

11-13-1987

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Nicaraguan President Will Meet With Contra Leaders In Reagan's Presence

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Friday, November 13, 1987

In an interview Nov. 10 with the New York Times during a plane flight to Washington to address the Organization of American States, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said that if President Reagan would receive him, he would consent to the presence of contra leaders at the meeting. This comment marked the first time any official of the Nicaraguan government had announced a willingness to meet directly with contra leaders under any circumstances. Indirect talks through Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, the Roman Catholic Primate of Nicaragua, are expected to start soon. "If Reagan invites me to talk, I would be willing," Ortega said. "If he wants to be joined by Secretary [of State George] Shultz, by [FDN head Adolfo] Calero or by the contra leadership, that is up to him." Although Ortega has not formally requested a White House meeting, he said, Nicaraguan officials have let the administration know of his interest. Asst. Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams said no such meeting was possible. Abrams called the Ortega proposal "not a step forward, but a step backward." He said Ortega's offer was intended to make contra leaders "junior partners of the United States." "When Mr. Ortega agreed to have indirect talks, it was an acknowledgement of the importance of the contras, and now he is attempting to take back that acknowledgement," Abrams said. He said the Sandinistas were trying "to engage the United States in talks without our allies." The Nicaraguan leader said he was carrying a new proposal that could speed up the process of negotiating a cease-fire with the contras. The plan was understood to entail a dialogue in which the Sandinistas would talk to both the contras and the US. The principal purpose of Ortega's trip was to address the OAS on Wednesday, and to meet with key members of Congress, including House Speaker Jim Wright. On Monday Reagan told the OAS that the administration was prepared to open talks with Nicaragua if Sandinista leaders opened "serious negotiations" with the contras. Administration officials have pressed Nicaragua to broaden the agenda for the talks to include political questions as well as cease-fire arrangements. The peace accord does not require such broad talks. President Arias sent two envoys to Managua to meet with Ortega before his departure for Washington. One of the envoys, John Biehl, a presidential confidant, said Arias would not press the Nicaraguan government to negotiate the sharing of power with the contras. Biehl said, "That is not allowed. Under the accord, all governments are legitimate." During the Nov. 10 interview, Ortega said that LA PRENSA would be closed down again as part of a renewed crackdown on the opposition if Congress approved an administration request for \$270 million in additional aid for the contras. "If the \$270 million is approved, all political space in Nicaragua would close immediately," he said. "The situation cannot stabilize until the war ends. As long as the opposition sees the Reagan administration committed to liquidating the Nicaraguan revolution, there are going to be intense confrontations." Cardinal Obando has asked that talks between the government and contra leaders be held in Managua, but Ortega said it would be impractical to hold the talks in the Nicaraguan capital because demonstrators favoring one side or the other would take to the streets and create pandemonium. He suggested that the talks be held in Washington. For the peace plan to work, Ortega said, Honduras must stop allowing the use of its

territory by contras and must close its airports to planes carrying US-supplied weapons and other goods for the contras. (Basic data from NEW YORK TIMES, 11/11/87)

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