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Costa Rica-Nicaragua Showdown Stresses Love-Hate Relationship

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A recurring situation is taking place in Central America. Costa Rica and Nicaragua are again in confrontation. What started as a harmless dredging of the Río San Juan, which runs on Nicaraguan territory along the binational border, has turned into a critical low point in these two neighbors’ relations (NotiCen, July 16, 2009).

Since the San Juan has several tributaries flowing into Costa Rica, that country’s authorities let their Nicaraguan counterparts’ know that dredging on the Nicaraguan side of the border could have an environmental impact on the Costa Rican side.

But Costa Rican Foreign Minister René Castro said he was verbally assured by Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Samuel Santos that there would be nothing to be concerned about.

Dredging began last month, with the operations headed by a controversial figure, former guerrilla commander and later contra chief Edén Pastora.

As Comandante Cero of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) guerrillas, Pastora headed the takeover of the Palacio Nacional in Managua in 1978. Seat of Nicaragua’s unicameral legislature, the building was the target of the successful Operación Chanchera (Operation Pigsty), during which an FSLN commando took several relatives of dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle (1967-1979) and all of the pro-Somoza régime’s legislators hostage for several days.

Somoza was thus forced to release 50 Sandinista political prisoners, including current Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, pay a US$500,000 ransom to the guerrillas, and publish several rebel manifestos, all in exchange for the hostages.

Somoza was toppled the following year—and killed in exile in Paraguay a year later during a bombing attack on his car—in what is known as El Triunfo, and Pastora later held several posts, including the position of vice minister of the interior.

Pastora eventually broke with the FSLN, switching sides to become the head of the Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática (ARDE), the smaller and less aggressive of the two counterrevolutionary groups organized, funded, and armed by the US in an unsuccessful, eight-year effort to topple, through armed struggle, the 1979-1990 government of the Revolución Popular Sandinista.

Headed by Pastora as the military chief and Alfonso Robelo as the political chief, ARDE operated basically from Costa Rica.

The bulk of the contras (a short form of contrarrevolución)—whom US President Ronald Reagan (1981-1985, 1985-1989) called "freedom fighters"—was the Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense (FDN), operating from the El Aguacate military base in Honduras, in the southern department of El Paraíso bordering Nicaragua.
The then governing FSLN was defeated in the 1990 elections. Pastora, one of many exiled anti-Sandinistas who returned to Nicaragua, ran unsuccessfully for the country’s presidency in 2006.

**Pastora’s dredging operations set off incident**

The former Sandinista guerrilla commander and later contra chief eventually mended his fences with Ortega who, now back in the presidency—and aiming at re-election next year—appointed him minister of development for the San Juan River Basin. As such, he was charged with getting the river dredged, an operation which began last month.

On Oct. 21, Costa Rica accused Nicaragua of having violated its sovereignty by dumping part of the sediment scooped by the dredge on a spot on the easternmost stretch of the 309-km land border.

The following day, the Costa Rican government sent the Nicaraguan government a note of protest, and—since Costa Rica abolished its army more than 60 years ago—announced it was deploying Fuerza Pública (the country’s police) officers to the Costa Rican side of the conflict area.

Six days later, the Nicaraguan government replied, saying that Costa Rica security forces had gone into Nicaragua’s territory.

On Nov. 1, Costa Rica reported soldiers of the Ejército de Nicaragua were in the area on Costa Rica’s side of the border, demanded they be withdrawn, and announced that, in an effort to resolve the situation, it was taking the case to the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States (OAS).

Nicaragua said that it was taking the case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague and that its troops would stay where they were because they were on Nicaraguan territory.

The Council sent OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza, a former Chilean vice president and interior minister, on a dialog-promoting mission to both countries on Nov. 5-8, which included flying over the conflict area.

On Nov. 9, Insulza reported back to the Permanent Council—made up of the ambassadors to the OAS—and among other suggestions recommended that the Comisión Binacional meeting tentatively scheduled for Nov. 27 be held as an opportunity to solve the crisis and that both countries pull back security forces deployed on either side of the border.

A lengthy, at times stormy, OAS session to address the issue ended late at night on Nov. 12, after its Permanent Council passed by majority vote—instead of the usual consensus—a motion that included Insulza’s proposal.

**Costa Rica claimed victory; Nicaragua said vote had been manipulated**

The following evening, in Managua, Ortega severely criticized the OAS as a useless institution that, among its many other failures, had not reversed last year’s coup in Honduras and said it was time for Nicaragua to think about pulling out of it.

Ortega also criticized several governments, Costa Rica’s in particular, saying that the call for troop withdrawal, in Nicaragua’s case, meant moving soldiers out of an area were they were battling drug traffickers.
"Costa Rican authorities listened to allegations made by drug traffickers who, running from Nicaraguan authorities, took refuge in San José where they said the Nicaraguan Army had occupied Costa Rican territory," said Ortega.

"Drug traffickers running Costa Rican policy. Since when? Costa Rican foreign policy being run by drug traffickers. This has to worry us," added Ortega, flanked by his wife and Information Coordinator Rosario Murillo and Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, a former foe from revolutionary times, Cabinet members, and military and police authorities, plus an audience. "Who benefits from this proposal, from this demand Costa Rica makes to us that the Army stop operating on Nicaraguan territory against drug-trafficking? Who benefits? Drug traffickers."

The Nicaraguan leader also ratified the decision to take the case to the ICJ.

Costa Rica’s response came 24 hours later. Castro sent Santos a letter of protest saying that "the Costa Rican government has received with outrage the statements made yesterday" by Nicaragua’s head of state, "alleging connections of Costa Rican authorities with drug-trafficking."

"It is at the same time outrageous and painful for us that...President Ortega states that ‘drug-traffickers lead Costa Rican foreign policy,’" added Castro in the letter handed to Nicaragua’s Ambassador to Costa Rica Harold Rivas. "This and other slanderous expressions...force on the Costa Rican government the duty to complain in outrage before the Nicaraguan government and to demand the necessary explanation."

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