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2 Senators Say Duarte Favors Nicaragua Talks

By B. DRUMMOND AYRES Jr.
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ANDREWS AIR FORCE BASE, Md., April 20 — Two United States Senators said today that José Napoleón Duarte, who is running for the presidency of El Salvador, told them he would seek negotiations with Nicaragua if he was elected.

Reagan Administration officials have accused Nicaragua of seeking the overthrow of the Salvadoran Government through its support of rebels in that country. Much of the support is believed to be in the form of clandestine shipments of ammunition.

Nicaraguans Noncommittal

The Senators, J. Bennett Johnston of Louisiana and Lawton Chiles of Florida, both Democrats, said that when they visited Nicaragua after seeing Mr. Duarte, officials there were non-committal when told about Mr. Duarte's negotiating offer.

But the Nicaraguans had "nothing disparaging to say about Duarte," Senator Chiles said, "although they expressed concern that the right in El Salvador would permit him to do that."

Mr. Chiles said Mr. Duarte did not specify precisely what he would discuss in any negotiations with Nicaragua. The Senator added, however, that at this point specifics were not as important as the fact that negotiations in general were being proposed.

"We want to be ready to test the Nicaraguans," Senator Chiles said. "It's a great opportunity."

The Senators said they had talked at length with Mr. Duarte during their six-day visit to the region and were encouraged about El Salvador's future.

Mr. Duarte, the Christian Democratic Party candidate, is running against Roberto d'Aubisson of the far-right Nationalist Republican Alliance in a runoff May 6.

"Our message is one of hope and optimism," Senator Johnston said. "The United States simply cannot walk away from Central America. Our policy is beginning to pay off."

Both Senators are members of Congressional committees that deal with Central American matters. They called for continued United States support of the Governments and armed forces of El Salvador and Honduras, as well as a flow of arms to rebels fighting the Nicaraguan Government.

On Wednesday a United States Army helicopter in which the two Senators were passengers was hit by fire near the Honduran border. Salvadoran rebels said the aircraft and a second UH-1H helicopter was on a reconnaissance mission. United States diplomats in El Salvador denied the accusation.

"We've been through the valley of the shadow and come out unscathed," Senator Johnston said this afternoon, moments after landing here. "A lot of people are dying down there and we're lucky not to be among them."

Senators Back Duarte

Senator Chiles said he had gone to Central America "very pessimistic" but had returned "very optimistic."

Besides El Salvador, the Senators visited Honduras, Panama and Nicaragua. Both expressed the hope that Mr. Duarte would win the Salvadoran election.

"We believe he can control the army, the death squads and the guerrillas — with our help," Senator Johnston said.

Both Senator Johnston and Senator Chiles have been supporters of Reagan Administration policy in Central America. They said their visit to the region had strengthened their resolve to continue with the policy, including covert support by the Central Intelligence Agency for the so-called Contra guerrillas who are fighting the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua.

"The Contras are a very strong card for the U.S. to play," Senator Johnston said.

Mr. Chiles said the incident on

copter was hit near the El Salvador-Honduras border had "heightened our awareness that there's a war down there and people get shot at every day."

No one was hurt in the incident, which occurred when the two Senators arrived to visit a Honduran refugee camp, and the aircraft, after putting down briefly for a quick inspection by its American crew, took off again.

Asked whether the incident took place over El Salvador or Honduras, Senator Childs replied, "It was rebel territory, wherever the heck we were."