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Nicaragua Unable to Demobilize Ex-Contras in Center, Northern Regions

by LADB Staff

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The Nicaraguan government's peace accords with the largest of the remaining bands of former contra fighters (rearmados) were signed on May 30, but final demobilization has been postponed. Pro-Sandinista rearmados and President Arnoldo Aleman's administration have been negotiating for months without much success. Following the collapse of the previous peace initiative in March, Aleman left open his offer of amnesty and economic assistance for the various bands operating in Jinotega, Matagalpa, and Chontales departments (see NotiCen, 03/20/97). In early April, leaders of the ex-contra Frente Norte (FN 3-80) estimated at between 600 and 1,000 members promised to move into government safe zones in preparation for signing a demobilization accord.

The government negotiating commission (led by Defense Minister Jaime Cuadra) and FN 3-80 commanders agreed in April on a pact that includes a government pledge of selective amnesty for rearmados on a list supplied by the FN 3-80. In addition, demobilized rearmados are to receive land, credit, and technical assistance. A joint commission will be set up to monitor compliance with the accords. The government has also agreed to investigate FN 3-80 allegations that the military buried disappeared persons in clandestine graves in Matagalpa and Jinotega departments.

Once the demobilization of the remaining rearmado bands is completed, the government plans to shore up public security in the troubled departments with regular rural road patrols, control checkpoints, and improvements in the judicial system. Rearmados who refuse to settle with the government will receive the "full weight of the law," said Aleman at the May 30 signing ceremony in Managua.

Ex-contra band backs out of demobilization

Soon after the FN 3-80 signed the agreement, the peace threatened to come apart. The June 15 deadline for disarming the FN 3-80 had to be postponed when the rearmado leaders said they needed their weapons for self-defense.

According to local press reports, FN 3-80 leaders were reluctant to turn in their arms because they had received threats from rearmados of the pro-Sandinista Frente Unido Andres Castro (FUAC). On June 17, the Armed Forces announced that several government negotiators had been kidnapped by the FN 3-80. But Defense Minister Cuadra said that no kidnapping had taken place and that the military's version was based on mere rumor.

Then, violence resumed on June 18, when soldiers fired on FN 3-80 members who were found outside the peace zone, killing five. The June 17 and 18 incidents raised suspicion that the military was less enthusiastic about the peace accord with the ex-contras than was the civilian Defense Ministry. At the least, there was poor coordination between the Armed Forces commanders, who are considered to be heavily pro-Sandinista, and the Aleman-appointed defense minister, say observers.

Pact with ex-Sandinistas is held up

Reverses have also occurred in the talks with FUAC. In April, for example, several FUAC members left the peace zone and attacked an army contingent near the town of Siuna, northeast of Managua. The incident set back progress toward demobilization of pro-Sandinista bands, as did recent movements around the northern town of Esteli by the Frente Revolucionario de Obreros y Campesinos (FROC).

Bishop Abelardo Mata of Esteli said in mid-July that FROC planned to take over Esteli by force to rob banks and release 15 prisoners from the local jail. The plan was abandoned when the army got wind of it and sent reinforcements into the area. Mata said that FROC believes it is operating in defense of the Sandinista revolution. However, some observers say FUAC, FROC, and other reputedly pro-Sandinista rearmados are simply outlaws with no political agenda, in which case a settlement offering amnesty and government economic assistance eventually could lead to settlements with most remaining rearmado bands. [Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 04/09/97, 04/10/97; Deutsche Press Agentur, 04/25/97; La Prensa (Nicaragua), 05/26/97, 05/28/97, 06/18/97; Central American Update, 05/24/97 5/30/97, 06/14/97-06/20/97; Reuter, 04/22/97, 04/25/97, 06/18/97, 07/04/97; Associated Press, 07/08/97]

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