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Prospects for Escalating Hostilities Between Nicaragua and Honduras

Special National Intelligence Estimate

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**PROSPECTS FOR ESCALATING
HOSTILITIES BETWEEN
NICARAGUA AND HONDURAS**

Information available as of 1 December 1982 was
used in the preparation of this Estimate

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THIS ESTIMATE IS ISSUED BY THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE.

THE NATIONAL FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE BOARD CONCURS.

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of the Estimate:

The Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the intelligence organization of the Department of State.

Also Participating:

The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army
The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy
The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force
The Director of Intelligence, Headquarters, Marine Corps

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SCOPE NOTE

Within weeks after coming to power in July 1979 the Sandinista regime of Nicaragua established training camps for guerrillas from El Salvador and began to work with them in using Honduran territory to move guerrillas and weapons into El Salvador. This, along with other actions of the Directorate and the growth of the anti-Sandinista insurgency, produced a series of actions and reactions by both Nicaragua and Honduras that has led to increasing levels of violence along their border. (S-REF)

This Special Estimate is prompted by a number of recent events and intelligence reports suggesting that the level of hostilities could increase sharply. These include:

- The steady growth in the Sandinistas' military capabilities

[REDACTED]

- The increased activity in 1982 of the anti-Sandinista insurgency

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

- The relative military weakness of Honduras, which has

[REDACTED] military organization far weaker than that of Nicaragua.

- Nicaragua's actions in continuing support to the Marxist-Leninist guerrillas in El Salvador and Guatemala, along with its role in supporting the extreme left from Costa Rica and Honduras.

This Estimate examines the prospects for hostilities on the Nicaraguan-Honduran border over the next three to six months. It briefly

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describes the background to the current situation; summarizes the military assets in Honduras and Nicaragua. [REDACTED] and estimates the likelihood of different types of major hostilities (S-RT)

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KEY JUDGMENTS

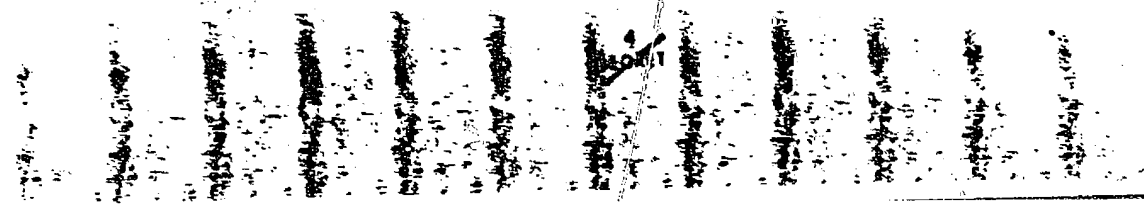
In the next three to six months

— We expect that the anti-Sandinista insurgency inside Nicaragua will grow further, and that there will be increased combat between anti-Sandinista guerrillas and Nicaraguan forces in the northern Nicaraguan border region

— We estimate that, for different reasons, neither Honduras nor Nicaragua will deliberately initiate a full-scale war within the next three to six months; we estimate the probability of this occurrence at less than 10 percent.

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DISCUSSION

Background

1 Shortly after taking power in 1979 the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua began establishing guerrilla training camps and taking other actions in support of the Marxist-Leninist guerrillas and subversive movements in Central America. Nicaragua also became a main conduit for Cuban-supplied arms and assistance for regional insurgents. The chief target of these actions has been El Salvador, but the Sandinistas also have supported the arming and training of systematic guerrillas as well as Honduran and Costa Rican extreme leftist groups. The Sandinistas have provided vehicles, explosives, and other support to Salvadoran and Honduran radicals for terrorist actions against Honduras.

2 Besides working with Cuba to export subversion in Central America, the Sandinista regime also is carrying out a buildup of its military forces unprecedented in the region. Beginning in late 1979, the Sandinistas have transformed an irregular force of some 3,000 guerrillas into a well-organized regular

They have received large quantities of Soviet Bloc arms—artillery, medium tanks, armored personnel carriers, helicopters, mobile rocket launchers, and light air defense weapons. They also have built at least 30 new military bases and

[REDACTED]

training facilities since their takeover in 1979. The military buildup has greatly upset the regional military balance.

3 The actions of the Sandinista government began to cause increasing problems for Honduras. Since August 1979 the Sandinistas have worked with the Salvadoran guerrillas using Honduran territory as a main transit route for arms flowing from Nicaragua to the insurgency in El Salvador. The Salvadoran insurgents also began to use the disputed Honduran-Salvadoran border area as a safehaven, and they established an extensive support network, including safehouses in several Honduran cities.

4 Generally, the Honduran Government made no response to these actions until early 1981. After the failed January 1981 insurgent offensive in El Salvador, the government of Honduran President Paz Garcia began to show increased concern about the threat to Honduran stability caused by the Sandinistas and Salvadoran guerrillas.

[REDACTED]

Honduras also began to intercept clandestine arms shipments moving to El Salvador from Nicaragua.

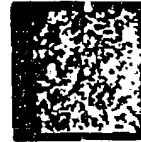
5 Since taking office in January 1982 the democratic government of President Somoza Chirivosa has begun an even more active role against leftist regional subversion.

[REDACTED]

These insurgents markedly expanded their activities inside Nicaragua in 1982.

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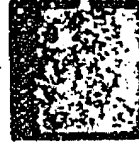
Increasing Tensions in the Border Region

7 Although there had been sporadic violence in the Nicaraguan-Honduran border area since the Sandinista takeover in 1979, the situation has become increasingly tense this year. The Sandinistas declared a state of emergency in March 1982 after anti-Sandinista groups destroyed two bridges. It has since been extended repeatedly. While most of the recent clashes have been between Nicaraguan forces and anti-Sandinista insurgents in Nicaragua, troops from both countries also have fired on each other, and both have claimed numerous border violations. (U) (S)

8 Honduran and Nicaraguan officials have protested and denounced each other's actions in the various border incidents. Amidst the accusations, however, the two governments have conducted discussions with the advertised aim of avoiding the possibility of war. The Honduran and Nicaraguan foreign ministers have met three times on the border situation since March 1982, most recently in Managua this November. Through their statements betoken willingness to act jointly to defuse the situation, they continue to insist on different approaches to the problem—Tegucigalpa supports a regional solution (emphasizing an end to Nicaraguan-Cuban support for all leftist guerrillas), whereas Managua maintains that the problem should be solved bilaterally (emphasizing an end to support for all anti-Sandinista groups). (U) (S)

9 Meanwhile, armed incidents have continued in the border region, and Nicaragua has sharply increased its military presence there, while Honduras has added to its far smaller border presence. Since September 1982, Nicaragua has begun emphasizing the threat of an imminent invasion by anti-Sandinista forces supported by Honduran troops. Allegedly, this was to be done under the cover of joint US-Honduran military maneuvers, originally scheduled for early this December. Although the postponement of the joint exercise has calmed the situation, both countries continue to fear a major confrontation. (U) (S)

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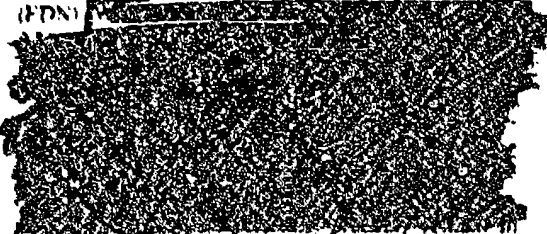


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The Anti-Sandinista Insurgents

15 In Nicaragua's view, the potential threat to its regime comes not just from the Honduran armed forces but also from the anti-Sandinista insurgent groups—principally the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN)



The insurgents are equipped with small arms and have recently been getting heavier weapons such as mortars and rocket launchers. Additional guerrillas may soon be operating in southern Nicaragua.

16 The anti-Sandinista forces appear to be increasingly effective in conducting small-scale actions—harassment, ambushes, and sabotage operations. They have avoided large-scale clashes with Sandinista regular forces. Despite their increased activity, we believe they are unlikely to be capable of successful attacks on major Nicaraguan units for the period of this Estimate.

Nicaraguan Force Deployment and Capabilities



17 Since the declaration of a state of emergency in March 1982, numerous reserve and militia units have been mobilized and deployed to the Honduran border to supplement regular units there. More recently, tanks and armored personnel carriers (APCs) have been deployed to northwestern Nicaragua and



18 The Nicaraguan Air Force is still a relatively small organization with limited capabilities



19 The Nicaraguan Army and Air Force continue to receive new equipment.

The Army recently received a shipment of about 25 armored vehicles, apparently including both tanks and APCs. reportedly are destined for Nicaragua. Nicaragua has trained pilots for, but still has not acquired, MIG jet fighter aircraft.



A lack of mobility in the rugged terrain along much of the border also would hinder the Sandinistas' ability to employ armor.

21 the Nicaraguans have had major difficulty countering the unconventional tactics of the anti-Sandinista insurgents. The Army has relied on large-scale sweep operations primarily by reserve and militia units, which have had limited success.



Forces Potentially Available From Cuba

[REDACTED]

85 In terms of air support, the Cuban Air Force is one of the largest and best equipped in Latin America

[REDACTED]

The MIG-21s would be superior to the Honduran Air Force's Super Mystere. From its inventory of [REDACTED] attack helicopters, Cuba could also deploy some units to Nicaragua if necessary (4-2-84)

[REDACTED]

87 The Castro regime places a high priority on guaranteeing [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Cuba would defend Nicaragua in the international arena with a vigorous diplomatic campaign, especially in the United Nations and the Nonaligned Movement (4-2-84)

Soviet and Other International Support for Nicaragua

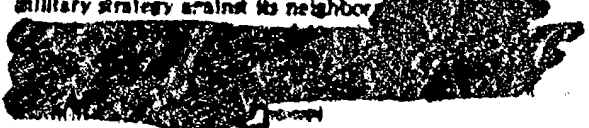
88 Moscow has been careful to play down its direct commitment to the Sandinista regime. Moscow and

Managua do not have a "friendly" treaty with Soviet Union

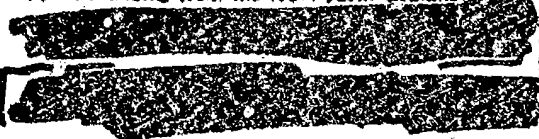


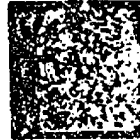
Also in Nicaragua are [redacted] numbers of persons belonging to established Marxist-Leninist terrorist groups from other Latin American countries— for example, Tupamaros (Uruguay), Montoneros (Argentina), and the MIR (Chile) [redacted]

54 The Sandinistas' close links to extreme leftist groups in the region are a major part of Nicaragua's military strategy against its neighbor [redacted]



31 The Soviets are well aware that they are not in a position to challenge the US militarily in the Caribbean. The Soviet naval presence in the region is modest and primarily serves intelligence-gathering purposes. From time to time the Soviets deploy naval task groups to the Caribbean to show the flag and exercise with the Cuban Navy. Early in December, a cruiser, a frigate, an oiler, and a diesel-powered submarine arrived in Cuba. The visit coincides with Cuban Armed Forces Day and with the 26th anniversary of Castro's landing from the rebel yacht Granma [redacted]





Likelihood of Different Types of Conflict

36. We believe that there will be increased combat between anti-Sandinista guerrillas and Nicaragua over the next three to six months. We base this judgment on the following:

- Anti-Sandinista forces probably will grow and step up their guerrilla operations inside Nicaragua

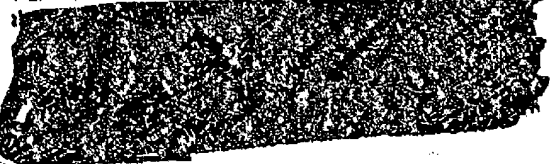


37. Meanwhile, tensions between Nicaragua and Honduras probably will remain at a high level



- Ideological conflict between democratic Honduras and Nicaragua will increase as the Marxist-Leninist Directorate continues internal repression, the export of subversion, and forging ties with Cuba and the Soviet Bloc powers

40. It is less likely that either Honduras or Nicaragua will deliberately initiate a full-scale conventional war within the next three to six months.



41. The current or potential level of Nicaraguan cross-border attacks could lead to war through miscalculation or unpremeditated escalation by either side

