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Deborah Tyroler

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Contra Prisoners Returned To Nicaragua: Summary Of Events & Statements

by Deborah Tyroler

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Dec. 20: At a news conference Honduran Foreign Minister Carlos Lopez Contreras said the Nicaraguan Resistance, the contras' political arm, was holding at least 104 captives in Honduras. "The government has knowledge that there are more and will continue efforts to free all of all of them," he said. Lopez Contreras also said that President Jose Azcona Hoyo had asked the Red Cross, the church and the Inter-institutional Human Rights Commission to "initiate efforts to rescue the Nicaraguan captives." Dec. 27: In Tegucigalpa, a contra spokesperson said the contras had released 104 prisoners on the Nicaraguan border. The prisoners, he said, were turned over to Red Cross, Roman Catholic church and human rights representatives near the border towns of Trojes and Capire. The prisoners were taken into custody on Dec. 26 by the Honduran government in Yamales, in the eastern department of El Paraiso, in the presence of the non-governmental organization representatives. The contra spokesperson, identified as Commander Johnson, said the prisoners included more than 70 former Sandinista Army soldiers. They were captured, he said, in battles over a year ago. The Red Cross and the Honduran Foreign Ministry refused to confirm that former Sandinista soldiers had been released. Honduran authorities prevented journalists from going to the towns, about 250 miles east of Tegucigalpa. Johnson said "all prisoners were in good physical condition." Dec. 29: Honduran Red Cross administrator Abraham Manun told reporters that 44 of the 104 prisoners released in the previous week were turned over to Nicaraguan Red Cross officials at the Las Manos border post, located 250 km. north of Managua in Nueva Segovia department. Journalists at Las Manos said the group included a contra commander accused of working for the Nicaraguan government, and a Nicaraguan soldier captured when his helicopter was shot down by the contras. Dec. 30: The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) newspaper, Barricada, reported that some of the 44 said they were tortured by the contras during their captivity in Honduras. Only Barricada, the pro-government newspaper El Nuevo Diario and Sandinista TV were allowed to cover the former prisoners' arrival in Nicaragua. The remaining 60 prisoners freed by the contras reportedly refused to return to Nicaragua, choosing instead to remain in Honduras while seeking permission to go to the United States, Mexico or Canada. Barricada said the 60 were "false prisoners" and El Nuevo Diaro described them as "mercenaries" staging a contra-directed propaganda "show." According to reports from Tegucigalpa, the 60 were moved by the Honduran Red Cross to one of the camps maintained by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in the Las Vegas area of El Paraiso department. Both Barricada and Nuevo Diaro said they interviewed several of the freed prisoners. Barricada quoted Natividad Matute Guillen as saying, "They subjected us to hunger, torture and all kinds of outrage. They made me see death." El Nuevo Diaro reported that 15-year-old Marvin Jose Palacio Orozco said he was tortured "with electric prods on my feet and used like a punching bag." The newspaper said the contras accused the youth of being a Sandinista spy. The contras say the prisoners were captured a year ago in combat in the Nicaraguan departments of Chontales, Matagalpa and Madriz. As of Dec. 30, the Nicaraguan government had not said whether the freed prisoners included members of the armed forces. The Honduran Red Cross said that 60 of the prisoners decided to remain in Honduras. Marcos

Antonio Rosa Zamora, one of the 44 who returned to Nicaragua, said that the 60 decided to remain in Honduras because they were "contra commando guards." He added that he and other prisoners suffered several kinds of torture at the hands of the contras. Rosa Zamora said that the 44 included war wounded, Sandinista combatants and civilians. (Basic data from AP, 12/27/88; Xinhua, 12/30/88; Notimex, 12/29/88)

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