

[REDACTED]

april 04, 1986

Special Analysis

**NICARAGUA-
HONDURAS:**

Evaluating the Border Fighting

Managua's recent incursion into Honduras cost it heavy casualties and bad publicity but served a longstanding Sandinista strategy. By concentrating forces along the border, the regime has sought to disrupt rebel infiltration and confine the war to a single front to exploit its superiority in troop strength and firepower. [REDACTED]

The cross-border operations last week—involving up to 1,500 men in the Las Vegas salient and 500 at San Andres de Bocay—were the most extensive operations to date, because Managua has improved its logistic capabilities in the border area and throughout the northwest, because rebel camps are now deeper inside Honduras, and because previous efforts to rout the rebels were unsuccessful.

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The incursions continue a strategy dating from the first years of the regime. The Sandinistas sustained casualties in Honduras as early as 1981, and, as the insurgency has gathered support and become more effective, Managua generally has responded with more aggressive operations in the border areas. [REDACTED]

Keeping Up the Pressure

The regime relied primarily on irregular warfare battalions, which seem to have suffered relatively heavy losses. Managua apparently feels that disrupting insurgent infiltration and logistic support is more important than the casualty rate. It evidently knew that large numbers of rebels had been resupplied and were still in the base camps. The regime also apparently recognized that it would have to limit its air support to minimize the chance of losing an aircraft inside Honduras, and also the possibility of retaliation by the Honduran Air Force.

[REDACTED]

The Sandinista incursion was not particularly well managed, and other government forces inside Nicaragua experienced logistic and coordination difficulties as a result. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Moreover, calls for medical evacuation flights and air support associated with the incursion and other counterinsurgency operations strained Air Force capabilities. [REDACTED]

The Sandinistas, however, have been working to improve logistic support. The general availability of air transport and better logistics will allow Managua to maintain its forces on the border longer than

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was possible a year ago [REDACTED] since last summer the Sandinistas have constructed airfields at Wiwili, Matagalpa, and San Jose de Bocay [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] a large concentration of government troops and vehicles at a support base at Wamblan, and recent improvements to an old logging road will allow artillery to be sent well within range of rebel camps—unlike the case in late March [REDACTED]

Outlook

Sandinista forces are located at strategic points along the border from the Las Vegas salient to the operating areas of Indian insurgents on the east coast, suggesting that Managua wants to restrict combat to the northwest by disrupting rebel support to groups inside Nicaragua and to prevent the rebels from reactivating the northeastern front. President Ortega's recent reference to fighting in "border areas" over which the Hondurans have no control—a tacit admission that Nicaraguan forces had entered Honduras—seems intended to justify this and future incursions and to intimidate the Hondurans [REDACTED]

If the rebels continue to infiltrate past the Sandinista forces at the border and move south—some 9,000 are already inside Nicaragua—and if those currently in Nicaragua can maintain operations, Managua again will have to disperse its forces, reducing those available at the border [REDACTED]

DIA Comment: While DIA agrees with the assessment that Nicaragua's overall strategy is to contain the insurgents inside Honduras, the 22 March attack seems to have been initiated by the Sandinista misperception of a tactical FDN weakness created by the large-scale infiltration of insurgents into Nicaragua. The Sandinistas were not attacking the rebels but rather the base camps and were probably surprised at the large number of combatants they encountered. Furthermore, the units involved in the incursion had been in the border area since the beginning of the year and were in a position to capitalize on the situation. When the FDN repulsed the Sandinista attack with an insurgent force willing to stand and fight, Managua's precipitous withdrawal suggests an unwillingness to commit more forces and sustain high casualties, as well as Sandinista sensitivity to the public reaction to the incursion. Regarding the number of Sandinista forces that participated in the operation in the Las Vegas salient, DIA believes there is no credible evidence to support the contention that more than 1,200 men participated in the operation.