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Guatemalan Right-wing Party Reportedly Training 8,000 Nationals To Join Nicaraguan Contras; Cerezo Government "shocked"

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At a Dec. 14 news conference in Guatemala City, spokesman for the right-wing National Liberation Movement (MLN) Rudy Fuentes told reporters that for the past nine months his party has been training 8,000 Guatemalan "volunteers" to fight with the contras. According to Fuentes, 5,000 Guatemalans are presently ready to join the contras, while the remainder are undergoing training. He said the volunteers will join the contras when the latter ask for them. Guatemalan law prohibits training of troops to fight against other nations. Fuentes would not reveal the location of the training sites, indicating that the site was a "secret" one in Central America. Since President Vinicio Cerezo assumed power in January, Guatemala has been the only country in the region that has remained largely neutral to the contra effort. The MLN, however, has consistently criticized Guatemalan neutrality. According to Fuentes, many of the 8,000 volunteers were children of persons "who fought in 1954 to get rid of communism in Guatemala." The MLN participated in the 1954 CIA-backed coup which ousted the government of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. The Arbenz government was considered to communist after attempting to implement agrarian reform, which involved the expropriation of lands from the United Fruit Company. The MLN leader stated that the party was financing the training. He refused to comment on the amount of money spent on the training, or if the MLN had provided any other type of support to the contras. UPI reported that the announcement about the training of 8,000 "volunteers" followed the MLN's first public recruiting campaign last week. Fuentes' statements contradict information recently provided to UPI by MLN legislator Juan Carlos Simons. Simons told UPI last week that only 50 soldiers were ready to join the contras in battle. He refused to comment on the total number being trained. On Dec. 15 Interior Minister Juan Jose Rodil Peralta declared Guatemala will not permit Nicaraguan rebels to train in national territory, after denying that a Guatemalan-trained contra force exists. According to REUTERS, government officials were shocked by the MLN announcement that 8,000 Guatemalans were ready to join the contras in battle. Meanwhile, former president of the MLN, Obdulio Chinchilla Vega, said he doubted the party could obtain the support of 8,000 men. He added that in any event it would be impossible to hide such a force in any other Central American country. The Nicaraguan government has accused Guatemala of allowing its territory to be used as a supply base for the contras. Guatemalan officials have denied the charge. Late last week, the Guatemala-based news agency CERIGUA, said contra leaders are reportedly entering Guatemala without first passing through standard immigration control procedures. The news agency said the media in Guatemala City has been publishing interviews with contra leaders Adolfo Calero, Pedro Joaquin Chamorro and Fabio Gadea. Some reporters suspect the three entered Guatemala via the military airport, which would explain the absence of documentation indicating their arrival by commercial airline or private plane, as well as passage through customs and immigration. CERIGUA reported the contras have at their disposal a US military plane, access to a hangar at the Guatemalan military airbase, as well as fuel and maintenance services. (Basic data from UPI, 12/15/86; REUTERS, 12/15/86; PRENSALATINA, 12/13/86)