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Nicaragua Seeks Cooperation of Former Presidents to Plan Reconstruction

by LADB Staff
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Reconstruction in storm-damaged Nicaragua took on a familiar political tone as President Arnoldo Aleman sought agreement with former president Daniel Ortega (1985-1990) on a plan of "national reconstruction." Nicaragua is second only to Honduras in damage from Hurricane Mitch. To date, the government has reported 4,000 storm-related deaths and US$1.5 billion in economic losses.

Unlike Honduras, where the president has asked for and received increased powers to begin reconstruction, Aleman has sought to share responsibility for reconstruction with Ortega, his principal political foe and head of the opposition Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN). Aleman scrapped the Comite Nacional de Emergencia, set up Nov. 3 under Vice President Enrique Bolanos, in favor of a new body, the Comision Nacional de Reconstruction (CNR), which includes Ortega.

In mid-November, Aleman and Ortega agreed to work together on reconstruction and to attend the Dec. 10-11 meeting on Central American reconstruction in Washington, sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). The Aleman-Ortega cooperation on reconstruction began with a Sandinista promise to support Aleman's efforts to secure international financial help, but subsequent talks appeared to give the Sandinistas considerable political leverage on future policy decisions.

At a Nov. 20 meeting, Aleman offered the FSLN membership on four of five presidential planning committees. The five committees are to develop plans for rehabilitation in social programs, infrastructure, external financial cooperation, agriculture, and funding for reconstruction. In addition, Ortega was included in the CNR, which will propose a comprehensive reconstruction plan for funding at the Washington meeting.

The CNR includes representatives from government, the FSLN, the Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada (COSEP), labor, agricultural, and civic organizations. Despite FSLN participation on key policy committees, Aleman said he plans to stick with the economic-adjustment policies, while the CNR's mission is to rebuild damaged roads and restore public services. The recovery plan includes a program of support for the agricultural sector and a crash program to construct housing.

Former president Chamorro declines to participate

At their Nov. 20 meeting, Aleman and Ortega agreed to invite former president Violeta de Chamorro (1990-1997) to join them at their next meeting, Nov. 23. Chamorro declined to attend, saying that, although she was aware of the meeting's purpose, she was not officially told what it was about. Chamorro said she preferred to work for reconstruction through her private foundation. In promoting government-FSLN cooperation on the reconstruction plan, Aleman denied any "co-government" element.
However, Chamorro expressed a concern that the Aleman-Ortega agreements would result in a political alliance between the two leaders. Aleman and Ortega have met frequently to negotiate critical national issues, prompting some analysts to suggest they have developed power-sharing agreements (see Noticen, 05/05/97, 07/10/97). In August, persistent rumors forced the two leaders to deny they were negotiating a division of state powers (see Noticen, 08/27/98). Eliseo Nunez, a dissident in the governing Alianza Liberal, said Chamorro was correct in rejecting Aleman's invitation. Nunez said Aleman and Ortega were using reconstruction "to legitimize their future pact and they simply needed the former president...to endorse their negotiations."

The cooperation between Aleman and Ortega does not eliminate deep divisions between them regarding government spending priorities. Sandinistas are demanding an immediate reordering of budget allocations, while Aleman insists on postponing that debate until next year when the results of the Washington meeting and the extent of international reconstruction funding become clear. At the end of November, the FSLN called for a protest march against Aleman's economic policies. The march is scheduled for Dec. 3, one week before the Washington meeting.

Ortega said the purpose of the march is to force the administration to take immediate action to help storm victims and to revise economic-restructuring polices. Ortega said the administration should end its "insensitivity" in continuing its neoliberal policies in the current disaster. The demands reflect the Sandinistas' fundamental opposition to Aleman's economic policies. Among the FSLN's specific demands are suspending layoffs in the public sector, freezing rates for water, electricity, and other basic services, eliminating taxes on basic goods, and canceling planned changes in the labor code. In addition to the lack of agreement on the economy, there has been no resolution of the struggle between the administration and the FSLN regarding Sandinista demands for constitutional and electoral reforms that would favor the Sandinistas. [Sources: La Prensa (Nicaragua), 11/21/98, 11/23/98; Spanish news service EFE, 11/21/98, 11/24/98; Notimex, 11/23/98, 11/24/98, 11/30/98]