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U.N., O.a.s., Canadian Observer Missions Dispute U.S. Charges About Improprieties In Nicaraguan Election Process

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The US government continues to reiterate charges and concerns on the Nicaraguan government's intent to rig the elections scheduled for Feb. 25, 1990. For instance, on Oct. 23, US ambassador to the UN, Thomas Pickering, expressed the State Department's concern about the Sandinistas' alleged plans to determine the outcome of the election, the "reported presence of armed soldiers at Nicaraguan voter registration centers," and that returning exiles may be unable to vote. At a White House briefing on Oct. 25, Secretary of State James Baker said the US has "some concern that the opposition parties there will not be given adequate and sufficient access to the media to make the election free and fair." Summarized below are recent statements by the United Nations and Organization of American States missions charged with monitoring the electoral process in Nicaragua, and a Canadian monitoring mission's report which charges that the US and the contras are the principal destabilizing forces impacting on the Nicaraguan elections. According to an Oct. 19 report by ONUVEN, the United Nations mission charged with monitoring the Nicaraguan electoral process, Nicaragua's Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) had not yet demonstrated favoritism for the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). In its first report since beginning monitoring activities on Aug. 25, the ONUVEN said it had reviewed decisions made by the Council during the June 8-Sept. 7 period. The report also discussed a controversy between the government and a group of opposition parties regarding military troop mobilization. In an Aug. 4 accord, the government agreed to suspend military recruitment beginning in September until after the Feb. 25, 1990, elections. Recruitment of Nicaraguans in the 17- to 25-year-old age groups for military service has been suspended. Mobilization of military reserves including 25- to 40-year-old Nicaraguans, has not been suspended. Some opposition parties charge that the government has reneged on the Aug. 4 agreement, since its intent was to suspend all military mobilization. The government argues the agreement was to suspend military recruitment induction into the armed forces, and that it has done so. The ONUVEN report said that the "unfortunate" wording of the terms contained in the Aug. 4 agreement is the source of the contradictory interpretations. In reference to equal access to the media by all political parties, the ONUVEN report stated that it was too early to offer an evaluation. The report noted opposition parties' complaints that the signal strength of television channel 2 is weaker than channel 6. Both are operated by the government. Political party messages and campaign pitches are aired on channel 2. Government officials said the difference in signal strength was a technical problem, not the result of premeditated planning. On foreign donations to political parties and campaigns, the report stated that the CSE had adopted a more flexible position than required under Nicaraguan law. In kind donations, capital goods and propaganda materials were exempted from the legal requirement that 50% of foreign donations to parties and political campaigns be channeled to the Council to defray non-partisan electoral expenses. In New York on Oct. 25, ONUVEN chief Elliot Richardson told reporters his team found that the government in Managua was running the campaign properly. He said, "It is certainly my impression, and I think that I speak for all of us representing the United Nations in Nicaragua, that the goal of a
free, fair and honest election is being taken seriously by all those concerned, in the government, in the parties, and among the people." Richardson, who served as attorney general under President Richard Nixon, was appointed by UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar to serve as his personal representative in overseeing the UN mission. Nicaraguan officials have reported that 20 people have died in contra attacks during voting registration. Richardson said, "I certainly do not think that maintaining the contras is necessary to assure a free and fair election...Whatever violence does impair the electoral process or leads voters to be afraid to go to the polls or to think that perhaps if they go, the result may not count in the end, will be of concern to us." Regarding the State Department's concerns about armed soldiers as registration centers, Richardson said, "I cannot tell you that [members of the UN mission] did not see any" soldiers or guards. He added that "this is not a not a matter that has been brought to my attention" in terms of the campaign's fairness. Richardson spoke to journalists before reporting to Secretary General Perez de Cuellar on his weekend meetings with President Daniel Ortega and members of Nicaragua's Supreme Electoral Council. "The council has been performing in a conscientious, fair and impartial manner," he said. Next, Richardson said that both the Council and President Ortega had promised to consider reopening the electoral lists to register any number of contra guerrillas who return before the February election. On Oct. 26 a press conference in Managua, Mario Gonzalez, head of the Organization of American States election monitoring mission, said the OAS team had reported that the voter registration phase of the electoral process had developed "normally" in all ways during the first four Sundays of October. He added that OAS mission estimates indicate that close to 85% of the Nicaraguan electorate had registered to vote. Gonzalez said that the OAS was concerned about the continuity of violent confrontations such as the Oct. 21 contra attack in northern Nicaragua resulting in the deaths of 18 members of the military reserve. The troops were en route to their homes with the aim of registering to vote on the following day. About 100 contras exploded an anti-tank mine under the military trucks, and then opened fire. The OAS official said that violence militates against realizing democracy by means of the electoral process. He said that in order for elections to contribute to building democracy, and as an exercise of democracy, citizens must feel safe and unintimidated in all senses when participating in the electoral process. On Oct. 26 in Ottawa, Canada, the Registration Observer Mission released a report stating that the US is doing everything it can to disrupt the Feb. 25, 1990 elections. Based on observations during four weeks in Nicaragua, the report said, "American intervention continues as the main obstacle to the attainment of free and fair elections in Nicaragua." The four-person observer mission was sponsored by the Committee for Peace and Democracy in Nicaragua, a group of representatives of church, human rights and academic groups in addition to unions and development agencies. Its report said Washington is disrupting the election process by its continued support of the contras and by large-scale illegal financing of the National Opposition Union (UNO), and of other anti-government groups and parties. Robert Fox, coordinator of the observer mission, said the US actions are all part of a strategy to destabilize the election process. The report called the millions of dollars worth of illegal financing an "intrusion on Nicaraguan sovereignty." Next, the report said that the contras are "waging a campaign of intimidation with the clear message, 'If you support the (Sandinista government), we will be back to kill you.'" Fox said that contras had killed 42 people last month in election-related violence. (Basic data from AP, 10/25/89, 10/26/89; New York Times, 10/26/89; Notimex, 10/19/89, 10/26/89)