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Summary: Conflict Surrounding Cardinal Obando's Receipt Of Vehicles

by Deborah Tyroler

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In early October, the Nicaraguan National Assembly approved legislation prohibiting the receipt of US government funds, and goods and services purchased with US funds, by domestic opposition groups. A week later, 17 Toyota jeeps and several electricity generators arrived at Nicaraguan Customs for Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo. The goods were requested by Obando and paid for the US Agency for International Development. In addition to the vehicles, the Cardinal's shopping list included 13 telefax machines, nine photocopiers, \$85,000 for rental of an office in Washington, \$200,000 for the services of a public relations firm, and \$400,000 for the refurbishing of a building in Managua. The Nicaraguan government accused Obando of abusing his position as co-chief of the Verification Commission established under the Sapoa peace agreements with the contras last March. The Cardinal stated that the fleet of vehicles was needed in order to fulfill the mandate of the Verification Commission. The commission is co-chaired by Obando and the Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), Joao Clemente Baena Soares. The Nicaraguan government had agreed that the commission be funded by the OAS. The US government later earmarked \$1 million for the verification process in a contra funding package. As a result of the breakdown in peace talks in June, the commission's work has not effectively commenced. Consequently, according to Deputy Foreign Minister Victor Hugo Tinoco, the commission's activities and powers have not yet been defined. Equipment currently at the disposition of the commission consists of a Toyota jeep located in the parking lot of the Intercontinental Hotel in Managua. "Up till now, there has been no verification activity," says Tinoco. He did not offer an opinion as to why Obando was arranging more purchases for the commission without first consulting the OAS Secretary General. "The Cardinal," he said, "appears to have an attitude which distorts what the Verification Commission is about." Existing agreements indicate that all technical- logistical equipment used in the verification purposes must be channeled through Baena Soares. Arrangements for importing equipment and materials, establishing commission employees' immunity, and specifications for the destination of equipment after completion of verification tasks are components of a pending agreement between the commission and the government. Government officials are reportedly waiting for a response to an Aug. 25 proposal concerning such arrangements. Nicaraguan officials argue that the only thing which could ostensibly be verified at this time is observation of cease-fire violations. The government has extended a unilateral cease-fire since June. The uproar caused by Obando's imports is largely a result of bad timing. The National Assembly legislation prohibits entry into the country of funds or goods tied to the non-lethal contra aid packages approved by the US Congress on May 31 and September 30. Receipt of monies or items purchased with such funds is defined as "treasonous." The legislation was approved not only by FSLN members, but also by a majority of opposition party representatives. The only exception to the rule mentioned in the legislation is funding for the Verification Commission. (Basic data from 10/31/88 report by Regional Coordination for Economic and Social Research of Central America and the Caribbean-CRIES, Managua)

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