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Nicaraguan Government Representatives Meet With Opposition Parties; Army Draft Suspended Until After Election

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Aug. 3, representatives of the Nicaraguan government met for public discussions on the electoral process with members of opposition parties. Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-CT), chairperson of the Foreign Relations subcommittee on Latin America, said the meeting, to be held in the presence of observers from the United Nations and the Organization of American States, was "a good sign that the electoral process is going forward in Nicaragua." In an unexpected move, President Daniel Ortega announced that the military draft would be suspended until after the February 1990 elections. The moratorium, to take effect Sept. 1, marks the first break in military recruitment established for all young Nicaraguan men in 1983. Official figures show that since then, 150,000 men have been inducted for two year duty tours. Some opposition leaders had requested that the military draft be halted during the election campaign to prevent the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) from using it to harass young political workers. Next, the military draft is unpopular with Nicaraguans weary of war and economic deprivation. In an interview with the New York Times, President Ortega said no effort would be made to slow down or halt discharges from the military during the moratorium or to compensate by speeding up recruitment before or after the campaign. Consequently, he said, the decision was expected to result in an overall reduction of troop strength. In Nicaragua, young men are required to register for the draft in November of the year in which they turn 17. They are then drafted in four separate "recruitments" the next year. Unidentified military officials told the Times that the first two recruitments, in the first half of the year, are larger than the final two inductions. Officials said that since 1983, conscriptions have averaged about 30,000 a year. Austerity measures this year reduced recruitment to an estimated 20,000. Of that quota, said the officials, the year's final recruitment is expected to total only a few thousand. Some opposition leaders wanted recruitment halted to prevent the government from using it as a tool to harass young campaign workers and from using roundups and military indoctrination to generate supporters among young people. The minimum voting age in Nicaragua is 16. President Ortega scoffed at such ideas, asserting that they ignored the war that had made the draft necessary. (Basic data from New York Times, 08/03/89, 08/04/89; Xinhua, 08/03/89)

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