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'Commander Zero' fights for a non-aligned Nicaragua

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ALONG THE SAN JUAN RIVER, Nicaragua, Eden Pastora sat aside his tin cup supper of rice, beans and mashed bananas and lit his walkie-talkie. From the mud-caked porch of an abandoned shack carved out of the river bank, he spoke the coded order: "This is Zeta. Start the party. Start the party."

The distant thud of a mortar round sounded moments later as guerrillas of the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance, known as ARDE, responded to Pastora's call. Their target: an isolated garrison of about 75 Sandinista soldiers in the Caribbean port town of San Juan del Norte, one of the

last government strongholds in southeastern Nicaragua.

Pastora, 47, the legendary Commander Zero of the 1979 Sandinista revolution who now seeks to overthrow the regime he helped install, was back doing what he knows best — waging war in the jungles of southern Nicaragua.

The attack began only five days after Pastora announced to the world that he was calling a "strategic halt" to his 3-month-old

guerrilla campaign because ARDE was nearly broke and critically short of food and arms.

"I never said retreat," Pastora told reporters who visited one of his remote outposts last week. "We were not abandoning the struggle, and our cease-fire lasted only 48 hours before traditional friends promised us substantial aid."

Although first appearing to be a serious setback for Pastora, the

June 23 "strategic halt" now seems to have been a calculated maneuver to jostle ARDE supporters into giving more aid.

Pastora has a reputation as a guerrilla fighter with a flair for the dramatic. He led the brazen daylight takeover of the National Palace in Managua in 1978, forcing President Anastasio Somoza to free imprisoned Sandinista leaders

and giving the world its first look at the revolutionaries who would seize power a year later.

Whittling on a foot-long stalk of sugar cane, Pastora said his anonymous "traditional friends" had not been providing ARDE with sufficient aid because "they thought I was getting everything I needed from the CIA."

"I am not getting 1 cent from the U. S. government or any U. S. organization, like the CIA," Pastora said. "Not that I would not accept help from the CIA if it were offered without strings attached."

ARDE's short-term needs may be satisfied by Pastora's traditional supporters. Sources say the military assistance comes from sympathetic senior military officers in Venezuela, Panama and Colombia acting independently of their governments.

ARDE officials acknowledge that their refusal to form an alliance with a larger force of U. S.-supported guerrillas fighting in northern Nicaragua is keeping Pastora cut off from the U. S. supply line.

The northern force, called the Nicaraguan Democratic Front or FDN, claims to have 7,000 men in arms. Both U. S. and Honduran government sources have acknowledged that FDN troops are allowed to operate from Honduras and receive considerable covert aid from the Reagan administration.

President Reagan has called the FDN guerrillas "freedom fighters." Pastora has said he visited Honduras in March 1982, when he discussed a possible alliance in conversations with Honduran military officers, FDN leaders and U. S. intelligence officials. The talks apparently broke down because of Pastora's demand that he be named commander-in-chief of the guerrilla forces, and because of his opposition to the FDN military commanders, virtually all of whom are former officers of Somoza's hated national guard.

ARDE leaders say the FDN commanders are contras, or counterrevolutionaries, who hope to restore a rightist regime in Nicaragua.

Pastora calls himself a "democratic revolutionary" who remains faithful to the ideals of the 1979 revolution but opposes the Sandinistas' drift toward Marxism, its dependence on Cuban and Eastern bloc military advisers, and its failure to call free elections.

"The revolution has accomplished many good things," he said last week. "The literacy campaign, the seizure of Somoza's holdings, the nationalization of certain industries and exports...."

"I am not anti-communist, but I am not naive," he said. "I know about their expansionism. I am for a truly non-aligned Nicaragua. Something is really wrong with the world if everyone has to align themselves either with the United States or the Soviet Union — the CIA or the KGB."

"The gringos (U. S. officials) should help us and not tie any strings to the aid," Pastora said. "When we win, we will throw out the Cubans and call free elections. I believe in a democratic Nicaragua, but the gringos are afraid of me. I am too independent. They cannot control me."

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