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Recap On Contra Aid Made Effective By Presidential Signature Of $576 Billion Omnibus Spending Bill

by Deborah Tyroler
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Staff The signing of the $576 billion omnibus appropriations bill into law Oct. 18 by President Reagan was the last step in the administration’s struggle to provide military aid to the Nicaraguan contras. The effort began in February, the first chapter in one of the Reagan administration's most controversial and dramatic foreign policy debates. According to White House statements, the administration requested the contra aid to counteract some $580 million in military assistance that the Sandinista government has received from the Soviet bloc since 1980. The aid legislation also provides $300 million in additional economic aid to Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Briefly, the $100 million contra aid package includes $70 million in military assistance the first such aid since 1984 and $30 million in non-lethal aid. Last year Congress approved $27 million in "humanitarian" aid for the contra forces. While the bulk of military aid to be made available to the contras is classified, the legislation does permit provision of ground-to-air weapons which supporters argue are essential in countering the Sandinista army's helicopters supplied by the Soviets. Forty million dollars in military and economic aid became immediately available when the president signed the budget bill. An additional $20 million will become available before February and 15 days after the president reports to the congress. The $20 million installment will be delivered to the contras if Reagan reports that no progress has been made on a regional peace treaty grounded on the Contadora document of objectives, that the Sandinista government is not engaged in a serious dialogue with the domestic opposition, and that prospects for a cease-fire do not exist. The law also stipulates that the president must report on whether the contra groups receiving aid are working together, broadening their political base, subordinating military forces to civilian leadership, eliminating human rights abuses, and using the aid for designated purposes. Next, similar findings by the president are required for the final $40 million disbursement, which the legislation says should occur after February 15, 1987. The lion's share of the aid will be received by the Honduran-based United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO), the main contra organization created largely through the efforts of the CIA at Washington's behest. Some $10 million are also earmarked for the Southern Opposition Bloc, based in Costa Rica, and a smaller amount for the Nicaraguan Indian contra group, MISURASATA. US government personnel are authorized to train contra troops under the wording of the new legislation. US personnel, however, are restricted from going within 20 miles of the Nicaraguan border. Finally, the legislation provides for the creation of a congressional commission on Central American negotiations. Commission members will be appointed by Republican and Democratic leaders of both Houses. The commission's responsibilities include monitoring contra attempts to coordinate their efforts and to carry out reforms, and the Central American peace negotiation process.

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