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On Continuity Of Contra Attacks In Nicaragua

by Deborah Tyroler

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Since mid-April, Nicaraguan officials have reported a sustained escalation in contra attacks inside the country. Under an agreement between the Bush administration and the Congress, \$50 million in non-military aid for the contras was approved on the condition the latter refrain from mounting attacks in Nicaragua. Last week a group of 83 members of Congress wrote to Secretary of State James Baker demanding an investigation of the attacks and the cutoff of all further aid to any contra units involved. The Nicaraguan government has reported clashes involving 58 civilian targets, resulting in 33 dead, 24 wounded and 100 abductions. According to Mark Uhlig of the New York Times, statistics on clashes with Nicaraguan military forces have not been made public. Contra leaders deny that their forces have launched attacks inside Nicaragua. They accuse the Nicaraguan government of fabricating evidence of combat in an attempt to trigger a cutoff in US aid. Next, the contra leadership asserts that the government has used the cease-fire to pursue and attack contra troops and sympathizers. A recent example of ongoing fighting occurred July 11 in Llano Grande, about 70 miles east of Managua, where a tiny military post manned by local reservists was attacked with machine guns and grenades. Three reservists and their commander, an army lieutenant, were killed. Two others were wounded. Government reports of contra attacks have been supported by independent groups such as Witness for Peace (WFP), whose network of observers in the Nicaraguan countryside has reported a rising number of attacks in recent months. A spokesperson for Witness for Peace in Managua, Rhonda Collins, said, "Contra activity has not ceased in Nicaragua, and in fact combat has increased." She continued by pointing out that WFP has continued to document large numbers of attacks "that do not indicate in any way that the contras have chosen as a strategy or policy to stop their military activities in Nicaragua." Among the clashes reported in the abovementioned letter by the congresspersons to Secretary Baker were 10 attacks on civilian targets, resulting in nine deaths. On May 7, the letter said, 20 contras attacked La Brasilia, an agricultural cooperative in Matagalpa department for the fourth time this year. One civilian was killed, and three others wounded. A week later, said the letter, witnesses reported that a group of at least 20 contras attacked a baseball game in the rural community of El Dorado, wounding three civilians and kidnapping 15 others, most of whom were later released. One of the largest clashes reported occurred on June 8, when the Central American Hydroelectric Plant in Jinotega department was attacked by a force that a government spokesperson said included more than 100 contras. A plant guard who said he had been kidnapped during the attack said the group was a contra unit. Mark Uhlig of the Times reported that when "pressed to identify the attackers of Llano Grande further, local Sandinista commanders said they believed that the men were not contra regulars, but local contra sympathizers intent on stealing the weapons and ammunition kept at the camp." In Llano Grande, said Uhlig, the families of those killed in the attack said many residents had gone into hiding, not from the fear of another attack but to avoid forced government recruitment. (Basic data from New York Times, 07/27/89)

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