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Update On Contra Demobilization, Observation Teams For Nicaraguan Elections

by John Neagle

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On Aug. 25, UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar and counterpart at the Organization of American States, Joao Baena Soares, said a joint commission to oversee the demobilization of the Nicaraguan contras in Honduras would begin work Sept. 6. The commission's main tasks are to seek to persuade contra fighters to disarm, and to arrange for their repatriation to Nicaragua, or resettlement elsewhere. The commission is also to provide guidance to a special UN military force that Perez de Cuellar said he would request the Security Council to create for overseeing the dismantlement of the contra camps. In their joint communiqué, Perez de Cuellar and Baena Soares said the commission would also provide "assistance for the demobilization of all those involved in armed actions in the countries of the region when they voluntarily seek it." The Aug. 7 summit (Tela) accords also called for dialogue between the Salvadoran government and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). After meeting with Perez de Cuellar on Friday, Salvadoran Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Pacas Castro told AFP: "In the same way the International Support and Verification Commission will play an important role in the voluntary demobilization of the Nicaraguan rebels, El Salvador would like the commission to also help obtain the voluntary demobilization of any FMLN members who want to demobilize." The Tela accords call for the completion of the joint commission's work 90 days after its creation. UN officials have said that it is unlikely that all contra fighters can be persuaded to disarm by the Dec. 5 deadline. The UN is also organizing a team of some 120 civilian observers to monitor the Nicaraguan electoral process. In the first phase of the operation which began Aug. 25, about 10 UN observers will travel to different locations in the country to watch party organizing and voter registration. Next, the UN plans to send about 100 military observers to Central America this year to monitor fulfillment of other provisions of the regional peace accords, i.e., ensuring that signatory nations do not provide bases for rebels seeking to destabilize their neighbors, and to halt military supply lines across their territory. This force will include soldiers from Canada, Spain, West Germany, Venezuela and Colombia. (On Aug. 29, during a teleconference via satellite, linking US embassies in several Latin American countries with Washington, Chris Arco, State Department deputy assistant secretary for Central American affairs, said that the US would welcome delegations from Argentina, other Latin American nations and European countries to observe the Nicaraguan elections. Foreign observers, he said, should be on hand in Nicaragua "before, during and after" the February elections. In response to a question, Arcos said that he thought it "unfair" that the Tela accords specify completion of contra demobilization before "clean" elections take place in Nicaragua.) (Basic data from Xinhua, 08/24/89, 08/25/89; AFP, AP, 08/25/89; New York Times, 08/26/89; Noticias Argentinas, 08/29/89)

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