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LADB Staff

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Contras Divided Over US Aid

by LADB Staff

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Some 300 former Nicaraguan contra commanders have taken a page from the playbook of Guatemala's Patrullas Autodefensas Civiles (PAC) to demand that they and thousands of other ex-contras be compensated for their service in the internal war against the Sandinista government. Rather than ask indemnification of their own government, they decided on Oct. 7 to go directly to the government that solicited their service, that of the US, to pay them.

Salvador Talavera, president of the Partido Resistencia Nicaraguense (PRN), said he sent a letter requesting a "financial-aid package" for 28,000 ex-contras to the US Embassy in Managua. The PRN is a political spinoff of the former contras, many of whom now live in poverty. About 7,000 of them were seriously wounded, and some have been reduced to street-begging for their survival. During the fight against the Sandinista regime (1979-1990), Talavera was known as Comandante Estevan.

The "package" they asked for totals almost US\$600 million and will include job training and medical care for the most seriously injured, whose needs are often highly specialized. Jose Angel Talavera, formerly Comandante Chacal and brother of Comandante Estevan, said the request that went to US Ambassador Barbara Moore also includes funding for the construction of a hospital, a home for the aged, and a bank to finance various rural projects. Noting that the US donated funds to former guerrillas in El Salvador, Salvador Talavera said, "The US government was courteous enough to give an aid package to their former official enemies in El Salvador. We were their friends." He said that the request was negotiable but that, if the US officials decline to discuss the demands, several former contras would go to Washington in November to take the matter up with sympathetic legislators.

Salvador Talavera told the press, "We're hoping for a gesture of good faith and political will from our US friends, including some leaders in the Bush administration who participated in the struggle against the Sandinistas and against the terrorism of that era. It's time for them to recognize our sacrifice. US financing wasn't sent to plant corn, it was an investment in war and war brings destruction."

Ex-contras have also aligned with some ex-Sandinista soldiers and with former members of Anastasio Somoza's Guardia Nacional to ask that 1% of the national budget be allocated to veterans' benefits. They currently receive US\$10-US\$15 a month, less than it would cost some to travel to pick up their checks.

Not all contras agree

Former fighters do not universally support the demand against the US government. Old debts have been mixed with current politics, and some contras who oppose the move do so because Comandante Estevan has allied his PRN party with the ruling Partido Liberal Constitucionalista

(PLC). The PLC is widely acknowledged to be led by ex-President Arnaldo Aleman (1996-2001) from a prison cell.

A group of ex-contras led by "Comandante Johnson," Luis Fley Gonzalez, said that they wouldn't support the move because, said Fley, "the contra battle was of Nicaraguans who did not agree with the government of the 1980s and not as subjects of the United States." He said that officials of the US Embassy in Managua told him that the demand for indemnification "has neither logic nor legality." The embassy told reporters, however, that it does not comment on petitions that it receives. There was dissent against the request for recompense from within the PRN as well.

Hernaldo Chow Molina, "Comandante Franklyn Negro," a party leader, called it "immoral," because, he said, Talavera never fired a shot in the ten years that the contra groups were in existence. Chow said, "Salvador Talavera sold the letterhead and seal [of the PRN] for the sum of 34 million cordobas (US\$2.2 million). He is an Arnoldista who wants to steal leadership." Chow, who serves as the party's national secretary of ethical matters, further accused Talavera of stealing money during the last elections. The money was supposed to go to fund electoral activities on the Atlantic Coast. "The Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) certified the disbursement from me to Salvador Talavera. That account is pending with the Atlantic Coast [authorities]," he said.

Chow sees the demand against the US as the only tactic Talavera has in coming municipal elections. He said that the party is leaderless while Talavera works for Arnoldismo rather than for the PRN, and that, if the situation continues that way, a significant fraction of the party will split off in coalition with the Gran Unidad Nacional (GUN). "We have never taken a salary check as mercenaries of the United States to finance the war," said Chow, adding, "Furthermore, we can't sue our constant allies."

The party now appears to be splitting along a fault line that has always existed within the contra group, those who see themselves as having fought as surrogates against the US's cold-war enemy, the Sandinistas, and those who believed they were fighting for patriotic reasons. That same line now separates those within the party who are lining up with the Arnoldista liberals, whom Chow calls "Arnoldistas, traitors, and scoundrels (sinverguenzas)," from those who believe, as does party founder Fernando Sanchez Herdocia, that "the contras were never mercenaries and never belonged to the US," and will likely split off.

Some former army members join struggle for benefits

Meanwhile, Talavera has made common cause with ex- Guardia Nacional (GN) members and retired members of the Nicaraguan Army (Ejercito de Nicaragua, EN), as well as with some members of the old Ministry of the Interior (MINT), to take to the Asamblea Nacional (AN) a bill that would designate them all, equally, veterans of war. Raul Areas, president of the Coordinadora Nacional de Oficiales en Retiro (CNOR), said that the veteran-of-war designation would be a first step toward getting a 1% set- aside from the annual budget to attend to veterans' needs. The ex-captain of the EN calls himself a Sandinista but said that he does not subordinate himself to the interests of the Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN).

FSLN Deputy and former Sandinista comandante Bayardo Arce has called the initiative a wild idea. Arias responded that Arce is now representing business interests. "Our idea is to form a Consejo Nacional de Veteranos de Guerra, with ex-contras and ex-guardias, because we all confront the same difficulties," said Areas. "We are working on a bill that we are going to present to the Asamblea together, including those from the GN, because we want national, effective, reconciliation of these forces. The 1% is one of the proposals to ensure the institutional strengthening of those of us who were under arms."

Returning to Arce's opposition, Areas said the former comandante's sentiments were like those of all who are "economically very well off. He doesn't know the hardship and suffering we face. The demobilized of the army and of MINT do not look to them [the Sandinista deputies] but to ourselves, who know the difficulties and are interested in resolving the economic and social situation of these people." The former soldier estimated that successive administrations have complied with only about 15% of the agreements and accords on property, retraining, health, housing, and legalization of properties that were supposed to have benefitted former soldiers.

Talavera said of the bill that, rather than affect the government negatively, it would help to resolve the problems the government has with this constituency. "We're trying to help them dispose of the complex problem of awarding benefits." He said he hoped the bill would be incorporated into the Constitution so that its provisions would be safe from changing administrations. In the meantime, he thinks that it has already encouraged reconciliation. "With this joint initiative, we have demonstrated that we are reconciled. We are all working together because we are the ones who daily bear the weight of the difficulties."

-- End --