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## Nicaraguan Missiles And Honduran Warplanes On Political Collision Course

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The US has thrust a stick in a long dormant hornet's nest with the near-simultaneous sale of military aircraft to Honduras and demand that Nicaragua destroy its stock of Soviet-era Sam-7 anti-aircraft missiles (see 2001-04-05). Nicaragua's newly inaugurated President Daniel Ortega was first to rise to the bait, calling proposals submitted to the legislature by the former government of Enrique Bolanos to destroy the missiles an "unimaginable absurdity." He said the country couldn't disarm unilaterally while its neighbors were increasing their military strength.

Ortega's stance is consistent with his campaign statements, well known to the US. In July, he said he would allow destruction of the missiles if his neighbors' combat aircraft were also destroyed. Both Honduras and El Salvador have military jets. Nicaragua has none. Under those circumstances, Ortega sees its remaining missiles as having strategic defensive importance. They are shoulder weapons of very short range, 1,500 m surface-to-air at best, and could hardly be considered offensive. Under Bolanos, the country destroyed about 1,000, half its stock of the weapons, and would have done more had not the Army and the Sandinista-led legislature resisted. The Asamblea Nacional still has pending a bill Bolanos sent down in March 2006 authorizing further destruction.

The US position is that the items could fall into the hands of terrorists. The Sam-7s have been in the Army's possession since the 1980s when the Soviet Union supplied them in aid to the Sandinistas in their war against the US-backed contras. Ortega visited Honduras in February to discuss a slate of issues and reportedly told Honduran President Manuel Zelaya that no one in Central America has anything to fear from the weapons. Zelaya said that Ortega is a friend and that the differences they were discussing, the maritime boundaries between the countries, would be settled diplomatically.

It was left to Honduran Vice Foreign Minister Eduardo Reina to deny that Honduras is arming itself, as Ortega charged. "We respect the position of President Ortega, but in our case we maintain an Army with only defensive capability." Ortega had said that Honduras' military aircraft were offensive and extended his criticisms to include Costa Rica. He said Costa Rica does not have an army but has "a very powerful force, which they call the Guardia Civil," which nevertheless has "a large budget, with many resources, and a great deal of armament."

Vice Minister Reina rationalized the airplane deal, saying, "This year we are going to get international cooperation on patrol planes, eight reconnaissance aircraft, simple, two passengers, with special gear, from the United States." He said the army needed the equipment to reinforce its surveillance of narcotraffickers moving through their territory on their south-north delivery routes. They would also come in handy for tracking arsonists and timber thieves in the nation's forests. The Army has, he said, "a light defensive capacity, as President Zelaya has said, for new challenges like the green battalions that combat forest destruction, the battle against drug activity, and assisting the police."

## *Offensive potential*

This is not entirely the case. Honduras also has 20-year-old F-5 jet fighters, even though, Zelaya told reporters, the Army "is small and is dedicated to environmental activities, enforcing the security of the country, and at the same time protecting the borders." He insisted that, despite Ortega's comments, he could assure him that Honduras "has a balance of forces in Central America. There is no hostile environment, no atmosphere of confrontation, the armies of Central America maintain excellent relations." Ortega had said that Honduras owned 11 warplanes in good condition and asked, "What does a country need a combat plane for? They are airplanes that could fly from Tegucigalpa to Managua in 25 minutes and bombard this city." Honduras has never used its planes offensively and there are no war clouds on the horizon, even though the arms issues come just as both sides await a judgment from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague on their territorial dispute.

The US Embassy in Managua has denied manipulating the timing of these events to stir up trouble. A spokesperson said the Honduran government had decided to use funds the US donated more than a year ago to purchase the planes. They are small two-seaters with a single 100-hp engine. Ortega took issue with the claim that they could not be armed, recalling from his own experience that in the 1970s the forces of dictator Anastasio Somoza (1967-1979) used similar-sized planes to drop bombs on the population in Managua, Matagalpa, and Esteli. "In those planes for four persons, four bombs fit and can be dropped, making them effective weapons," he said.

This remains a sore spot in the Nicaraguan collective memory, as Asamblea Nacional first secretary Wilfredo Navarro of the opposition Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) separately recalled. "Those civil aircraft are fixed in the minds of Nicaraguans, the Push and Pull that the Guardia Nacional had that were armed and then used to bomb the population," said Navarro. Ortega's position remained, "If in Central America there were no combat aviation, there would simply be no reason to have missiles. But, since there are these warplanes in Central America, unfortunately, they oblige us to have these missiles to defend the country in case a situation of aggression arises. The United States recognizes the sovereignty of Honduras to arm itself, and I recognize that as a sovereign decision, but it is also a sovereign decision of Nicaragua to defend the armament that it has."

Ortega did leave a door open. He said he was willing to negotiate with the rest of Central America the reduction of spending on offensive weapons and to use the money saved to fight narcotrafficking and organized crime. In the legislature, the combined opposition forces of the PLC and the Alianza Liberal Nicaraguense (ALN) have said they have the 48 votes necessary to pass the bill calling for the destruction of 651 of the missiles. That would still leave the army with an estimated 400 Sam-7s. In 2005, the Army agreed that 400 would be enough for its needs.

But for the new Ortega government, the issue is the exercise of sovereign right in the face of possibly renewed US interference. He exhorted the AN to wait, telling them, "Deputies of different political tendencies should act with a patriotic sense, because today they demand that you destroy the missiles, tomorrow they demand that you destroy the tanks, later they demand that you destroy the artillery, and finally that you dissolve the army. Nicaragua cannot be destroying its armaments

unilaterally." Ortega said that, at present, Nicaragua is the only country of the region that has complied with the concept of a reasonable balance of armed force.

The Foreign Ministry dispatched a press release to that effect, leading with, "Nicaragua, autonomous and sovereign, does not need the approval of another state to determine the appropriate means for the defense and safeguarding of its sovereignty." The release went on to say that the Esquipulas Accords established the principle of reasonable force to maintain balance among the regional armies in which each state revealed its inventory to the UN (see Update, 1988-08-10, 1992-10-23, and 1993-03-12, NotiSur, 1996-11-15 and NotiCen, 1999-08-26). "Therefore, no state can hold up any reason whatever to demand of Nicaragua the unilateral destruction of its armaments, vital for its defense." It concluded with a plea for the other countries to comply with the agreed-upon balance.

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