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U.S. Sends Troops To Honduras, Justified By Nicaraguan "invasion": Summary Of Events & Statements, March 16-17

by Deborah Tyroler

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March 16: Late Wednesday evening, White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater announced that President Reagan had ordered 3,200 US troops to Honduras in response to what was described as a Nicaraguan invasion of Honduran territory. Administration officials said the units would consist of two battalions of the Army's 82nd Airborne Division, stationed at Fort Bragg, NC, and two battalions of the 7th Infantry, stationed in Fort Ord, Calif. The units were sent to Palmerola air base near Tegucigalpa as part of an "emergency deployment readiness exercise" and would not be involved in combat with Nicaraguan soldiers, said the officials. There are already more than 3,000 US National Guard and Army Reserve troops operating in Honduras. According to the officials, the administration acted to show support for Honduras after receiving a letter from Honduran President Jose Azcona Hoyo describing the Nicaraguan action as an "invasion" of Honduran territory supported by combat aircraft and artillery. On Wednesday evening, Fitzwater said that the Nicaraguan army had invaded Honduras in an effort to wipe out the contras. According to the spokesperson, 1,500 Sandinista troops were seeking to destroy contra base camps inside Honduras, while another 4,500 soldiers supported by Soviet-made helicopters, were massing close to the border in the Bocay border of Nicaragua. He said he lacked details about the extent of the Sandinista invasion. The US, Fitzwater said, was considering the options, including a military invasion of Nicaragua to counter "this invasion in force" which began March 15 and is continuing. Washington, he added, has been in contact with Honduran President Jose Azcona Hoyo, and the presidents of Costa Rica, El Salvador and Guatemala. Fitzwater called the invasion a serious breach of regional borders and an offensive act that threatens the stability of all countries in the region. He said the invasion "makes a mockery of Sandinista pledges for compliance with the Guatemala peace plan." The Organization of American States, he said, will be asked to examine the invasion. As mentioned above, Fitzwater first contended that the administration would "rule out no option," but on responding to further questions, he reiterated Reagan's repeated statements that the US has no plans to invade Nicaragua. According to the Reagan administration, Azcona, who had been suffering from influenza, made an "oral request" for US aid to US Ambassador Everett Briggs. Earlier in the day, the Honduran Foreign Ministry said it knew of no request for US aid. The president's decision to send troops came after a day of conflicting statements by administration officials and rumors about prospective intervention. As late as 5 p.m. on Wednesday, Reagan assured Republican Senate and House leaders at a White House reception that he had made no decision on providing military aid to Honduras. Secretary of State George Shultz, White House chief of staff Howard Baker and National Security Adviser Colin Powell went to Capitol Hill late Wednesday afternoon to brief House leaders from both parties about the situation along the Nicaraguan border with Honduras. They received a mixed reaction from Republicans about the need for US military aid for the contras and skepticism from Democrats. Shultz said the meeting was called "basically to describe to them a set of events we believe pose a genuine national security problem for the United States of America and that is the movement of Nicaraguan troops into

Honduras." Shultz said the administration estimates that 1,500 to 2,000 troops are involved in an exercise to damage "the ability of the freedom fighters to represent themselves...We believe there are very serious implications." At the meeting, Shultz reportedly said military aid for the contras is necessary. "The secretary said `we don't have a specific proposal,'" said House Majority Whip Tony Coelho (D-Calif.). "They basically said they don't know what they want." House Speaker Jim Wright said after the meeting that he had spoken by telephone with Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto, who told him "the government has ordered the Nicaraguan troops to withdraw well into Nicaragua." Pentagon officials told reporters that the Sandinista offensive could severely damage contra military efforts by seizing their primary supply depot near the border town of Bocay. "If the supply base is overrun, the contras will vaporize," said a Pentagon official monitoring the situation. These officials said reports indicate that about 1,500 Sandinista soldiers had moved across the border, toward the supply headquarters. In Managua, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said on national television that there was a major offensive against the contra rebels fighting the Sandinista Nicaraguan government. He denied that Nicaraguan troops invaded Honduras where contras have long had supply depots and base camps. Sen. Christopher J. Dodd (D-Conn.) said he was "highly suspicious of the administration's motives" in characterizing the military action as an invasion. He mentioned that in March 1986 the administration used reports of a Nicaraguan "incursion" and a request from Azcona to justify sending \$20 million in emergency US military aid to Honduras. On that occasion, the Honduran government first denied the incursion and then, after much discussion and controversy, confirmed it along with the aid request. [Nearly a year later John Ferch, who had been US ambassador to Honduras in March 1986, was quoted by Knight-Rider newspapers as saying he exerted pressure on Azcona, under instructions from Washington, to make a written request for the aid. Ferch was cited as saying to Azcona, "You've got to get a letter (requesting US aid) up there right now. They're going bonkers...This is absurd but you've got to do it."] William LeoGrande, an American University professor who specializes on Central America and has worked for Democrat congresspersons, said: "With the contras in big trouble and the administration coming to an end, if they're ever going to try to knock the Sandinistas off, this may be the last excuse they get." March 17: In the afternoon, Honduran jet fighters dropped one bomb inside Nicaraguan territory, narrowly missing a group of journalists, and two more on the Honduran side of the border. About 30 Nicaraguan and foreign journalists were standing on the Nicaraguan banks of the Coco River at San Andres de Bocay, in the jungles of northern Jinotega province. They were flown to the area in the morning in Sandinista Army helicopters to inspect a dirt airstrip captured by government troops from contra rebels during the offensive. The air attacks came shortly after the Honduran Armed Forces said they issued an ultimatum Thursday to Nicaragua demanding the withdrawal of all its troops from Honduras. [Informed sources cited by the Post said the four Honduran sorties were not nearly as potent as what the US was pressuring Tegucigalpa to do. The US, according to diplomatic sources in Tegucigalpa, had hoped the Hondurans would bomb the Sandinista command and control center for the offensive in Bonanza, Nicaragua, about 50 miles southeast of Bocay. A diplomat cited by the Post said the US had been "twisting every arm they could" to get the Hondurans to respond militarily. In 1985 and 1986 the Honduran Air Force also attacked Sandinista positions, once in Nicaragua and once in Honduras. "This was the first time they've bombed when the Sandinistas have not attacked Honduran positions," said one diplomat in Tegucigalpa. Thus far there has been no reported contact on the ground between Honduran and Nicaraguan government troops. Washington had reportedly been pressuring the Honduran military to bomb Sandinista positions in support of the contras as well as to provide ground troops.] Lt. Col. Javier Carrion, the Sandinista commander for the Army operation in the border area, said his

troops halted their advance at the border and ended the 11-day offensive at noon following orders from President Ortega. Carrion said Ortega stopped the operation as a result of the charges from Washington that Nicaragua "invaded" Honduras and Reagan's decision to send 3,200 additional troops to Palmerola Air Force Base in Honduras. [According to the Washington Post, it could not be determined whether Sandinista troops marched into Honduras in recent days. There appeared to be no government troops in Honduras in the area west of San Andreas de Bocay on Friday. The Nicaraguan government reportedly launched the offensive three days before cease-fire talks with the contras were scheduled to begin March 9. That round was postponed until March 21. The contras used the offensive as an opportunity to persuade Congress to vote more aid, floating reports that their fighters were facing slaughter and their last supplies were about to fall into Sandinista hands.] In Managua, President Daniel Ortega declared that Nicaragua was ready to "combat and liquidate" US troops sent to Honduras. According to AP, Ortega said Nicaraguan soldiers would not withdraw from the border region. He also called for a meeting of the UN Security Council to deal with what he called "one more escalation of the war against Nicaragua." Ortega called the US troop movement "a dangerous act" and accused Washington of pressuring Honduras into requesting the US presence. He would not confirm reports that Sandinista forces crossed the border into the neighboring country. Ortega told reporters, "Here the question is not if (Nicaraguan) Army troops penetrated Honduran territory or not, but that we have dozens of camps of mercenary forces in Honduran territory, in view of and tolerated by the Honduran government." The president said the Nicaraguan "invasion only exists in the warped imagination of the North American leaders" and said the sending of US troops "violates international law and the regional peace efforts...We demand that the United States withdraw its troops from Honduras immediately and, with this, contribute to the meeting that is going to be held in Sapoa (on Monday) having positive results." Ortega added that the US would use the current situation to give the contras logistical and military aid not approved by Congress. According to Ortega, the White House "clearly seeks" to circumvent the congressional ban on contra aid, using the presence of US troops in Honduras to provide military aid to the contras. Costa Rican President Oscar Arias called the reported incursion of Sandinista troops into Honduras deplorable and said it jeopardized truce talks set for March 21 between the Managua government and contra leaders. At a news conference in San Jose, Arias said, "I deplore that this happens shortly before the meeting begins, and it appears to me lamentable because Costa Rica feels that the manner of resolving problems is through direct dialogue and not through war...We are putting in danger the much or the little that we have achieved in the Central American peace process and the eyes of the world are placed on the isthmus to find out what we are capable of." According to Reuter, the UN Security Council agreed to meet on March 18 to discuss a Nicaraguan call for the immediate withdrawal of the US troops from Honduras. UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar called for restraint in the conflicts but said he had not decided whether to send in an observer team. On NBC's "Today" show, Secretary General of the Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry Alejandro Bendana, said from Managua that his government had already begun withdrawing troops from the border region after driving about 2,000 contras back into Honduras. "The operations have successfully been concluded, and we don't plan to stay along the border region. In fact, this deescalation has already begun." Bendana denied US and Honduran allegations that Sandinista troops entered Honduras, and he invited the United Nations and Organization of American States to visit the area to "establish what the facts are and end these accusations." According to a Honduran government spokesperson, the Air Force launched attacks against a Nicaraguan army position inside Honduras. The Nicaraguan government claimed that two US-made F-5 fired five rockets at a Nicaraguan military command post near the border with

Honduras inside the country's Jinotega department. The Honduran spokesperson, Col. Manuel Suarez Benavides, insisted that the raids took place "in Honduras, not in Nicaragua," and were meant to "expel the Sandinistas that are in Honduran territory." A US military spokesperson in Honduras said that by midafternoon, four C141 cargo planes carrying about 250 troops of the 82nd Airborne and 7th Light Infantry divisions were on the ground at the Palmerola air base northwest of Tegucigalpa. A US Embassy spokesperson said that 14 planes were expected Thursday, with another 14 due on Friday. House Speaker Jim Wright said, "I know nothing that justifies sending troops. He urged the administration to put its efforts into supporting the cease-fire talks in Nicaragua to begin on March 21. "Some in the White House are obviously trying to do everything in their power to keep the war going," Wright added. Pentagon officials said US troops will be ordered to stay at least 20 miles from the fighting in the Nicaraguan- Honduran border area. Secretary of State George Shultz told the Senate Budget Committee that the airlift was designed to "get people's attention to what is happening in Central America" and to tell the Honduran government, "We stand with you." Some senators expressed confusion over Shultz's assurances that US troops are not in Honduras in a "shooting capacity," while adding that "it is important for people to know the United States will fight, but we don't plan to get involved in any military way." Senators were told that a Sandinista military buildup along the Honduran border that eventually totaled 4,000 to 5,000 troops began in early March. The Sandinistas reportedly used old Soviet transport planes known as Antonov 26s rigged for bombing missions to drop 500-pound bombs on the contra base and supply camps inside Honduras. Asst. Secretary of State Elliott Abrams told members of Congress that 2,000 Sandinista troops were in Honduras and were not withdrawing. He said that a package of lethal aid for the contras is "under consideration" in the administration and that "hard evidence is being presented to the intelligence committees today. That evidence will persuade anybody with an open mind." On the possibility that the airlift had swayed congressional sentiment in favor of resuming military aid to the contras, House Majority Leader Thomas Foley (D-Wash.) said, "I don't think there is a change of attitude in this House. A majority opposes military aid." "The administration has cried 'Wolf! Wolf!' before," said Senate Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.). "I don't know if it is calling 'Wolf! Wolf!' this time." "I don't think it will sway one vote," said Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), who dismissed the military demonstration as "saber rattling...designed to make it easier to get contra aid...I don't think anything's changed except the Treasury is out millions of dollars for a show of force." House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Dante B. Fascell (D-Fla.) described the Sandinista incursion into Honduras as "kind of like an exclamation point that says I told you so." Sen. Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.) said that congressional rejections of contra aid had made the Sandinista offensive "inevitable...The problem is the (peace process) works only if we give aid to the contras." Some veteran contra supporters, such as Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), worry that Reagan's decision to send US forces to Honduras may have negative consequences for the administration's position. They reportedly fear that the move may create concerns about whether the troops will be involved in combat, and raise doubts about the White House's already badly eroded credibility with lawmakers. Democrat leaders were irritated with the administration's failure to inform them of the decision to send US troops. Wright, for example, was told of the action by a newspaper reporter as he attended a fund-raiser Wednesday night. According to Rep. Tony Coelho (D-Calif.), "What I've seen over the last week is not an attempt to communicate with Congress or build a consensus...It is a public relations campaign aimed at the media to resurrect a failed policy of military aid to the contras." Meanwhile, some House Democrats were irritated with President Ortega for launching the military offensive only days before the cease-fire talks with the contras. "It doesn't demonstrate much good faith," said Rep. Jim Slattery (D-Kans.), a member of the so-

called swing group of House moderates. "It was an incredibly stupid mistake by Ortega." "There is great anger at Ortega again," said Rep. Bill Richardson (D-NM). "And that is driving the Democrats more than the administration's sabre-rattling." Demonstrations protesting the escalation of US aggression in Central America took place in Managua, Leon, Chinandega and other Nicaraguan cities. Protesters called for an end to US hostilities against Nicaragua, and withdrawal of US troops from Honduras. US nationals demonstrated in front of the US Embassy in Managua. (Basic data from various reports by Washington Post, AP, Reuter, Wall Street Journal, Prensa Latina, Tass, New York Times)

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