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CONTRA AID VITAL, REAGAN DECLARES

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WASHINGTON, March 3 — President Reagan warned Congress today of a "strategic disaster" if it failed to approve military assistance to the Nicaraguan insurgents, who he said would be crushed like "the Hungarian freedom fighters" without the aid.

The warning came as Mr. Reagan, intensifying his push for \$70 million in military aid to the rebels and \$30 million in nonlethal assistance, met with rebel leaders and was told that many of the insurgents had gone into hiding without ammunition or other supplies.

One of the rebel leaders, Alfonso Robelo Callejas, a former member of the Nicaraguan junta and one of three directors of the United Nicaraguan Opposition, said his group had told Mr. Reagan that about 6,000 insurgents were active inside Nicaragua and that another 22,000 sympathizers had gone into hiding.

'We Need the Aid Badly'

Mr. Robelo said Mr. Reagan appeared aware of the situation as he expressed a commitment to providing military assistance.

"It is clear that we need the military aid badly in order to have effective pressure to bring the Sandinistas to the table," Mr. Robelo said in recalling his group's remarks to Mr. Reagan. "We told the President that we have been talking to the commanders and that they need military aid real fast, be-

cause of the fact that less than one-third of the forces are active."

Mr. Robelo said his group, in Washington to lobby Congress for the assistance proposed by Mr. Reagan, believed that \$70 million in military aid was adequate and that by making the aid officially covert the Administration could better distribute it.

He said the aid should be part of a two-track program in which efforts to obtain a political solution would be combined with military support for the insurgents in order to press the Nicaraguan Government to negotiate.

White House officials had scheduled a press briefing with the Nicaraguan opposition leaders after their meeting with the President, but rescheduled it for Thursday. One ranking official said the action had been taken to avoid "overkill" and to keep the focus on Mr. Reagan's comments.

Reagan Comments After Meeting

Mr. Reagan's remarks came as he addressed a group of conservative leaders and business executives after meeting with the rebel leaders.

The remarks echoed a speech by Secretary of State George P. Shultz to the Veterans of Foreign Wars today and statements by other high-ranking officials that amounted to a blanket denunciation of the Nicaraguan Government. At the same time, the officials spoke glowingly of the rebels, while warning that their military situation was tenuous.

Mr. Reagan said a Congressional defeat of his aid proposal "could well deliver Nicaragua permanently to the Communist bloc."

"I think the world is watching to see if Congress is as committed to democracy in Nicaragua, in our own hemisphere, as it was in the Philippines," Mr. Reagan said.

At another point, the President drew a comparison to the Hungarian uprising of 1956, saying that "if we don't provide our friends with the means to stop the Soviet gunships, Nicaragua's freedom fighters will suffer the same fate as the Hungarian freedom fighters, who had nothing to defend themselves against Soviet tanks."

'Privileged Sanctuary'

Mr. Reagan said a defeat of the rebels would make Nicaragua a second Cuba and "would mean consolidation of a privileged sanctuary for terrorists and subversives just two days' driving time from Harlingen, Tex."

The President warned further that a failure to approve the military aid would "place in jeopardy" the survival of what he termed fragile democracies in Central America, open the possibility of Soviet military bases near the United States, threaten the security of the Panama Canal and cause a vast migration of hundreds of thousands of refugees to the United States.

"And those who would invite this strategic disaster by abandoning yet another fighting ally of this country in the field will be held fully accountable," he said.

Mr. Reagan's remarks and the speech by Mr. Shultz were a part of a drive by the Administration to secure funding. The Secretary, in his appearance, made many of the same arguments offered by the President.

Nicaragua Accused of Subversion

But in a detailed portrait of the Nicaraguan Government, Mr. Shultz asserted before the veteran's group that it was engaged in wide-scale subversion, including aid to radicals and terrorists from the Middle East, Latin America and Europe. In addition, he asserted, "agents" from the Palestine Liberation Organization operating in Central America and Panama are using Nicaragua "as their base of operations."

The Nicaraguan Embassy here, in a statement today, said the remarks by Mr. Reagan and Mr. Shultz were examples of the "utter disdain" the Administration had for negotiations, including bilateral talks with the Nicaraguan Government and the regional peace initiative offered by the nations known as the Contadora group.

"The actions of the Administration are additional proof of its commitment to a military solution in Central America, because more aid to the contras

will inevitably lead the U.S. into creeping escalation, which will culminate with the intervention of U.S. combat troops in Nicaragua," the embassy statement said.

Administration officials have argued that the Nicaragua conflict is entering a critical period. Making that point today, Elliott L. Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, told reporters that the insurgents had made steady gains last fall, but that a "technology gap" developed as the Nicaraguan Government deployed sophisticated Soviet weapons, including helicopters.

Mr. Abrams said that it was now difficult for the insurgents to get volunteers and that their ranks had been depleted from about 8,000 to 6,000 because of supply problems. With American military assistance, Mr. Abrams asserted, the force would swell to about 25,000.

The Nicaraguan Army has about 60,000 troops, about the same number as the Government militia.

'A Military Track'

Mr. Abrams said that with the proposed American military aid the rebels could greatly expand their campaign. Without it, he said, the Sandinistas would consolidate control and turn their attention "fully to subversion of their neighbors."

Restating what he said one rebel leader, Arturo José Cruz, had told Mr. Reagan, Mr. Abrams said, "There has to be a military track or else the diplomatic track will have no teeth."

The Administration has expressed a willingness to hold talks with the Nicaraguan Government if it agreed to church-sponsored discussions with the insurgents. The Nicaraguan Government has refused to negotiate with the rebels, and the Reagan Administration has broken off direct talks with Managua.

Mr. Robelo, in discussing the proposal for a "dual track" approach, said the rebels favored both sets of talks as well as negotiations under the so-called Contadora process.

Senator Jim Sasser, Democrat of Tennessee, said today that he would propose that the United States place the aid in escrow for six months while it pursues bilateral negotiations.

Another key member of Congress, Representative Dave McCurdy, Democrat of Oklahoma, said today that he opposed military funding and believed that the Administration would eventually compromise and settle for non-lethal assistance. Mr. McCurdy was a co-sponsor last year of the legislation that gave the rebels \$27 million in non-military aid, such as food, medical care and uniforms.