

Nicaragua: 400 Contras On Atlantic Coast Accept Amnesty

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On Oct. 3, Uriel Vanegas, one of the leading commanders of Miskito Indian rebels fighting the Nicaraguan government, agreed to end his campaign against the Sandinistas. Vanegas and several dozen of his estimated 400 men appeared in Puerto Cabezas, and shared the platform with Interior Minister Tomas Borge, who flew from Managua for the occasion. "We can support the Sandinista project if it defends Indian rights," said Vanegas. His men carried rifles, grenade launchers and machine guns as they listened to his speech in Puerto Cabezas's main plaza. Vanegas said he and his troops were not surrendering, and vowed that they "will not turn in a blessed rifle to the Sandinista Front." Under an agreement signed by Vanegas and Sandinista officials, the Indians will be allowed to keep their weapons, and they will form police and militia units to defend Indian villages. Vanegas said some of his men "will become part of the national army." Relief workers and others in Puerto Cabezas described Vanegas's decision as an important breakthrough that could lead to an end to the 6-year war between the Indians and the Sandinista authorities. They estimated that with Vanegas's decision to stop fighting, there are between 800 and 1,500 Indian guerrillas still in the field. Brooklyn Rivera, the most prominent Indian leader, has put the figure at 2,800. The Moravian Church, to which most Miskitos belong, is serving as an intermediary in talks between the government and Indian commanders. "Most Indian fighters are about to accept a cease-fire," said Rev. Andy Shoegren, superintendent of the Moravian Church in Puerto Cabezas. "During the last two years, the government has taken a different attitude toward those people and has started respecting their feelings." Shoegren said if government officials were successful in trying to persuade Rivera to return to Nicaragua, "That would be a very big step." Miskito leaders received CIA help at one time, but were cut off after they refused to unite with the contras. Vanegas pledged that he and his men would fight against the contras if contras attack Indian villages in the future. "There will always be differences between us and the Sandinista Front," Vanegas said. But he said the situation had changed considerably, and that the Sandinistas had promised "to be flexible and make serious reforms." On Oct. 5, government radio station VOZ DE NICARAGUA announced that over 400 men under Vanegas's command had accepted amnesty. Military sources consulted by the Associated Press said that most of the men were indigenous to the region. For about two years, this group had been allied with the main contra army, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN). In December 1981, indigenous groups, principally Miskitos, took up arms against the Sandinistas in response to the government's imposition of a system considered contrary to Indian customs. (Basic data from AP, NEW YORK TIMES, PRENSA LATINA, 10/05/87)

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