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Nicaragua: Contra Leaders Address Concerns About Sandinista Compliance With Peace Plan

by Deborah Tyroler

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Three contra leaders, Adolfo Calero, Enrique Bermudez and Azucena Ferrey, were interviewed by the WASHINGTON POST (09/28/87) Sept. 25 on a riverbank on the Nicaraguan side of the Coco River during a tour to confer with rebel commanders and troops on the Honduran-Nicaraguan border. The visits by the three to this area, said the POST, appeared to reflect mounting concerns that the Sandinistas are making political headway in the peace process. The contras say the Sandinistas are engaged in an intensive effort to show compliance with the peace plan through largely symbolic measures and thus ensure a cutoff of US aid. Calero said the Sandinistas are "carrying on a tremendous propaganda campaign aimed at trying to get our people to surrender." He said they were waging this campaign in part through "territorial commissions" being set up under a National Reconciliation Commission, which was formed in accord with the Aug. 7 peace plan. He added that the Sandinistas have been making overtures to have these commissions visit contra positions inside Nicaragua, and that rebel field commanders have been sending messages asking for instructions. "What the Sandinistas are saying is for export," said Enrique Bermudez, the contras' top military commander. "In fact, they are increasing pressure on our troops." [In some of the latest fighting, according to a contra military spokesman, rebels armed with US-supplied Redeye shoulder-fired missiles shot down two Sandinista MI25 helicopters Sept. 25 in Matagalpa province. The spokesman, Bosco Matamoros, said Sept. 26 that Sandinista troops backed by four helicopters had tried to attack a contra force that had just received an air drop of supplies the day before. Nicaragua confirmed the loss of one copter.] According to Bermudez, "The main objective of the Sandinistas is to cut off the aid that the US Congress gives to us." He said, "we are preparing a contingency plan" for a US aid cutoff. "We will do the best we can to keep on fighting." This could mean, he said, reducing the size of contra forces, which he put at 16,000 fighters, changing tactics or waging "another type of war." He did not elaborate on the contingency planning. Bermudez added that an aid cutoff "may mean it will take more time" to defeat the Sandinistas and that "this will bring some problems to us." If the Sandinistas go ahead with plans to declare their own partial cease-fire, said the commander, "we will take the opportunity to improve our offensive positions. It will not change our struggle." Bermudez acknowledged that Sandinista actions on the political front lately have caused some uncertainty among the rebels. "The Sandinistas say we are already at peace. This is confusing our troops. We are aware the Sandinista propaganda could create some concerns. We can't deny that a few who don't have enough conviction in the struggle have been tricked by propaganda. But we are optimistic our troops will keep fighting." The military chief admitted that "we don't have the resources to make propaganda" to compete with the Sandinistas. "The best propaganda we have is military action." In an effort to counter the Nicaraguan government's intensified appeals to contras to accept amnesty, Bermudez said, "We are conducting our own campaign to keep our fighters informed." It was as part of this effort that he and Calero toured contra positions together on Sept. 25, while Ferrey conducted question-and-answer sessions with rebel fighters and local commanders. Calero and Ferrey are among the six directors of the Nicaraguan Resistance, a contra umbrella political alliance. Plans are being made

to try to repeat the success of a prisoner release Aug. 18. In what they called a "humanitarian act," the contras freed 80 alleged Sandinista prisoners held at sites on the Honduran side of the border and flew them to Costa Rica, where only 20 of them decided to return to Nicaragua. "We have approximately 30 prisoners we are going to free at the next opportunity," Bermudez said, without naming a date. The contra leaders indicated that they are taking a harder line toward the peace plan in conversations with rebel fighters than they have thus far in public statements. "We must change the government in Nicaragua," Ferrey told a squad of rebels in one pep talk at a contra border camp. "We can never have peace in Nicaragua with a totalitarian government like the Sandinista Front. Nothing has changed for us. The struggle continues, and the goals are the same." At one camp, however, she came in for some tough questioning by contra commanders as she addressed about 20 seemingly bewildered rebels ranging in age from 12 to nearly 50. In her response, Ferrey said the rebel directorate would never agree to an amnesty without "complete security." She said this meant that, among other measures, the Sandinistas had to dismantle their neighborhood committees and state security apparatus, cut all links between the ruling party and the Army, free all political prisoners and return all confiscated property.

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