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Nicaragua: Update On Former Contras' Occupation Of Rama Road, & Related Developments

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As of Nov. 8, former contras armed with rifles continued a blockade of the Rama Road, the only overland link between Managua and Bluefields, the most important port city on the Atlantic coast. The blockade has also cut off transport between Bluefields and Jinotega to the north. (See CAU 11/06/90 for previous coverage.) Their demands include the return of land confiscated by the previous government, food, production credit, jobs, dismantlement of military bases and police forces in Chontales, Boaco and Juigalpa departments and a part of the Atlantic coastal region, and pensions for wounded contra veterans, and for the widows and orphans of contras killed in battle. [According to the media sources cited in this article, "hundreds" of former contras are involved in the road blockade, and takeovers of public buildings. In addition, an indeterminate, but significant, proportion of the inhabitants of the above departments, reportedly support the former contras' demands.] Nov. 6: The Agence France Presse (11/08/90) reported that participants in the roadway blockade including local residents traveled to the city of Juigalpa Tuesday and attempted to occupy the Sandinista National Liberation Front's regional office and the city's post office before being dispersed by the police. No casualties were reported. In Bluefields, another group of protesters occupied the regional government office, the airport and the local radio station to demand Hurtado's resignation, and the dismantlement of the local police force. In a public statement, they expressed support for the former contras' efforts to blockade the Rama Road, and a group of hunger strikers holed up in the Managua cathedral. In addition to Hurtado, they demanded the resignations of Presidency Minister Antonio Lacayo and army chief Gen. Humberto Ortega. Nov. 7: In Mexico City, former president Daniel Ortega told reporters that the protesters occupying the Rama Road refuse to accept the Oct. 26 accord between the Chamorro government and the Sandinista Front. He said that their aggressive tactics constitute an intent to "overthrow the Chamorro government and install [Vice President Virgilio] Godoy." However, he added, their attempt will fail "because the Nicaraguan people will not permit it." Ortega was visiting Mexico to participate in informal discussions of Nicaragua's oil debt and the impact of the Persian Gulf crisis on the Nicaraguan economy. On Wednesday evening, 18 mayors from the departments of Chontales and Boaco and a portion of the Atlantic coastal area, assembled in Juigalpa's main church where they presented a public statement calling for the resignations of Interior Minister Carlos Hurtado, Lacayo, Ortega, and senior military and police officers. In addition, they called on President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro's government to remove military posts and police from the above areas, to be replaced by the former contras' "rural police" force. In Bluefields, former contras left the installations of Radio Zinica, and state-run TV station, BTV-9, after an occupation of several days. Nov. 8: President Barrios de Chamorro met with the mayors of 18 towns and cities to discuss the former contras' demands and complaints. A communique by ex-contra protesters said the president's overture to the mayors was positive, but insisted that the administration deal with "legitimate representatives" of the former contras. At present there are two factions among the demobilized contras, one headed by Israel Galeano, and the other, by Oscar Sovalbarro. In a communique, the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference said that a dangerous and growing frustration was apparent throughout Nicaragua due

to the absence of peace and prosperity. The communique was released on the day after the bishops met with President Barrios de Chamorro to discuss former contras' demands and confrontations with farmers and local-level officials. The bishops called on the president to fulfill promises made to the demobilized contras, including the delivery of cultivable land to 15,000 men, demilitarization of the country, and pensions to war wounded, widows and orphans. In a statement aired by radio broadcasters in Managua, Gilberto Cuadra, president of the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP), described Chamorro's administration as "a gelatin government that does not want to liberate itself from the Sandinistas." [At a meeting on Nov. 7, COSEP members voted to support the government's decision announced Nov. 6 to extend the implementation period of Decree 11-90 to Dec. 31. The decree, which calls for the review of all property confiscations ordered by the previous administration, was scheduled to lapse Nov. 7. Cuadra said he was pleased with the decision, but said the decree should be extended for yet another six months.] The 18 mayors announced the establishment of the "We will save democracy civic movement" (Movimiento Civico, Salvemos la Democracia), in support of the former contras obstructing the Rama Road. The movement is headed by UNO Deputies Humberto Castilla and Nardo Sequeira, according to a report by the FSLN's official newspaper, Barricada. The mayors reiterated demands for the resignations of Hurtado, Lacayo, Ortega and military officers. Next, the mayors requested that President Chamorro permit Vice President Godoy to exercise his office. Since the government's installation on April 25, Godoy has not been assigned any specific duties or activities. At a press conference in Managua, army chief Gen. Ortega said the occupation of roads and public buildings was decidedly "suspicious," and that groups of former contras have begun "digging up" weapons in several areas of the country. Ortega said that mayors "identified with extremist sectors" of the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) were planning a "coup," evidenced by their insistence on the resignations of top officials and military officers. After describing the mayors' request as "crazy and adventurist," the general added, "we will not bow down to anyone's blackmail." The army, said Ortega, cannot permit an "extremist minority" to frustrate the government's peace efforts by promoting "chaos and civil disobedience." He acknowledged that the current situation is highly "dangerous," but that the army would not "fall into the trap" of sending troops to quash the "extremists." Ortega said the army and police were awaiting Chamorro's go-ahead to free the strategic Rama road. (Basic data from AFP, 11/07/90, 11/08/90; Notimex, EFE, ACAN-EFE, AP, 11/08/90)

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