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Nicaragua Accuses Honduras of an Arms Race

by LADB Staff

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In the latest effort to resolve the Caribbean boundary conflict between Honduras and Nicaragua, presidents of the two nations met with El Salvadoran President Francisco Flores to thrash out Nicaraguan accusations that Honduras was engaged in an arms buildup that threatens regional peace. The talks did not end the tension, but Honduras agreed to a full accounting of its military forces. Tensions rose between the two countries in late 1999 when Honduras ratified a treaty with Colombia setting their common maritime boundary in the Caribbean. Nicaragua objected to the treaty because it awarded Colombia sovereignty over a zone in the Caribbean that Nicaragua also claims (see NotiCen, 2000-01-27).

In an interim settlement reached with Organization of American States (OAS) special envoy Luigi Einaudi in December 1999, Honduras and Nicaragua agreed to take the boundary dispute to the International Court of Justice at The Hague and to abide by its decision. The matter is now before the tribunal, but a ruling is not expected for several years. In the meantime, both sides accepted an OAS proposal to demilitarize their land-border posts and set up a military exclusion zone in the disputed area of the Caribbean. Despite the agreements, the conflict worsened in recent months as Nicaragua began to accuse Honduras of a military buildup and other acts that appeared to upset the balance of power in the region and threaten the OAS agreements brokered by Einaudi.

Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Francisco Aguirre Sacasa said in early February that there was "a tendency in Honduras to acquire powerful armaments." He rejected a Honduran claim that the new weapons were merely replacements for old ones, and he warned Honduras against starting a Central American arms race. At the same time, Nicaraguan President Alfonso Aleman told a news conference that Honduras had increased its military presence along the border, carried out military maneuvers near the border without prior notification, added new bases in the Caribbean, and increased its military budget to twice that of Nicaragua's.

Aleman also said that the Honduran National Assembly was considering a bill to reimpose compulsory military service and that Honduras had skipped Central American security meetings for more than a year. The meetings are held four times a year to exchange information on the region's military forces. These actions, he said, violated agreements the two countries made with Einaudi.

Aleman said the Foreign Ministry had asked the OAS to seek full compliance from Honduras. Honduran Defense Minister Enrique Flores denied his government had made any belligerent moves or was increasing its stockpile of weapons. He said Nicaraguan officials were lying, and what Nicaragua took to be military exercises were humanitarian missions to build schools and roads carried out in joint exercises with US troops. In March, Nicaraguan Defense Minister Jose Adan Guerra said Honduran coast guard vessels were cruising in the disputed Caribbean zone. Nicaragua also complained of Honduran vessels in Nicaraguan territorial waters in the Gulf of Fonseca. But

Honduras said the vessels were on patrol there to keep Honduran fishing boats out of Nicaraguan waters.

In March, Aleman and Honduran President Carlos Flores discussed the issue at the meeting of regional leaders with the Consultative Group of donor nations in Madrid. They agreed to invite OAS observers to examine Nicaragua's claims of a Honduran military buildup and to submit reports on Honduran military acquisitions. In early April, Agence France-Presse said that a UN report on the reduction of arms and military expenditures in Central America since the 1980s appeared to support Nicaragua's contention. The report said Honduras acquired 11 French-built Super Mystere jet fighters in 1998. If true, the purchase is at odds with Honduran claims that its military had made no such purchases since 1980.

A week before the three leaders met at the Nicaraguan resort of Pochomil near Managua, Aguirre renewed his accusations in a television broadcast. He said that the Honduran legislature was debating a law to permit an increase in its military capabilities and that a notice had appeared in the official Honduran publication *La Gaceta* authorizing the purchase of modern arms. He said El Salvador had also noticed the buildup and had sent a note of protest to Tegucigalpa.

Aleman offers to share the disputed zone

Aleman confounded some Nicaraguan leaders by suggesting that Honduras and Nicaragua could end the dispute by sharing the natural resources found in the disputed Caribbean area. He linked the proposal to the ongoing process of regional integration. "We should not be arguing about whether the boundary of Nicaragua is at the 17th parallel or the Honduran boundary is at the 15th," said Aleman. The suggestion brought criticism from Nicaragua's former army chief Joaquin Cuadra, who said Aleman had no right to compromise the territorial integrity of Nicaragua in the name of regional integration. No country in Europe gave up territory upon entering the European Union (EU), he said.

Furthermore, Aleman's statement came after the International Court of Justice agreed to hear the case and would do Nicaragua's side no good, said Cuadra. He suggested Aleman might have some personal financial interest in a bilateral sharing of resources. "They say that large corporations have many economic interests in the maritime zone," said Cuadra. But Aguirre said Aleman's proposal would probably not be on the agenda at the Pochomil meeting, and it would not be a viable solution unless Honduras repudiated the treaty it signed with Colombia. Aleman later withdrew the suggestion.

As the case went before The Hague tribunal, the three presidents, along with their military chiefs, met in Pochomil March 30 to take up Nicaragua's accusations about the supposed arms buildup in Honduras. A source in the Nicaraguan administration said Nicaragua favored a negotiated settlement because "a bad deal is better than a good court ruling." In the latter case, "we all lose," said the source.

Following the summit, Aguirre told the daily *La Prensa* that the meeting ran into trouble because a delegate, whom he would not identify, accused one of the countries participating in the talks of

carrying out military espionage on the other. Aguirre professed surprise at the accusation and said it nearly wrecked the summit. If the accusation was leveled against Nicaragua, it could hardly have been a surprise since Aguirre had earlier said that Nicaragua had ways of knowing everything that happened in Honduras.

La Prensa reported on March 31 that administration sources had said Nicaragua would present a detailed report on Honduras' military readiness and that the report was based on Nicaraguan military intelligence. Honduras agrees to furnish details on military The summit's final declaration Presidential Declaration of Pochomil calls for Honduras to provide detailed military information "in a complete, transparent, and verifiable manner." Honduras is to disclose its military and public-security inventories by April 15, along with its military budget and details about the deployment of its military forces and installations. Honduras is the only Central American country that has not shared this kind of information with its neighbors through the Comision de Defensa y Seguridad de Centroamerica.

Nicaraguan government sources took the agreement as a vindication of its charges against Honduras and of the accuracy and volume of its intelligence on the buildup. The sources said Honduras did not expect such "authentic and convincing proof." The evidence Nicaragua presented during the summit came from information it had from internal communications of the Honduran army, troop orders, and arms-purchase plans for the next three years. Also included was information on the increase of Honduran military posts from four in 1999 to 22 by February 2001. A follow-up meeting on the arms issue takes place April 4 in San Salvador and after that, another summit covering broader issue is scheduled for May in Choluteca, Honduras.

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