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Nicaraguan Government Presses to Negotiate End to Organized Rural Violence

by LADB Staff

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President Arnaldo Aleman is offering an "integrated" package of benefits for 33 bands of former combatants (rearmados) who have terrorized the countryside since 1990. Government peace negotiators and army chief Gen. Joaquin Cuadra are confident that most or all of the rearmados will accept government terms before the Feb. 28 deadline set by Aleman. If they do not "put down their rifles and pick up the plow" by that date, the government will use whatever means necessary to protect the local population from further attacks, said Aleman.

The rearmados, who include former members of the US- backed contras as well as some former Sandinista soldiers, still operate in the northern departments of Jinotega and Matagalpa and in the central department of Chontales. Since 1990, these armed bands have killed 1,000 people and kidnapped 600, according to government figures. Since the general demobilization of armed groups in 1994, the military and police have reduced the number of these bands from over 100 to the current number of 33. Some of the rearmados are dismissed as common criminals. But the government acknowledges that many have grievances against former president Violeta de Chamorro's administration (1990- 1997) for failing to live up to the promises made in 1994 to give former combatants land, farming equipment, credits, and other forms of assistance to help reintegrate them into civilian life.

The government has alternated between military sweeps into the rearmado areas and offers of negotiation and amnesty. Last March, talks between the government and one of the more important groups the Frente Norte 3-80 (FN 3-80) collapsed when army troops appeared near the proposed negotiation site (see NotiSur, 04/05/96). Aleman sends peace commissions to rearmado zones. Since taking office in January, Aleman has moved quickly to resolve all rearmado issues in a single, broad settlement with all 33 bands. One of his immediate concerns is that armed assaults in the three departments will interfere with agricultural production and cancel out some of the new administration's economic projections for 1997.

Aleman set up high-level peace commissions headed by Defense Minister Jaime Cuadra and Interior Minister Jose Antonio Alvarado to contact the rearmados in the hope of starting negotiations. The commissions then designated safe areas in each of the three departments into which rearmados could move, with a government guarantee of safe conduct, to meet peace-commission negotiators. Defense Minister Cuadra said he expects to have all 500 rearmados moved to the safe areas by the middle of the month. After the start of negotiations, the government will send food, clothing, and medicine to the rearmados until Feb. 28, or longer if necessary, to sustain them until they can be resettled.

By early February, the peace offensive seemed to be on track. On Feb. 10, Interior Minister Alvarado told a press conference that within a few days the first group of rearmados, who operate in

Chontales, would be demobilized under an agreement reached with the peace commission. Accords with rearmados in Matagalpa and Jinotega would soon follow, he said. Government offers land, loans, and amnesty Under the accord reached in Chontales, the rearmados agreed to disband and surrender their arms. In exchange, the government will give approximately seven hectares to each rearmado, along with technical assistance, a small amount of working capital, and building materials for housing. The government has also promised to invest in potable-water facilities, health centers, schools, and other social programs in the rural area where the rearmados will be settled.

Several European donor countries have already promised to help pay for the reintegration program. The thorniest question remaining is amnesty. Before the end of the month, the National Assembly is expected to take up debate on a bill introduced on Feb. 5 that would give amnesty to all rearmados who meet the Feb. 28 deadline. While the bill has wide support in the Assembly and from the military high command, opposition has appeared among families of victims of rearmado violence.

An editorial in the daily newspaper La Prensa said amnesty is an assault on the rule of law. Amnesty extended to armed bands in the past only promoted impunity and failed to end the violence, said the editorial. The Aleman administration has said, however, that the amnesty will not extend to bands of common delinquents but only to rearmados with grievances stemming from the 1990 armistice. Meanwhile, as the negotiations proceeded, Central Bank president Noel Ramirez announced that the Economic Cabinet was working on a financial-aid plan for agriculture for the next growing cycle starting in May. The plan includes special assistance to the rural areas that have been plagued by rearmado assaults. [Sources: Deutsche Press Agentur, 01/21/97; Reuter, 01/22/97, 01/30/97; La Prensa (Nicaragua), 12/04/96, 12/05/96, 01/22/97, 01/23/97, 02/10/97; Spanish new service EFE, 01/24/97, 01/26/97, 01/30/97, 02/05/97, 02/07/97, 02/08/97, 02/10/97]

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