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CENTRAL AMERICA

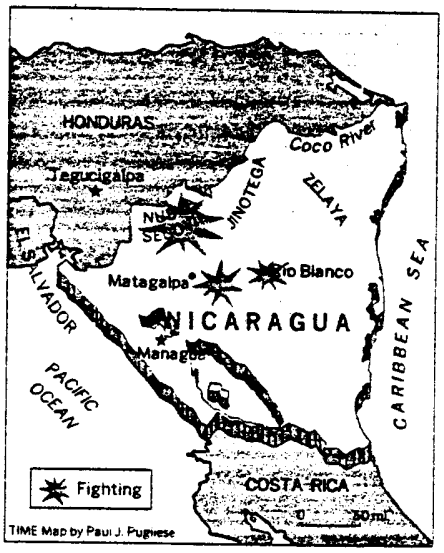
Nicaragua's Elusive War

A guerrilla struggle raises charges of covert U.S. involvement

Reports from the various battlefronts were murky, confused and conflicting. Casualty figures and claims of triumph were trumpeted confidently, but without verification, by both sides. Only one fact was certain in Nicaragua last week: a new level of clandestine guerrilla warfare was under way in the tiny Central American republic. Ironically, the Marxist-led Sandinista government that overthrew Dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979 now seemed to face an insurrection very similar to the one that brought the Sandinistas to power. At a hastily arranged press conference in the Nicaraguan capital of Managua, Defense Minister Humberto Ortega Saavedra declared last week: "We consider the situation to be critical."

Nicaragua tried to make the most of its alleged injuries at an emergency session of the United Nations Security Council. The country's Deputy Foreign Minister, Victor Hugo Tinoco, charged that the new warfare was inspired and armed by the Reagan Administration, which is determined "to destroy the Nicaraguan revolution." That challenge earned a sharp rebuke from U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, who called Sandinista fears of a U.S. invasion a "myth." Kirkpatrick did not address the main Sandinista contention: that the guerrilla warfare now plaguing Nicaragua is part of a covert operation directed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

The latest charges have further increased the rhetorical temperature in Central America. Defense Minister Ortega warned darkly last week of "the possibility of war" with neighboring Honduras, which he accused of aiding the rebels. Nicaragua also charged that Honduran troops had briefly entered Nicaraguan territory, an accusation that the Hondurans labeled "totally false." Said a State Department official: "The Nicaraguans create a devil outside to increase internal solidarity."



Nicaragua's concern was mirrored in some corridors on Capitol Hill. Congressman Michael D. Barnes of Maryland last week decried a "1980s version of the Bay of Pigs." Said he: "It appears that the U.S. is engaged in supporting a war in Latin America without discussing that involvement with the American people." Said another congressional source with privileged access to U.S. intelligence information: "We're concerned about the danger of a wider conflagration." At the same time, many members of Congress continue to support the Administration's efforts to curb Soviet influence in the hemisphere, even if it means engaging in covert activity.

Despite the ample declarations of concern, the war in Nicaragua remains for the most part invisible. Newsmen who descended upon the country last week could find little evidence of fighting. The major sign of military activity in Managua was the predawn jogging of groups of Nicaraguan army soldiers near the city's Intercontinental Hotel. In the town of San Fernando, nearly 159 miles from the capital, the only sign of combat was a cornfield still ablaze as a result of fighting the day before. Said a U.S. diplomat in Washington: "They have clearly got a fighting

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