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Nicaragua To Release Imprisoned Former National Guardsmen On March 19

by Deborah Tyroler

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On the evening of March 10 at a press conference in Managua, Deputy Interior Minister Lenin Cerna announced that 1,894 imprisoned former National Guardsmen will be released on March 19. Cerna introduced to the reporters a governmental commission charged with organizing the prisoner release. The commission includes two representatives of the Organization of American States. The former Guardsmen are being held in the Tipitaopa prison, located north of Managua. Members of the National Reconciliation Commission, headed by Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, and representatives of the OAS and the International Red Cross are to be present to "testify" to the mass prisoner release. The National Assembly's Human Rights Commission examined a list of 1,933 former Guardsmen prisoners. Of the total, pardons were not extended to 39 prisoners, who will continue serving sentences of 10 to 30 years for "crimes against humanity." Cerna said that the government had surveyed the prisoners to determine which of them wish to leave the country upon their release. He and other officials said those prisoners would receive passports. Cerna added that released prisoners who chose to remain in Nicaragua would retain all the rights of a Nicaraguan citizen. On March 14, Nicaragua's National Assembly voted to pardon and release from prison 1,893 former members of Somoza's National Guard. After more than five hours of debate, the motion was passed by a vote of 91 to four with one abstention. In compliance with an agreement at the Feb. 14 summit in El Salvador, President Daniel Ortega presented the pardon proposal to the Assembly. Some 2,500 contras will remain in prison until the contra army disarms, said the government. In late 1987, Nicaragua released 985 prisoners. (Basic data from Notimex, 03/11/89; New York Times, 03/12/89; AFP, 03/14/89)

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