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Talks Between Contras & Sandinistas Via Intermediary May Begin Next Week

by Deborah Tyroler

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According to contra officials and US congresspersons recently returned from Managua, the first session between contra leaders and an intermediary in talks with the Nicaraguan government may be held as early as next week. The lawmakers, who met with Vice President Sergio Ramirez Mercado and Interior Minister Tomas Borge over the weekend, said that the Sandinista officials had told them they wanted indirect negotiations with the rebels to begin "as soon as possible" and that they had mentioned next week as a likely starting point. Contra officials say they have already decided on a three-point proposal for the first session of talks in which they intend to concentrate on the terms for achieving a cease-fire. The officials said the conditions are the right to control territory in which contra troops operate, the right to supply the troops with noncombat supplies like food, medicine and clothing, and the right to unfettered radio communications with units in the field. After a cease-fire has been agreed on, rebel officials say, they will ask to negotiate political issues. Senior Sandinista officials have said that they will discuss only a cease-fire, and not political concerns. Alfredo Cesar and Alfonso Robelo, two of the eight leaders of Resistencia Nicaraguense, the contra umbrella organization, said in interviews that the rebels would raise political matters, including the lifting of the state of siege in Nicaragua, the guarantee of freedom of the press and the right of exiles to return. Cesar and Robelo say that after a cease-fire is concluded, they will ask that some of their representatives be allowed to return to Nicaragua under a broad, general amnesty and take an active role in politics. If the representatives find that the Nicaraguan government does not allow them to freely organize politically, "then we will have our troops in the field, and we are ready to keep fighting," Cesar said. Robelo said the contras intended to keep up military attacks until a cease-fire has been negotiated. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega has asked Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo to serve as the intermediary in the indirect negotiations. It appears that the Cardinal will carry the Nicaraguan government's position to the contras and that they will then present their own position. The talks will almost certainly be held outside Nicaragua. The planned talks could quickly bog down in controversy. The issue of granting control of territory to the contras promises to be particularly difficult. Cesar contended that the contras physically exert control in "more than 50%" of Nicaragua, a figure the Sandinistas will almost certainly contest as too high. (Basic data from NEW YORK TIMES, 11/10/87)

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