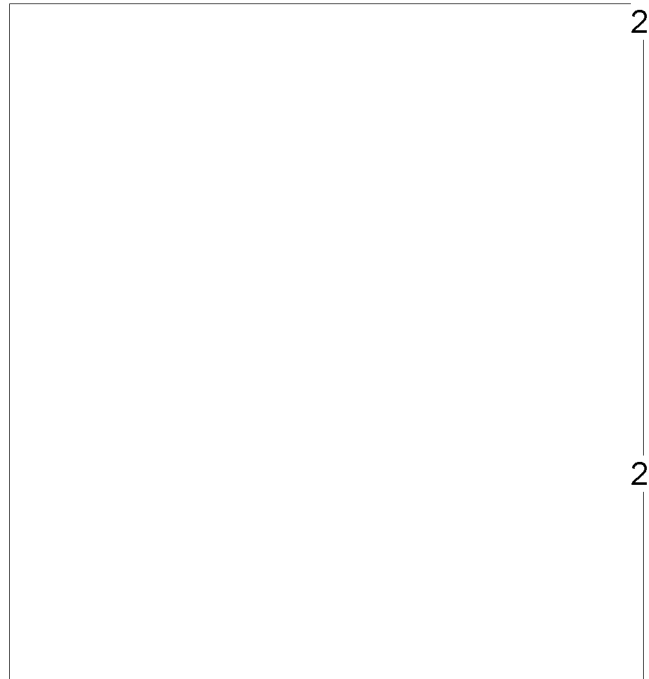
The Soviet Union is the ultimate source of most of the military goods sent to Managua, and direct shipments from Moscow account for about half of the total tonnage. The Kremlin has worked hard to avoid open involvement in the arms supply effort, preferring to stay in the background as much as possible. The bulk of Soviet direct shipments has consisted of the more innocuous military-associated support items, including such dual-use goods as construction equipment, tents, and field kitchens. Soviet allies, primarily East Germany, Bulgaria, and Cuba, have delivered most of the actual weapons and were probably compensated later for this effort. Others, such as Libya, also continue to supply combat arms.



Nicaragua has also purchased some military goods openly from Argentina, France, Spain, Brazil, and Japan.



Most military supplies have come to Nicaragua by sea under various shipping arrangements. All direct Soviet shipments have been carried on Soviet ships assigned to two USSR-controlled shipping lines that link the Baltic ports with the Caribbean and Latin America. The majority of shipments from Cuba probably have been carried by the four ships belonging to



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a joint Cuban-Nicaraguan shipping line. Cuba, however, has almost certainly used other small Cuban and Nicaraguan ships to deliver sensitive cargoes. Both Bulgaria and Algeria have used vessels in their own merchant fleets to carry arms to Nicaragua. East Germany recently took yet another course by chartering Panamanian-flag vessels for two deliveries of support items. A much smaller volume of priority shipments has probably been sent by air.

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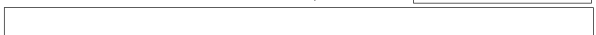
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**Soviet Supply Routes**

We estimate that the Soviets have sent directly about 3,000 tons of military-associated goods to Nicaragua in the first seven months of 1983; at this rate the total could reach at least 5,000 tons by the end of the year. In comparison, total Soviet direct shipments during 1982 amounted to about 3,000 tons.

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Because the USSR has avoided shipping arms and



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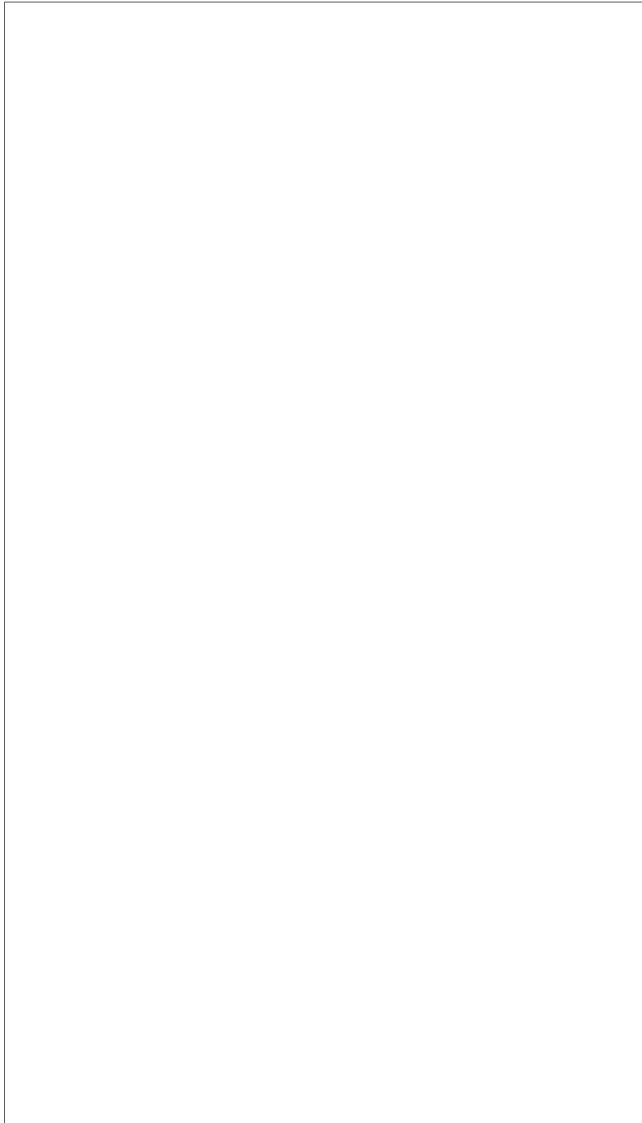
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**Sea Shipments.** Almost all of the Soviet military support goods have been delivered by sea to Corinto exclusively on ships of the two Soviet liner services-- Balt Capas and Scan Pacific. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

[redacted] During the first seven months of this year, 40 Soviet merchant ships arrived in Nicaragua, compared with 25 for the same period in 1982. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

The two liner services operating between Leningrad and Nicaragua had typically been making three or four port calls at Corinto per month, but their port calls surged to 13 in June and nine in July of this year. Stops along the way usually include port facilities in West Germany, the Netherlands, Jamaica, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Panama before transiting the Panama Canal en route to Corinto (figure 2). The Soviet lines normally employ roll-on/roll-off ships that can be offloaded quickly or general cargo freighters. Most of their cargoes originate in Europe, although these ships make prearranged pickups and deliveries at each intermediate stop. [redacted] 25X1

**Air Shipments.** Aeroflot, the Soviet national airline, provides service to Sandino International Airport near Managua every Monday. The flight, which also serves Havana, originates in Moscow and makes a refueling stop at Shannon airport in Ireland. It primarily provides passenger service for Cuba and Nicaragua, though the IL-62s that fly the route are capable of carrying 3 tons of cargo in addition to passengers and baggage or up to 27 tons of cargo alone. These flights could be used to send a small amount of high-priority spare parts, although we have no evidence confirming that this has occurred. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted]

[redacted] This practice surely reflects Soviet sensitivities toward potential US reactions to any clear, publicized evidence of direct Soviet participation in the delivery of arms and munitions to Managua. [redacted] 25X1

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**Indirect Shipments via Cuba.** Evidence points to Cuba's role as an intermediary for Moscow in supplying arms to Nicaragua, but we have little hard data on actual deliveries or specific quantities. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

details on individual cargoes are rarely available. Cuba established a new airline this year, Aero Caribe, to provide regional service. The carrier operates two or three AN-26 light transport aircraft on cargo runs to and from Nicaragua and other Caribbean destinations. These planes can carry a little more than 2 tons of cargo on each flight. [Redacted]

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**Cuban Delivery Systems**

We estimate that thus far in 1983 about 1,000 tons of military supplies have been delivered by sea from Cuba; the actual amount could be several times this volume. Sources of information are fragmentary and the exact tonnage and number of deliveries cannot be determined. Cuba and Nicaragua jointly own one liner service (Linea de Caribe) that serves Cuban and Nicaraguan ports. The ships currently assigned operate between Havana and Corinto. Cuba also has a large interest in Namucar, a shipping consortium set up by the governments of Costa Rica, Mexico, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba. That line's three ships serve all members and call frequently at New Orleans and Los Angeles as well as at other ports. Other ships from Cuba's merchant fleet also make voyages to Corinto, and small coastal freighters—some Cuban, some Nicaraguan, and some of undetermined nationality—shuttle frequently between Cuban and Nicaraguan ports, [Redacted]

[Redacted] Cuban ships make no stops between Cuba and Nicaragua other than at the Panama Canal (figure 2). [Redacted]

Regular air service between Cuba and Nicaragua consists of one scheduled Cubana flight on Wednesdays using a TU-154 aircraft. In addition, Cubana operates two or three additional TU-154 nonscheduled flights per week and an occasional IL-62 flight. Each of these aircraft can carry 20 tons or more of cargo or a mixture of cargo and passengers, but useful

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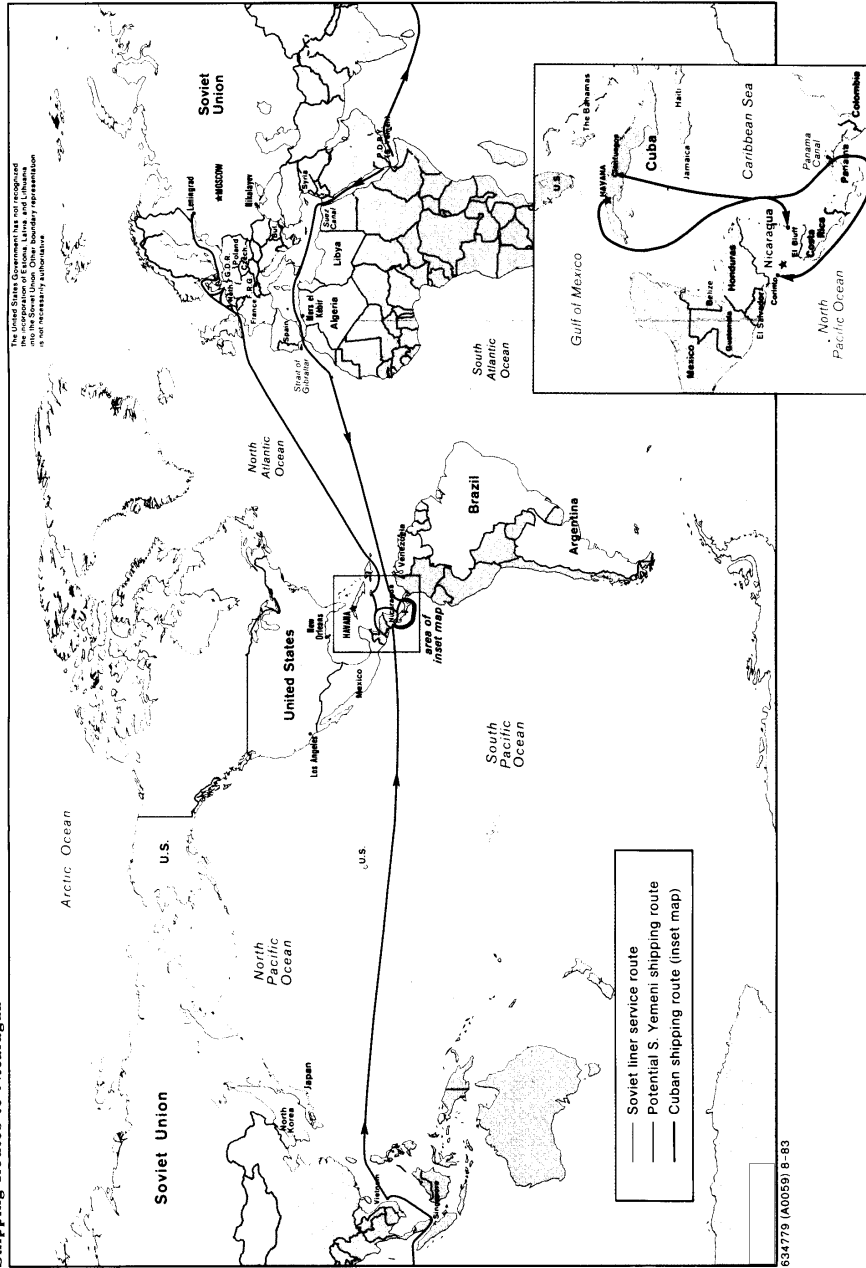
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Figure 2 Shipping Routes to Nicaragua



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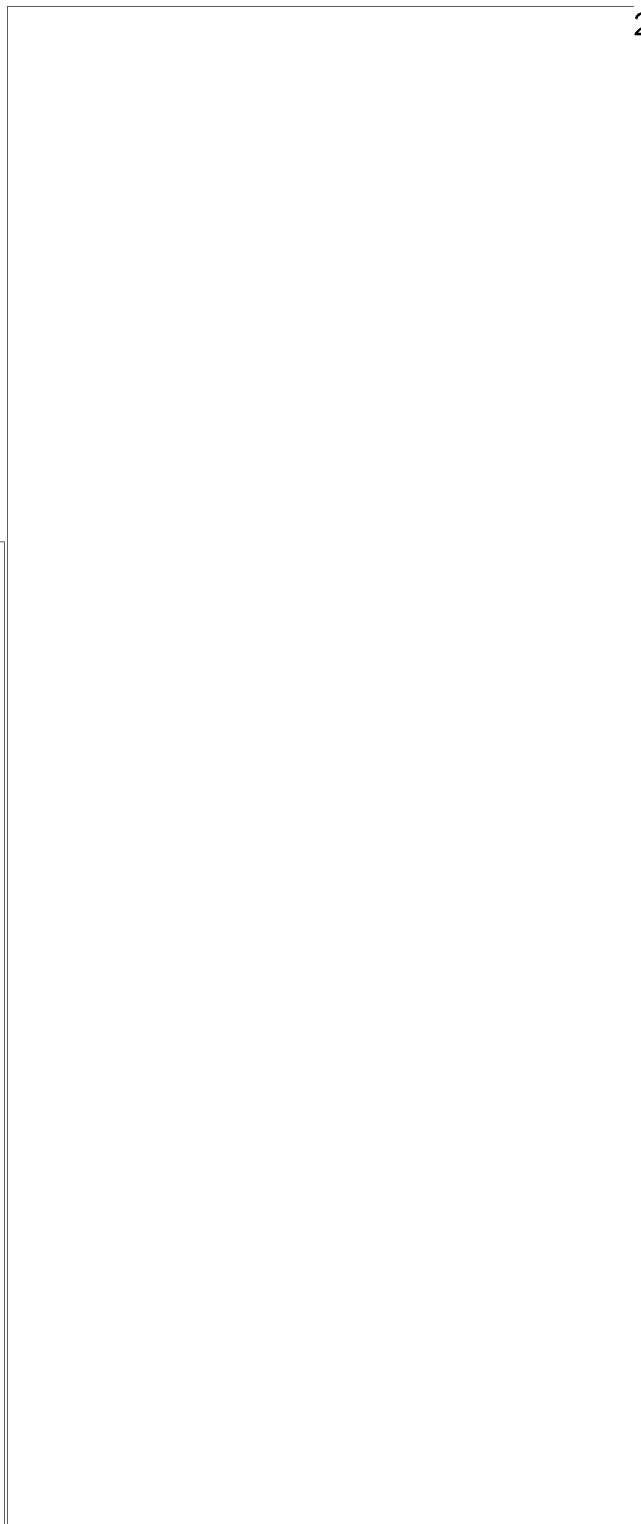
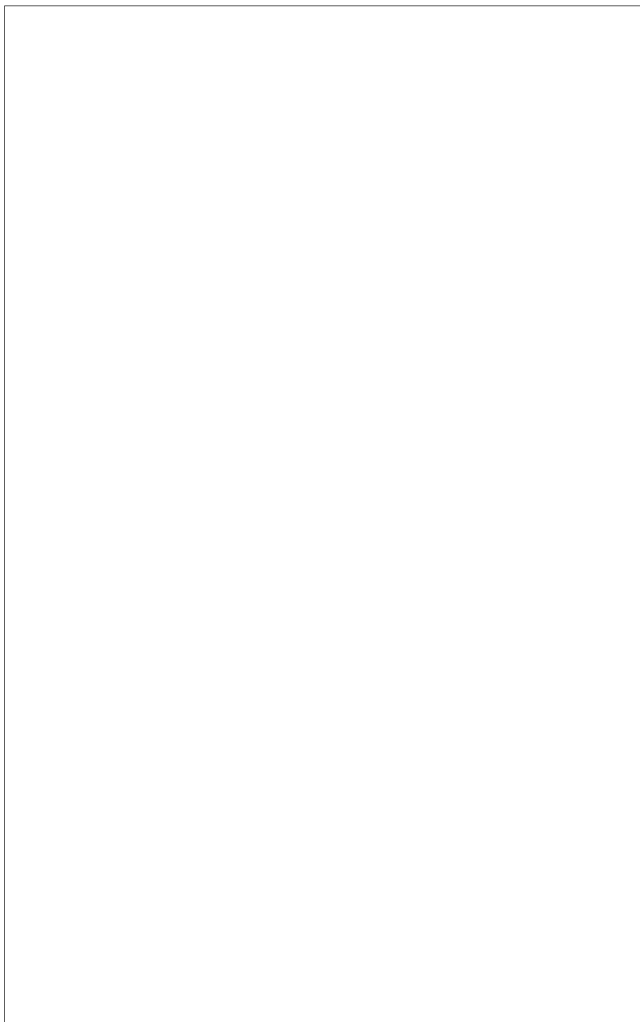
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**Third World Suppliers**

Other countries that have provided military equipment to Nicaragua include:

- *Algeria* served as a conduit for four Soviet seaborne shipments of arms and military-associated equipment in 1981 and 1982, but we have not detected any arms shipment from Algeria in 1983. Last year the Algerians told US diplomats that they would no longer participate in this activity, partly because they had already repaid any "debt" to the Soviets through these shipments and partly in response to US diplomatic pressure. Should the Algerians decide to resume shipments, they have the transport capability for nonstop delivery by sea but possess no aircraft capable of nonstop transit.



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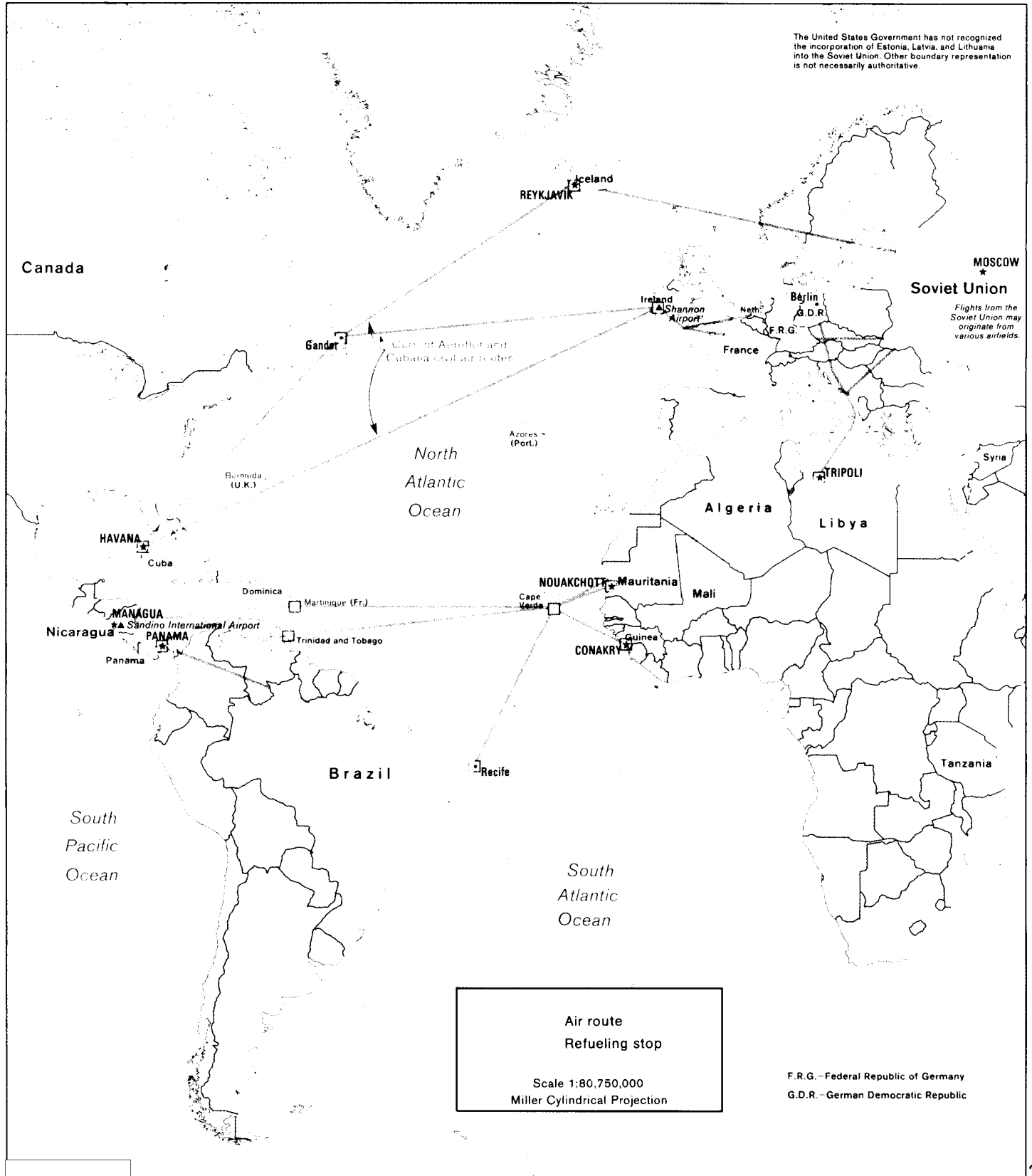
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Figure 3  
Air Routes From Europe and Africa to Nicaragua



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Nicaragua's ports and airfields can accommodate a large volume of supplies—albeit with increasing port congestion, particularly at Corinto; and significant improvements to those facilities are under way. However, the internal transport infrastructure is poor and susceptible to disruptions; military supplies currently move along limited road, rail, and river networks with little or no built-in redundancy. [Redacted]

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If the Sandinistas lose control of either or both east-west highways, or if the regime's ability to move goods along the Rio Escondido between El Bluff and Rama (the key arms delivery avenue) is somehow neutralized, the eastern half of the country would be effectively isolated from the west and the movement of arms to some of the areas where they are needed for fighting would be significantly hampered. Insurgent control of one or more of the eastern ports could have nearly the same effect. Disruption of the road traffic between Corinto (both the port and the city are on an island) and the mainland would cause considerable inconvenience, at least temporarily, to the flow of arms and other goods from that port to the interior.

[Redacted]

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In the case of seaborne deliveries, certain potential weak points must cause Moscow concern:

- Ships carrying military goods to Nicaragua can in many cases be identified, and since some of them trade in the United States—including Soviet, Nicaraguan, and Panamanian-flag ships engaged in scheduled liner service—Moscow has to consider the possibility that non-Soviet owners and governments could become anxious over possible restrictions on US port calls.
- If ships from the jointly owned Namucar line become involved in arms traffic to Nicaragua, Cuba's nervous partners in this consortium could back out. That would force Havana to accept a larger proportion of the hard currency operating costs. Jamaica has already expressed dissatisfaction with both Cuban control of the group and the high annual subsidies it must pay the shipping line.
- Western governments could take actions to hinder Nicaragua's allies from using charter ships operating under Western flags. [Redacted]

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**Vulnerabilities of Nicaragua's Supply System**

Nicaragua's internal transportation network represents the major weakness in the entire supply system.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For more detail see the appendix. [Redacted]

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In the case of airborne deliveries, only Cuba effectively has unlimited access to Nicaragua because of its proximity and facilities. Access for the Soviets and their allies is far more tenuous. Given the airlift capabilities of Nicaragua's suppliers and the distances between them and Nicaragua, arranging the necessary overflight permission and refueling stops would be politically difficult (figure 3). No significant airborne resupply effort could be mounted from the Eurasian or African continents without refueling stops in countries whose governments are sensitive to the transfer of military goods through their territories. Key stopping points include Ireland or Iceland, Canada, Cape Verde, Bermuda, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, and Martinique.

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Of the Eurasian nations that might provide aid, Iran and Syria are the only countries having aircraft (the Boeing 747SP) with the capability to fly a significant cargo load nonstop from Africa to Nicaragua. However, should the Soviets and their allies choose, they could escape most of these problems mentioned above simply by ferrying empty aircraft to Cuba and using them in conjunction with Cuban aircraft—staging from Cuban airfields—to airlift equipment brought to Cuba by ship or drawn temporarily from Cuban inventories.

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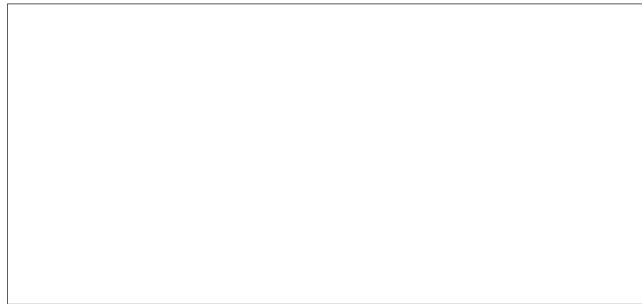
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### Appendix

#### Nicaraguan Internal Transport Constraints

Although the shipping and air capabilities of suppliers are crucial elements in the logistic scheme, in Nicaragua's case the primary constraints probably operate on the receiving end. The capabilities of its suppliers to support the Sandinista regime with air and sea shipments greatly exceed any foreseeable level of need. Short of the supply lines at sea being interdicted, the only factors that could in any way stem the flow of military goods are the ability of the Sandinista military forces to absorb these goods, the capacities of Nicaragua's ports and airfields, and the country's poor internal transport networks.<sup>2</sup> [redacted]



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#### Port Constraints

Six Nicaraguan ports can be used for military resupply by oceangoing vessels (figure 1). Of these, only Corinto on the Pacific coast has deepwater berths that can accept large merchant ships at quayside. At the other ports, lightering from offshore anchorages is required for all but the smallest ships. [redacted]

Since last November a \$125 million expansion program has been under way to enable El Bluff to handle vessels up to 35,000 deadweight tons (dwt). This project, with Bulgarian technical and financial assistance is scheduled to be complete by 1987. Present construction at El Bluff appears to be slow. [redacted]

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About 70 percent of the nation's seaborne trade passes through Corinto [redacted] The port facilities and town are on an island that is connected to the mainland by one highway bridge. The general cargo quay can handle up to four vessels at a time. For small tankers, there is also a single-berth POL (petroleum, oil, and lubricant) terminal with product storage tanks that can hold more than 600,000 barrels. A banana-loading conveyer system at another pier could be used to load or unload small boxed cargo. A sheltered anchorage can accommodate about 10 additional ships. [redacted]

Rama "port facilities" consist of a small paved ramp on the Rio Escondido, a narrow river where shallow depths restrict passage to ships with drafts of 3 meters or less [redacted] A barge occasionally used as a floating dock can accommodate one small vessel at a time. There are no dockside cranes or other support equipment that would normally be required to offload other types of ships. [redacted]

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On the east coast, El Bluff has been the most important delivery point for military resupply activity [redacted] even though El Bluff has no rail or road connections to the interior. Entrance to the Bluefields Lagoon at El Bluff is restricted by a sandbar, and oceangoing ships must anchor offshore while their cargo is discharged by lighter. [redacted]

Three other ports, Puerto Sandino and San Juan del Sur on the Pacific and Puerto Cabezas on the Caribbean, would be acceptable for major military deliveries only under wartime emergency conditions. Puerto Sandino, 60 km south of Corinto, is Nicaragua's only crude oil delivery point for the Esso refinery at Managua and can accommodate large tankers [redacted] [redacted]<sup>3</sup> San Juan del Sur, on the Costa Rican border, has no facilities for oceangoing ships. Lightering from an offshore anchorage to San Juan del Sur's lone quay is necessary for all but small coastal freighters.<sup>4</sup> Puerto Cabezas, a small port on the north Caribbean coast

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<sup>3</sup> Only at the offshore oil delivery mooring point. A 255,000-ton tanker has been observed this year delivering oil at this facility. [redacted]

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<sup>4</sup> The Soviets are, however, surveying San Juan del Sur for upgrading as a fishing port; any such improvements would also increase its ability to become a major military supply port. [redacted]

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that reportedly has been used by coastal traffic from Rama and El Bluff for resupplying nearby troops, has one pier [redacted] That pier, which is not sheltered from the sea, has two small dockside cranes and can accept small coastal freighters. [redacted]

Nicaragua's total port capacity is probably adequate to handle foreseeable priority military shipments. Corinto currently processes about 20 oceangoing commercial vessels (totaling about 50,000 tons of cargo) per month. Arms shipments (averaging roughly 2,000 to 3,000 tons) to El Bluff have been processed in about four to five days; Nicaragua has a few lighters and barges at the other ports that could be used to unload cargoes from ships at anchor in a similar period of time. [redacted]

**Airfield Constraints**

While Nicaragua contains more than 250 aircraft landing areas—including seven airstrips capable of handling light to medium transport aircraft—only Augusto Cesar Sandino International Airfield at Managua can currently support sustained air operations [redacted] The remaining six major airfields—Puerto Cabezas, Waspam, El Bluff, El Rosario, Montelimar, and Leon—all lack service facilities. Light transports flying from Cuba could operate out of all seven, but large cargo aircraft are still limited to Sandino, pending improvements under way at most of the other fields. [redacted]

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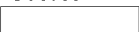
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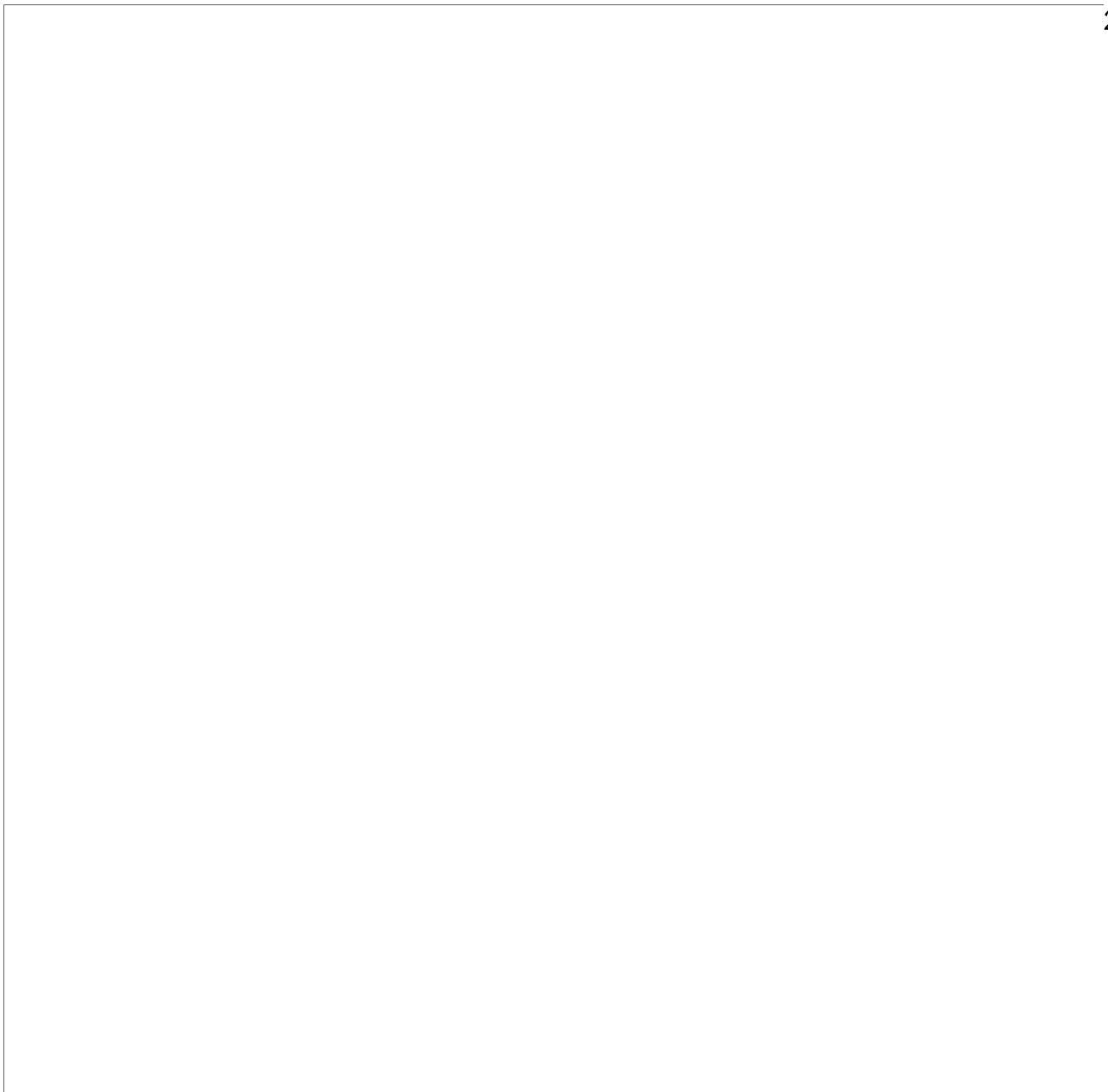


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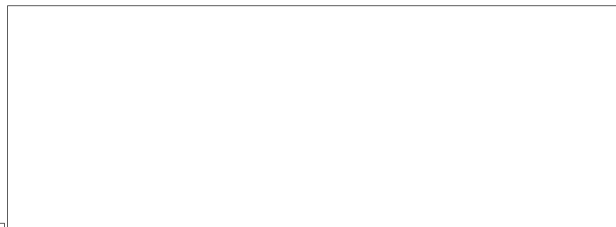
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Construction has recently been resumed on the main runway at Punta Huete, a new airfield near Managua. Punta Huete could be ready for limited use by the middle of next year. It reportedly will have the longest runway—3,500 meters—in Central America when completed. [Redacted]



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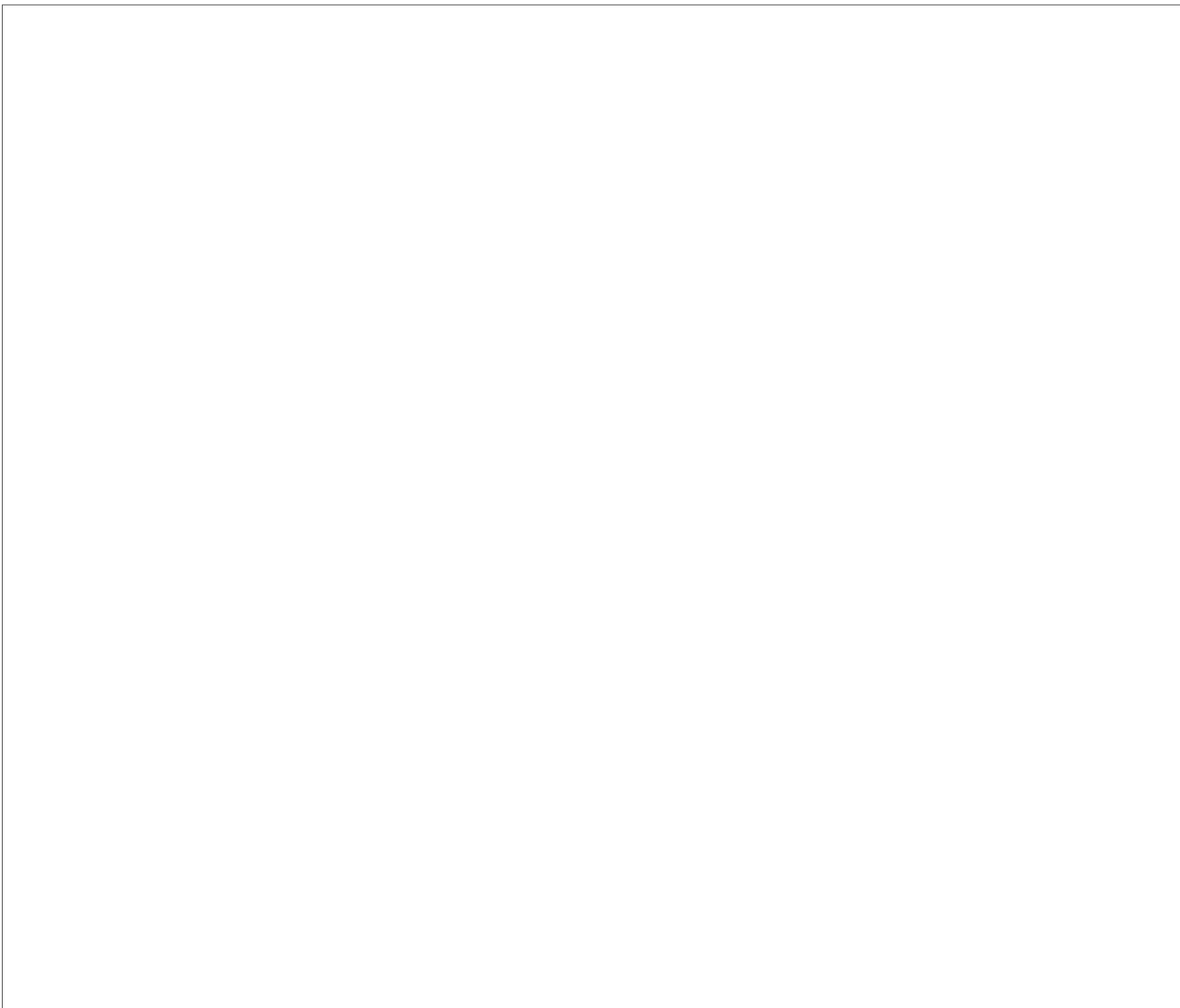
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**Road Constraints**

Only one road extends between the Atlantic and the Pacific coasts, and it traverses hostile territory. This road, which is only partially paved, connects Puerto Cabezas with Sebaco; from Sebaco highways extend south to Managua and north to the Honduran border. The road is being improved with Cuban help, but it still is a weak transportation link. In southern Nicaragua a 300-km all-weather road connects the river port of Rama with Managua. Military supplies and other

traffic must travel 100 km up the Rio Escondido from El Bluff before reaching Rama's road terminus. Aside from these two roads, there are no other means of east-west cross-country ground transport of military supplies. 

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Most of the good roads—especially the Pacific highway serving the Corinto-Managua corridor—connect the principal population centers clustered on the

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Pacific lowlands. The Inter-American Highway, which extends north-south from El Espino at the Honduran border to Penas Blancas at Costa Rica, is the major overland connection between the northern and southern portions of Central America. Military operations in the eastern part of the nation are difficult to support because no roads cross the often rough and densely forested terrain. [ ]

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**Railroad Constraints**

Rail transport plays little or no part in the transfer of military equipment or materiel either from the ports or to the field. The 300-km rail system, constructed before the turn of the century, has fallen into disrepair and disuse since the Sandinistas came to power. The aging main line extends 190 km southeast from Corinto to Granada on Lake Nicaragua. It consists of narrow-gauge double track that is usable at present only on portions of the system. The rolling stock is old, in need of major repair, and inadequate for even normal civilian use. Flood damage in May 1982 to a portion of the system near Corinto—including the causeway between the port and city of Corinto and the mainland—has not yet been repaired. [ ]

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According to the Cuban press, the Sandinistas plan to take corrective action soon. New construction has reportedly begun with the aim of refurbishing the entire line in 10 years and expanding the system to link El Bluff with Managua and Corinto. [ ]

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