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Central American Presidents Expected To Delay Commencing Contra Demobilization Until After Nicaraguan Elections

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On Aug. 5-7 the presidents of El Salvador, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua will convene in Tela, Honduras for a summit that has been postponed several times since mid-May. The principal items on the summit agenda are a timetable and procedures for demobilization of the contra forces camped in Honduras. At their last summit on Feb. 13-14 in El Salvador, the five presidents accepted proposals by Nicaragua and Honduras "to formulate, within a period of 90 days, a joint plan for the voluntary demobilization, repatriation or relocation" of contra fighters camped in Honduras. In addition, Nicaragua pledged to advance general elections from November 1990, to February 1990, as well as implement a variety of electoral and media reforms to facilitate broad-based participation, including that of former contras who decide to enter the political process after disarming and returning to Nicaragua. The February summit agreement did not "link" the timing of contra demobilization with the Nicaraguan electoral process. The only feature of the agreement which could be construed as tied to contra demobilization in the sense that it would precede the process was Nicaragua's commitment to release prisoners. The joint agreement issued Feb. 14 reads as follows: "In order to contribute to the creation of conditions for the voluntary demobilization, relocation or repatriation of Nicaraguans who may have been involved in direct or indirect armed activities and who are in Honduran territory, the Government of Nicaragua has decided to proceed with the release of prisoners, in keeping with the classification made by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights." (See CAU, 02/15/89, 02/17/89 for reports on February summit.) In March, the Nicaraguan government released from prison nearly 2,000 former National Guardsmen. Immediately after the February summit, the Bush administration began issuing policy statements to the effect that the contra army should be maintained as a viable force until at least Feb. 25, 1990, the date of the Nicaraguan elections. The preservation of the contra army would comprise an allegedly necessary inducement for the Nicaraguan government to fulfill its commitments for a "free and fair" election. Thus, the Bush administration argued that "humanitarian aid" should be provided for the contra fighters and their families camped in Honduras. In March, the administration and the Congress established what was called a "gentleman's agreement" on maintaining the contra army in the field with non-lethal aid funding up to late February 1990. Under this agreement, congressional leaders could cut off the aid flow before February 1990 if one or more specific events or conditions developed, such as evidence that contra fighters had carried out military operations inside Nicaragua. Events and statements related to the continuing "linkage debate" on the eve of the Aug. 5-7 summit are summarized below. (See also CAU 08/02/89.) Aug. 2: Asst. Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Bernard Aronson traveled to Guatemala City to meet with Central American foreign ministers to persuade them to reject Nicaragua's demand that the presidents conform to the February summit agreement and commence the disarmament and demobilization of the contras. Aronson met with Salvadoran Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Pacas Castro, Mario Palencio of Guatemala, and Carlos Lopez Contreras of Honduras. Aronson left before the arrival of the Costa Rican Foreign Minister Rodrigo Madrigal Nieto, but conferred with other Costa Rican

officials. In interviews with the New York Times in Washington, contra military commanders said that if the Central American presidents adopt a plan calling for demobilization before February, they would resume fighting in Nicaragua. Luis Angel Lopez, known as Commander Leonel, said: "The combatants feel that if they have to return to Nicaragua, they will do so with their arms because democratic conditions do not prevail. If we go back that way, the Sandinistas may use it as an excuse to cancel the elections." Xinhua cited contra field commander Israel Galeano as saying that any plans to begin contra demobilization prior to Feb. 25, 1990, would be ignored by contra fighters. If such a decision is taken, he said, the contras would resume combat operations inside Nicaragua. According to the New York Times, "Some members of Congress suggested this week that the administration was using economic aid to Honduras as a lever to obtain Honduran support for the US position on the contras." Congress has appropriated \$85 million in economic aid for Honduras in the current fiscal year, including \$70 million in cash. An unidentified administration official told the Times that none of the cash had been disbursed to Tegucigalpa. The official said that the money had been withheld because Honduras "has resisted making the economic reforms" considered necessary by the US, and not because of any "political reasons." Aug. 3: In statements to Notimex in Guatemala City, Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto said it was clear the US government seeks to discredit the Nicaraguan electoral process to forestall the dismantlement of the contra forces until at least February 1990. He added that the US has a "clear policy" of "sanctifying all electoral processes in Latin America in places like Paraguay and El Salvador, and sewing doubt and suspicion regarding the Nicaraguan electoral process." The Nicaraguan diplomat was interviewed during a break in a two-day meeting of the Central American foreign ministers charged with preparations for the summit. D'Escoto continued by pointing out that for the US government, maintaining the contra army in the field is necessary for the viability of holding an "option" that may be utilized in the event Washington "can successfully discredit the Nicaraguan elections." (Basic data from Notimex, Xinhua, New York Times, 08/03/89)

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