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Nicaraguan President Announces Possible End To Cease-fire: Summary Of Reactions & Aftermath

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Costa Rica celebrated 100 years of political democracy by inviting presidents and prime ministers from throughout the hemisphere to attend a meeting in San Jose on Oct. 27-28. President Oscar Arias also invited opposition leaders from Nicaragua and Panama as observers, including Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, presidential candidate in the Feb. 25, 1990 elections. Arias did not extend invitations to the leaders of Chile, Cuba, Haiti and Panama. Oct. 27: While attending the meeting in Costa Rica, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega announced that his government was considering the termination of a cease-fire with the contras on Oct. 31. An AP report on Friday cited a "Sandinista source" who requested anonymity as saying that Ortega would soon announce a decision to end the cease-fire. Reports by Notimex and AFP indicated that President Ortega discussed his intentions during a speech to 3,000 students and others at the University of Costa Rica. In the speech, Ortega said contras inside Nicaragua had stepped up attacks in an attempt to ensure that the elections scheduled for Feb. 25, 1990 take place in the midst of chaos. He said, "The drop of water that made the glass spill over was the attack that the mercenaries launched" on Oct. 21 against a group of military reservists returning to their homes with the aim of registering to vote on the following day. "According to our security information, 19 campesinos were assassinated and six others were injured. This means that the contras are trying to deny the Nicaraguan people their right to an electoral process," he said. Ortega continued: "After these savage attacks I met with the army high command to analyze the situation, and the result of the analysis was that the cease-fire could not be maintained...We have to guarantee the safety of the Nicaraguan people and the electoral process, which means we have to organize the army better...[I]t is unacceptable for us to disarm ourselves. "We cannot remain passive while the Somocista bands continue assassinating our people...All peoples have not only the right, but the obligation to defend themselves in the face of aggression." According to the New York Times (10/28/89), President Ortega announced his plans during an interview in a hotel suite in San Jose with one European and two US reporters. The Times cited the president as saying he would announce the end to the cease-fire at a news conference on Saturday morning. Ortega said that Nicaraguan troops "will go on the offensive" on Nov. 1 against the contras currently inside Nicaragua, estimated to number 2,500. He said, "We are facing a terrorist offensive from a counter-revolution endorsed by the UNO [National Opposition Union] and financed by the United States...The contra attacks are endangering the electoral process. We want to guarantee the electoral process by taking these measures." Ortega asserted that President Bush is attempting to wreck the government's electoral campaign by destroying the economy and supporting the contras and the UNO. He also criticized UNO for failing to denounce the contra attacks. The Times cited Ortega as saying that he made the decision to end the cease-fire after the killing of two Sandinista organizers on Oct. 25 and the Oct. 21 attack on two trucks carrying Sandinista reservists on their way to register to vote. He added, "The army can no longer remain with its hands tied while contras operate with impunity." Ortega said the contras have repeatedly violated the cease-fire, saying they had killed 736 Nicaraguans, wounded 1,153, and kidnapped or "disappeared" 1,481 others. The president concluded: "We are going to guarantee the elections."
If we didn't take measures like this, the electoral process would be endangered. The government of Nicaragua has responsibility to guard citizens' lives and the electoral process." [On March 23, 1988, Nicaraguan government representatives and contra leaders signed a cease-fire agreement in Sapoa, Nicaragua. Subsequent talks between the two sides broke down the following month. Since the temporary truce expired, the government has unilaterally renewed the cease-fire on a monthly basis. Contra units resumed attacks inside Nicaragua. According to Nicaraguan government officials and other observers, the contra attacks continued on a sporadic basis and then escalated in September and October this year.] Oct. 28: United Nations information director Mario Zamorano told Notimex that Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar was extremely worried about the resumption of fighting in Nicaragua. In a communique, Perez de Cuellar said that the current situation "reinforces, once again, the necessity of initiating without delay the verification of the Esquipulas II agreements." Prior to his departure from San Jose on Saturday, President Ortega said his government would extend the cease-fire if Washington would reallocate funds currently destined to maintenance of the contra army in Honduras to use in the demobilization plan. Ortega said, "We are looking for a solution. If the Congress of the United States stops financing the counter-revolutionaries, then we will unilaterally declare a truce." Under a bipartisan agreement with the administration, Congress in April approved $49.75 million in non-lethal aid to last through Feb. 25, 1990. However, the aid will be suspended on Nov. 30 if any of the key congressional committees with jurisdiction in the area object to its continuation. Nicaraguan officials have said the US has acted to obstruct the dismantlement in several forums, and that they had to take dramatic action to force the issue. An unidentified official close to Ortega cited by the New York Times (10/29/89) said, "It was a shock tactic. What we are looking for is a commitment to dismantle the contras by Dec. 5." [Upon arriving in San Jose, Honduran President Jose Azcona Hoyo had said his government has no means of obligating the contras to accept the desire of the Central American presidents for their dismantlement as specified in the Tela agreement.] The Times stated that White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater was delighted with Ortega's announcement: "We're incredulous that he made such a blunder." Organization of American States Secretary General Joao Baena Soares told reporters in San Jose that he hoped violence would not once again become the "norm" in Nicaragua, and that the reasons behind President Ortega's decision could be overcome. At a press conference in San Jose, Bush told reporters that "We're not going to let this little man, who is out of whack with the rest of the world, ruin a very good meeting." Bush criticized Ortega's military uniform garb, and called Ortega an "outcast" and an "unwanted animal at a garden party." [Bush referred twice to 5'10" Ortega as a "little man." Asked why he used that description, the 6-foot-2 Bush snapped, "Because he is, that's why." AP pointed out that Ortega is tall for Central American standards. President Arias is closer to the average at 5'6". As Ortega arrived in Managua after leaving the Costa Rican event before the closing ceremony, he said that being called a little man by Bush "does not bother me much."] Argentine President Carlos Menem said Ortega "was not helping the quest for peace in Central America at all." Costa Rican Information Minister Jorge Urbina quoted President Arias as saying he was not happy with Ortega's bombshell. In Managua, Ortega said Bush had shown interest in enlisting the help of Latin American presidents to change Ortega's decision to end the cease-fire. The Nicaraguan leader said, "I interpret this as a predisposition of President Bush, amid all his rhetoric, of negotiating this matter of the truce with the mediation" of Latin American presidents. Ortega said he had spoken with Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez and President Arias in San Jose, and that they told him they were willing to mediate between Ortega and Bush on the matter. Ortega said his government would announce its decision on whether to extend the truce for another month on Oct. 31. He reiterated that the cease-fire would
be extended only if non-lethal US aid to the contras were used for contra dismantlement, as desired
by the Central American presidents in the Aug. 7 Tela agreements. Radio Catarran, a government-
rung station in central Chontales department, said that more than 1,000 soldiers from Managua were
being transported to guard the strategically important Rama Road. The station cited unidentified
military sources as saying the move was "because of the constant activity of the contras" along the
road. Oct. 29: In an interview on the NBC News program "Meet the Press," Senate majority leader
George Mitchell (D-Maine) said, "The agreement that we reached with the administration last
spring contemplated continued assistance through the elections. And we intend to honor that."
Mitchell described President Ortega's statement as "a very unwise move." He added, "It is my hope
that the free and open election process will go forward and that the results will be accepted by the
people of Nicaragua." The majority leader said he believed that Ortega's comments resulted from
a "rivalry" with President Oscar Arias Sanchez of Costa Rica. Senate minority leader Bob Dole (R-
Kan.) said he would propose a Senate resolution on Tuesday in which "I would hope we could all
denounce Ortega." Oct. 30: In Managua, Argentine President Carlos Menem told reporters that he
wished to cooperate with the Nicaraguan government to ensure the fulfillment of the Tela accords
calling for the "demobilization of the contras, so that the elections take place in a peaceful climate."
Menem met with President Ortega on Sunday evening to discuss the escalation in contra attacks.
The Argentine president said that he urged Ortega to reconsider suspending the unilateral cease-
fire. In reference to a communique by the Nicaraguan Resistance released in San Jose asserting that
the contras are not willing to disarm or demobilize, Menem said that his appeal and cooperation
were aimed at preventing the continuity of violence as apparently promised by the contras. Also
attending the meeting between Ortega and Menem were Argentine Foreign Minister Domingo
Cavallo, Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto and Nicaragua's Interior Minister, Tomas
Borge. President Ortega told reporters, "I believe that Bush has the...capacity and the means to
ensure the effectiveness of the peace plan, and to ensure that the Tela accords are fulfilled during
the indicated time period, or by Dec. 5. If the [US] government has the will, all elements can rapidly
fall in place." Ortega said that the US could reallocate funds destined to maintain the contra army in
Honduras to the United Nations and the Organization of American States to repatriate or relocate
the fighters and their families. A communique by President Ortega said he had asked the Rev.
Jesse Jackson to intervene with the Bush administration and US Congress to obtain support for
contra demobilization, and to divert US funds used to provide non-lethal aid to the contra army
in Honduras to the UN and the OAS. The communique said Ortega had spoken with Jackson by
telephone. The communique said, "We asked the Rev. Jesse Jackson to focus his mediation efforts
on [having the United States] stop placing obstacles on the demobilization of the contras." In a
message to President Ortega, UN Secretary General Perez de Cuellar urged the Nicaraguan leader
to extend the cease-fire. Perez de Cuellar said he shared Ortega's concern about "the attacks which
the Resistance have been carrying out despite the cease-fire, which has been observed in general
terms since March 1988...The deterioration of the situation in Nicaragua can only impact negatively
on the Central American peace process as a whole." Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesperson Vadim
Perfiliev said that continued fighting by the contras in Nicaragua may affect the February elections,
and complicate the entire Central American peace process. He stated that the Soviet government is
convinced that Managua is fulfilling its commitments under the Tela agreement. The spokesperson
said the Nicaraguan government has the right to expect demobilization of the contras under the
Tela accord, and that it was reasonable for the government to express its concern in this regard
since little progress has been made toward said demobilization. Oct. 31: President Ortega traveled
with US Embassy political adviser Valentin Martinez to a farm cooperative in San Miguelito, where

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Ortega said a contra attack on Monday night left four people dead and six wounded. Presidential spokesperson Maria Antonia Cuadra said Ortega postponed announcing his decision on whether he would call off a 19-month cease-fire. He originally scheduled the announcement for Tuesday afternoon. John Leonard, the US charge d'affaires, was invited to accompany Ortega, but Leonard sent Martinez instead, said Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mercedes Borge. Borge said Ortega and Martinez spoke privately for about five minutes at the farm cooperative, located on the shores of Lake Nicaragua. The two traveled by helicopter accompanied by Defense Minister Humberto Ortega, Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto, Interior Minister Tomas Borge, and officials from the UN and OAS. In San Miguelito, President Ortega extended his hand toward four coffins, and told reporters and other observers, "My message to President George Bush is what you are looking at." Lt. Col. Roberto Calderon told AFP that 45 contras attacked the cooperative 270 km. southeast of Managua Monday night. The US Senate approved a resolution by a 95-0 vote denouncing President Ortega's intentions to suspend the unilateral cease-fire. The resolution also insisted that the Nicaraguan government fulfill its pledges for a free and fair election in February. The resolution said the Nicaraguan government's intentions regarding the truce were "totally unjustified." At a White House press conference, President Bush said that if the Nicaraguan government ends a unilateral cease-fire, "I would re-evaluate this situation in a minute..." Several news agencies, including AFP and Notimex, described this remark as a "hint" that Bush would request military aid for the contras if President Ortega suspends the cease-fire. Bush rejected Ortega's suggestion to extend the cease-fire if the US helped fund contra dismantlement, saying it had "limited appeal." In Managua, official newspaper Barricada reported that five Nicaraguan soldiers died in contra attacks during the weekend in the north and central areas of the country. The State Department asserted that the contras no longer have the capacity to lead offensives since the US Congress cut off military supplies. (Basic data from several reports by AP, AFP, Notimex, Xinhua, 10/27/89-10/31/89; New York Times, 10/28-31/89; Noticias Argentinas, 10/29/89, 10/30/89)

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