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Mike Leffert

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Nicaragua Seeks New Arms and a Benefactor

by Mike Leffert

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Nicaragua has announced its intention to acquire major new armaments. Upon making the announcement in May, President Daniel Ortega referred to Honduras' recent acquisition of several new light planes from the US but said the new weapons would be used primarily to protect the nation's natural resources from illegal logging and to increase the effectiveness of its border patrols. Army Chief Omar Halleslevens said separately that his forces needed at least six new helicopters, twelve coastguard patrol vessels, and several new airplanes.

Further clarification came from military spokesman Col. Adolfo Zepeda, who said, "We, as the Army, have expressed to the president the necessity to fortify the Air Force and Naval Force, so we can have the resources and means to improve our fight against environmental depredation and offer support to the police in the battle with international narcotrafficking."

US Ambassador Paul Trivelli said of the intended buildup, "It's not a bad idea" to have military capacity and stability for the fight against narcotrafficking and for preparedness in case of natural disasters. He said, "These types of machines are very useful," adding, "I believe that, if a country wants to acquire a type of equipment that can be defensive or that can be put to many uses, well, it is worthwhile." Trivelli's words were very much in line with Ortega's description of the potential use of the armaments. Ortega made clear that he was not looking for combat aircraft.

Who pays?

At US\$5 million a piece for the helicopters, not to mention the boats and other planes, it was left unexplained who would pay for the equipment. The US Embassy has said, however, that it would provide training "to help to improve regional maritime security." In the legislature, both the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) and the ruling Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) back the buildup.

The president of the production, economy, and budget committee, Francisco Aguirre Sacasa (PLC), called them necessary but, acknowledging a lack of resources, said hopefully, "But, instead of buying them, I believe the ideal thing would be that someone donate them. For example, the government of the United States." Coordinator of the FSLN congressional delegation Edwin Castro confirmed there is no money, but he supported the need.

Tentative opposition to the plan came from president of the Movimiento de Renovacion Sandinista (MRS) Enrique Saenz who called it a bad signal for the region, ignoring that both Honduras and El Salvador have announced plans and acquisitions to bolster their militaries.

The question of funding places Ortega in a position that is familiar and comfortable for him and that has so far worked well for him (see NotiCen, 2007-04-26). Along with the suggestion that the

US underwrite the venture, there has also been speculation that US adversary Venezuela might be interested in doing so. Ortega has done well being courted by these two and has played the two cagily. So far he has said only that there are "unidentified" friends willing to write checks.

In Honduras, which Ortega has criticized in connection with its acceptance of a donation of several Storm Rally aircraft, the unidentified friends [of Nicaragua] are thought to be in Venezuela. "Among regional analysts the mystery benefactor of the Ortega regime is not so mysterious at all," wrote the Honduran English-language newspaper Honduras This Week. "The strong Nicaraguan alliance with President Hugo Chavez and his field of influence is well documented, which makes the Venezuelan premier a prime suspect as a possible financial backer."

The strong alliance threatened to become even stronger and more worrisome for nervous Hondurans when, on June 6, Chavez called for creating a common defense pact among Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Bolivia. He said the four nations, tied together as the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), should cooperate militarily to become more independent of US influence. "It seems the moment to establish a joint defense strategy to prepare our people for defense so that nobody makes any mistakes with us," said Chavez.

Ortega has done nothing to disabuse anti-Chavistas of their concerns. In June, he paid a visit to Venezuela and appeared for hours on TV with Chavez, strongly supporting the Venezuelan's denial of an extended broadcasting license to opposition RCTV. Together, the two presidents discussed the probability that, by its criticism of the move characterized in the US as a shutdown or takeover of the station, the US is starting a "perception war." The station is in fact not shut down and continues as a cable channel.

In another move that gives pause to arbiters of Nicaraguan intentions, the country has restored diplomatic ties with North Korea. Ambassador So Jae-myong, already ambassador to Mexico, has presented his credentials to Ortega. In reporting this, Radio Pyongyang said, "President Ortega said comrade Kim Jong-il's Songun (military-first) politics is right, and the DPRK's deterrent ability in self-defense is a clear manifestation of its independent position." Relations between the two countries were broken in 1990 with the electoral defeat of Ortega by ex-President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (1990-1996). North Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Kim Hyong-jun met with Ortega in May during a three-day visit to Nicaragua. A statement from the Nicaraguan government said the purpose of the visit was to "discuss areas of common bilateral and multilateral interest and to strengthen the old ties of friendship that have long existed between both governments and peoples."

If the US is taking this negatively, it is not letting on. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has a planned meeting with Nicaragua's Foreign Minister Samuel Santos during the 37th meeting of the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) in Panama. The meet was set up by US director of the Office of the Western Hemisphere for Central America John Feeley.

The agenda wasn't announced, but Feeley said, "I believe that the more we talk, the more easily we confront whatever solution to whatever difference we might naturally have between us," adding that relations between the countries were proceeding along "a good path." Santos said the US was most interested in talking about compensation for US properties seized during the contra war.

The implication was that the US was prepared to forego comment on Ortega's planned trip to visit other US antagonists, including Iran, Algeria, Libya, and Cuba. Ortega will fly on a jet loaned him by Libya's Muammar Qadhafi. Said Ortega of the trip, "We are not asking permission from any country, from any president, about who we meet, when we meet, or what we talk about. It is a sovereign decision and the North American government understands that very well."

-- End --