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Nicaragua Suspends Unilateral Cease-fire, Calls Meeting On Contra Dismantlement: Summary Of Events, Responses

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Nov. 1: At a 6 a.m. news conference, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega announced his decision to suspend the unilateral 19-month cease-fire with the contras. He reaffirmed the government's commitment to carry out the Feb. 25, 1990 elections, regardless of the outcome of attempts to see the contras demobilized by Dec. 5, or the deadline specified in the Aug. 7 Tela accords signed by the five Central American presidents. Ortega called for negotiations on Nov. 6-7 at the United Nations among representatives of Nicaragua, Honduras, the contra army and the International Verification and Support Commission (CIAV), comprised by the UN and the Organization of American States. He said the cease-fire could be resumed within weeks if the talks produce progress toward contra dismantlement. Ortega pointed out that 1,100 contras have infiltrated into Nicaraguan within the past 20 days. A statement by UN spokesperson Francois Guilliani said that Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar expressed concern regarding the cease-fire suspension, and urged both sides to exercise "maximum restraint" so that the truce could be resumed. Nicaragua's ambassador at the UN, Alejandro Serrano Caldera, said that the meeting in New York is essential because the Tela accords are being transformed into a "dead letter." In response to a question by a reporter, Serrano said the delay by the UN Security Council to approve the creation of the peacekeeping force for Central America (ONUCA) could in no way be attributed to the recent cease-fire suspension. He pointed out that a report prepared by a UN mission whose members traveled to all Central American countries to plan logistics and activities of the ONUCA was presented to the Security Council over two weeks ago. Approval by the Council has been delayed, said Serrano, due to opposition by certain Council members. In an interview with the New York Times on Wednesday afternoon, President Ortega said, "If the international community wants peace, they have to work for peace. But they don't. They simply watch the fight, and applaud when Nicaragua takes positive steps. They don't have the courage to pressure the United States, they only have the courage to pressure Nicaragua." Ortega asserted that the US Congress and the US media have displayed cynicism and complicity in the continued existence of the contra army. He said, "I have spoken with hundreds of congresspersons in Nicaragua, and they're always thinking about their electorate in the United States. To them the lives of Nicaraguans don't matter..." The Bush administration has resisted efforts to dismantle the contra army in Honduras before the Nicaraguan elections. According to the New York Times, "As a result, Honduras, which is heavily dependent on American aid, has not forced the contras out of its territory, and the rebels are likely to remain there beyond the Dec. 5 deadline set in regional peace accords." The administration has reportedly cut off aid to a contra commander whose unit "initiated an offensive operation." The Times cited US intelligence agencies who say they do not have the ability to assess responsibility for most of the clashes inside Nicaragua since the cease-fire was first introduced in March last year. Reactions in Washington on Wednesday include the following: Rep. David R. Obey (D-Wisc.), chairperson of the House Appropriations subcommittee responsible for foreign aid, said, "Daniel Ortega is a fool and always has been." Speaker of the House Thomas S. Foley, said: "I cannot conceive of the House moving now toward providing military assistance. That's not in the direction of the peace process. It's
not in the direction of free elections." Sen. David L. Boren (D-Okla.), chairperson of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said, "We should not rule out a resumption of military aid to the contras, but we must be careful not to play into Ortega's hands by giving him an excuse to cancel the elections or remove international observers." Rep. Mickey Edwards (Okla.), chairperson of the House Republican Policy Committee: Ortega's decision was "disgraceful" and "reckless." Bob Dole (Kans.), Senate Republican leader: "Ortega has thumbed his nose at his own people, at his democratic neighbors and at us. Even his most ardent apologists in the Congress are running for cover." Deputy State Department spokesperson Richard Boucher: Ortega should "reconsider this regrettable decision, restore the cease-fire, enter direct talks with the contras and free all political prisoners. "We support the cease-fire. We want to see it continued. We will cut off humanitarian assistance to resistance forces who engage in offensive operations. This policy is being reiterated in clear and compelling terms to the resistance." Robert A. Pastor, a professor of political science at Emory University who is working with former President Jimmy Carter on a plan to monitor the Nicaraguan elections, said President Ortega made a serious mistake in suspending the cease-fire. He added: "The Sandinistas, in my view, have legitimate concerns about the increase in contra activities. Some of the contras may be stepping up their attacks to disrupt the electoral process."

In Tegucigalpa, Honduran President Jose Azcona said the Nicaraguan government's decision on the cease-fire would not delay the democratization process in that country. He added that the "Nicaraguan opposition must redouble its efforts and continue pushing a political solution." When asked about the possibility of contras resuming attacks against Nicaragua from Honduran bases, Azcona said that in order to avoid such development, his government had requested the creation of ONUCA, the UN peacekeeping force in Central America. Notimex cited unidentified "diplomatic sources" who said that the US has pressured the UN Security Council to delay a vote on approving the ONUCA. The five Central American presidents requested that the UN create the peacekeeping force to verify fulfillment of regional peace agreement provisions which specify that no signatory nation will permit "irregular forces" to use national territory for purposes of launching attacks against another signatory nation. The ONUCA would be headquartered in Honduras, where about 12,000 contras are encamped in El Paraíso department. Notimex reported the postponement of a visit to Honduras by the CIAV (UN-OAS commission to oversee contra dismantlement), previously scheduled for early November. Honduran armed forces spokesperson Col. Manuel Enrique Suarez Benavides said that at 9 p.m. Oct. 31 the Nicaraguan army attacked with machineguns and grenades the Las Manos border post, located in El Paraíso department. El Paraíso borders on Nicaragua's Nueva Segovia department. Costa Rican Foreign Minister Rodrigo Madrigal Nieto was cited by Notimex as saying that the Nicaraguan government was responsible for the cease-fire suspension because it had not adopted sufficient measures to "create confidence to induce the contras to return peacefully" to Nicaragua. He said Managua must reconsider its decision in order to avoid negative impacts on the democratization process and the elections. Madrigal said Ortega had mentioned the death toll of Nicaraguans in contra attacks on numerous occasions prior to his announcement regarding intent to suspend the cease-fire last Friday. He asserted that Ortega had used recent deaths in contra attacks as a "pretext" to lift the cease-fire. Costa Rican President Oscar Arias called on both the Nicaraguan and US governments to respect the Tela accords. He asked Washington to contribute to contra dismantlement, and requested that President Ortega renew the cease-fire in an effort to keep the peace process on track. The Nicaraguan Defense Ministry reported that contras killed eight people and wounded 14 in three attacks in Matagalpa and Jinotega departments from Sunday to Tuesday. Three of the dead were civilians who were kidnapped then killed, the communique said. Nov. 2: A communique released in Tegucigalpa by the Nicaraguan Resistance
said contra leaders were willing in principle to meet with Nicaraguan government representatives at the UN. The communique said the contras were still awaiting an official invitation from the CIAV. The statement said government troops using armored helicopters and heavy artillery attacked contra units on Wednesday in the Sirena and Batitan areas of Zelaya department. On the same day, said the communique, troops in armored tanks and Soviet MI-8 helicopters moved against contras in Jinotega department. Argentine Foreign Minister Domingo Cavallo told reporters in Buenos Aires that President Carlos Menem had ended the government's informal efforts to act as a type of mediator to persuade the Nicaraguan government to resume the cease-fire. He said that Menem continues to support pacification in Nicaragua particularly contra dismantlement as specified in the Tela accords, and instructed Cavallo to seek contacts with "other foreign ministers." An unidentified ministry spokesperson cited by Notimex said that the Group of 8 ministers may become involved in efforts to ensure that the Tela accords are fulfilled. The Group of 8 is comprised of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. Panamanian participation in the G-8 was suspended last year. By a vote of 379 to 29, the US House of Representatives approved a non-binding resolution denouncing the end of the cease-fire in Nicaragua. The resolution is identical to the Senate version adopted by a unanimous vote Nov. 1. The resolution requested that Ortega terminate aggression in the region and against his own people, and to permit the establishment of democracy in Nicaragua. In Managua, military spokesperson Lt.Col. Rosa Pasos said government troops were engaged in actions against contras sneaking into Nicaragua from Honduras, and in areas where most of the estimated 2,500 contras inside Nicaragua are located. Next, Pasos confirmed a report by the Sandinista National Liberation Front newspaper Barricada that an army company backed by militias mounted the first attack against a group of about 30 contras in the area around Quilali. She said the attack took place Nov. 1, about two hours after President Ortega's announcement. Barricada said in its Nov. 2 issue that combat units in 14 towns and villages in northern Nicaragua began operations overnight against the contras. The Honduran Foreign Ministry issued a communique stating that the government has declined to participate in the Nov. 6-7 meeting called by President Ortega. The Nicaraguan government, said the ministry, must seek a solution to contra dismantlement and repatriation. To date, said the communique, the Honduran government has "complied with the Tela accords, and has closely collaborated with the creation of the peace force for Central America (ONUCA), and the International Support and Verification Commission." The communique asserted that President Ortega's decision to end the cease-fire "could make execution of the demobilization and repatriation of the Nicaraguan contras more difficult." Nicaraguan Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo accepted an invitation by President Ortega to serve as a witness at next week's meeting at the United Nations. The cardinal announced his decision following a 40-minute meeting with Ortega. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss "logistical and technical aspects" of contra dismantlement. President Ortega told reporters: "The elections are going to take place because this is the will of the Nicaraguan people. They will be made impossible only in the event of a US invasion, but I do not believe this will occur." (Basic data from Notimex, 11/01/89, 11/02/89; New York Times, 11/02/89; AP, AFP, Xinhua, 11/02/89)