

A U.S. RESPONSE TO THE SANDINISTAS' NEW PROMISES

The key lesson from last week's meeting of the five Central American leaders in San Jose, Costa Rica, is that United States assistance to Nicaragua's Democratic Resistance forces is essential to a democratic Nicaragua. Without strong military pressure from these forces, popularly known as the Contras, the ruling Sandinistas would not have agreed to face to face negotiations with them. Only continued Resistance pressure can assure that the Sandinistas really will go to the bargaining table, really will bargain, and really will keep their promises. So far Resistance pressure has forced the Sandinistas to promise to lift the six-year-old state of emergency and to grant a limited amnesty for political prisoners.

Tactic to Halt U.S. Aid. Sandinista motives, of course, are suspect. Their objective almost surely is to stop new U.S. aid to the Resistance. And their unanticipated promises in Costa Rica clearly are designed to give those members of Congress who are against Contra aid an excuse to oppose renewed assistance.

The Sandinistas' promises are designed to present an image of flexibility and reasonableness while making few substantive moves toward democracy. The state of emergency, for example, which suspended a number of political and civil rights, can be reimposed at any moment. Political activity, in any case, can be controlled easily by the Sandinistas through their broadly worded public security law. The amnesty promise, meanwhile, is not a true amnesty. It excludes many of the approximately 9,000 political prisoners and requires that the freed prisoners leave Nicaragua. Talks with the Nicaraguan Resistance, as proposed by the Sandinistas, would be restricted to technical matters and would not address the political core of the differences that have engulfed Nicaragua in civil war. Nor do the Sandinista promises cover Soviet involvement in Nicaragua.

A particularly bad omen is that at the very moment when the Sandinistas were trying to appear reasonable and conciliatory, they were jailing seven leaders of the opposition and five more later, including a senior editor of the opposition newspaper *La Prensa*, as they returned to Nicaragua. All of them apparently have now been released as a consequence of strong international protests.

Contra Battlefield Success. If the Sandinistas have become more reasonable, it is certainly not because they suddenly discovered the virtues of democracy. After all, the Sandinistas have had eight years to initiate a democratic system. The Sandinistas' action last week was forced on them by the Resistance's military perseverance and gains. The Sandinistas have not been able to defeat the Resistance in the battlefield. On the contrary, since U.S. support for the Resistance was renewed in 1986, the Nicaraguan freedom fighters have achieved significant military successes. These include: the attack on the gold mines of Zelaya in central Nicaragua last December, where more than 5,000 freedom fighters converged from different areas of the country to carry out a sophisticated military operation; shooting down more than 30 Soviet-made aircrafts; the ability to operate in an area that covers 60 percent of the Nicaraguan territory; building a large base of popular support in the countryside; and, according to a Costa Rican affiliate of Gallup International, Consultoria Interdisciplinaria en Desarrollo S.A., winning support from an impressive majority of the people of Central America. The Sandinistas, who have had to break their vow never to talk to the Resistance, in effect have recognized the Nicaraguan Resistance as a legitimate counterpart in the Nicaraguan civil war.

To ensure that the Sandinistas are forced to keep their promises, the Resistance needs continued U.S. aid. Without this aid, the Resistance would dissolve. The political opposition inside Nicaragua then would be demoralized and lose any chance of gaining power. After all, the Sandinistas already have announced that even were they to lose an election, they would not relinquish power.

Testing Sandinista Sincerity. A collapsed Resistance would free Nicaragua to continue its efforts to undermine its Central American neighbors. It is because of these efforts that Congress in the past voted to fund the Resistance. Of the Sandinistas' ability to overrun their neighbors there is little doubt. A high ranking Sandinista official, Major Roger Miranda Bengoechea, who defected in October 1987, revealed, among other things, that the Sandinistas intend to build an army and militia totalling 500,000 men. This later was confirmed by Nicaraguan Minister of Defense Humberto Ortega.

The sincerity of last week's Sandinista promises should be tested. The test, however, must last at least a year--long enough for the Sandinistas to deliver what they promised. In the meantime, the U.S. must continue to aid the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance. Only the pressure they mount on the Sandinistas can assure the restoration of peace in Central America, and democracy and independence in Nicaragua.

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For further information:

"Sandinistas' sham," editorial, *The Miami Herald*, January 19, 1988.

Jorge Salaverry, "Contras Score Military Gains Inside Nicaragua," Heritage Foundation *Executive Memorandum* No. 174, August 31, 1987.