

CONTRAS SCORE MILITARY GAINS INSIDE NICARAGUA

In Nicaragua's civil war, the democratic forces, popularly known as the Contras, have been making impressive military and political gains. Today some 14,000 Contras are fighting in approximately half of Nicaragua. Their ability to sustain operations in such a large portion of the Nicaraguan territory is a solid indicator of the high degree of support that they enjoy among the rural population.

Since the Contras began military operations five years ago, they have grown from a force of a few hundred to an experienced, well-trained, and highly disciplined force of more than 14,000. Most of them are peasants. Sandinista defectors account for about half of the resistance forces.

In the first half of this year, the Contras had 1,360 military contacts with the Sandinistas, a total higher than that for all of 1986. Through this July, the Contras have destroyed 55 military posts and temporary bases of the Sandinista army, 15 bridges, 142 poles and transmission line towers, 83 military trucks, five jeeps, and nine pick-up trucks. In the same period, the Contras shot down at least five helicopters made and provided by the Soviet Union. Of these, two were MI-24s, commonly known as flying tanks; three were HIP models, generally used for carrying troops. Other seriously damaged Soviet helicopters included four MI-24s, one MI-17, and one MI-8. In addition, two more helicopters have been downed this month. This has been a significant blow to the Sandinista army, given its heavy reliance on air power to attack the democratic resistance.

Passing the Test. An ability to carry out coordinated attacks on major military targets is a key test of a fighting force. The Contras have passed this test. They have conducted six major attacks during the past four months. One of these was on San Jose de Bocay on July 16. San Jose de Bocay is the main Sandinista army base in the north-central region of Nicaragua and thus is heavily defended. The Contras, however, penetrated the Sandinistas' defenses and destroyed several military installations. To carry out this assault the rebels brought together and combined the efforts of a number of different combat units operating in the region.

There is evidence that in zones of heavy combat the Sandinista army is being forced on the defensive. The Contras have seized tactical initiative and the Sandinistas are now reacting. The Sandinistas appear to have been forced to withdraw from the battlefield some high-value military equipment, such as PT-76 amphibious tanks and some heavy artillery. They apparently feared that these would be captured or destroyed by the Contras.

A major Contra success has been political unification. After years of division and political strife, the major Contra organizations assembled in Miami in May, where they established a unified anti-Sandinista front: the Nicaraguan Resistance (NR). This organization, democratically elected by a 54-member assembly and represented by a 7-member directorate, includes and unites all sectors of the democratic opposition fighting against the Sandinistas. All the Contra forces were consolidated under one military command, the Nicaraguan Resistance Army (NRA). The NRA, in turn, is under the authority of the civilian directorate of the Resistance.

Popular Support. The Resistance, meanwhile, has won the support of the majority of Central Americans. A Costa Rican affiliate of Gallup International conducted a survey in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Costa Rica (in Nicaragua surveys are forbidden) to explore how Central Americans feel about the Contras. Among the survey's results are the following:

- ◆◆ Three-fourths of all Central Americans view the Soviet Union as responsible for fomenting violence in the region.

- ◆◆ The majority of Central Americans believe that the anti-Sandinista rebels enjoy the support of the Nicaraguan people.

- ◆◆ Two-thirds of the Central Americans approve of the U.S. military and humanitarian aid to the Nicaraguan Resistance.

Another Gallup survey recently published in Costa Rica shows that approximately 80 percent of Costa Ricans have little or no confidence that the Sandinistas will comply with the current peace plan.

While the Nicaraguan Resistance is making military and political gains, the Sandinistas are losing some of their international support. West Germany, for example, is one of the nations that has decided to put an end to an important aid program to the Sandinista regime. France also has reduced earlier aid commitments to Nicaragua. In June, the Netherlands announced that it was reducing economic aid to Nicaragua by about 50 percent. The decision was taken because the Netherlands is convinced that civil and human rights consistently are violated in Nicaragua.

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