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Deborah Tyroler

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Panel Discussion On Contra Demobilization; Over 7,000 Contras Currently Inside Nicaragua

by Deborah Tyroler

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On March 20 in New York, the Society of the Americas sponsored a panel discussion on alternative means of contra demobilization. Special attention was given to UN military reports that 7,400 contras have reinfiltred into Nicaragua in recent weeks, and that another large contingent has prepared to leave Honduran camps beginning on March 22. The Nicaraguan government representative on the panel, Alejandro Bendana, said the contras should not be used as a "negotiating chip" in the transfer of power from the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) to the government of president-elect Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. He added that the US could contribute to an orderly and peaceful transition by channeling its millions in aid to the contras to UN missions set up for contra demobilization, repatriation and relocation. The State Department's Central America office assistant director, Jerome Hoganson, said that the debate on mechanisms for demobilization depends on whether the contras believe they will be safe within Nicaraguan territory. He said that once all sides reach an agreement on demobilization procedures, US money will be forthcoming. Arturo Cruz, son of a presidential candidate in Nicaragua's 1984 election (of the same name), said that one of immediate problems impacting on the demobilization is that the contras do not believe in the Sandinistas, nor in Barrios de Chamorro. He said he supported the immediate demobilization of the contras. He added that a climate of generalized confidence and security is necessary at present in Nicaragua, not only to help repatriated contras feel secure, but also the Sandinistas, who will become an opposition party. Kenneth Sharpe, political science professor at Swarthmore, said the greatest obstacle to contra demobilization is the survival of certain sectors in the US government who continue to support policies of force rather than negotiation. He pointed out that in the past these sectors torpedoed numerous initiatives, such as the Contadora Group and Support Group plans, that could have brought peace to Nicaragua and the region.

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