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Embassy staff in Nicaragua said harassed

By James Morrison
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Nicaraguan secret police have been arresting, interrogating and harassing Nicaraguan employees of the U.S. Embassy in Managua, the State Department charged yesterday.

Since Nov. 2, about 14 Nicaraguan employees who work as drivers or secretaries or in other embassy support jobs have been "subjected to long periods of intense and often abusive interrogation, ranging from six to 13 hours in length" and later released, State Department spokesman Charles Redman said.

The secret police, the feared internal security arm of the Marxist Sandinista government, summoned many of the Nicaraguan employees late at night and accused all of them of spying for the Central Intelligence Agency, a charge the State Department strongly denied.

"We reject any claims that those employees are engaged in espionage activities," Mr. Redman said. "All are employed

in the normal sort of support functions as foreign nationals in any U.S. embassy in the world."

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State William Walker yesterday sent the Nicaraguan Embassy in Washington a strong protest, calling on Nicaraguan authorities to stop the interrogations.

"We regard these midnight summonses and this psychological and verbal abuse of our ... employees as unacceptable harassment," Mr. Redman said.

The Nicaraguan Embassy had no immediate comment. A spokesman said he had transmitted Mr. Walker's protest to Managua and was awaiting a reply.

All of the U.S. Embassy employees summoned by the secret police have been "subjected to long periods of intense and often abusive interrogation," Mr. Redman said.

"All have been subjected as well to psychological abuse by being forced to sit for extended periods of time in small windowless rooms and by being forced to walk at all times with their heads down and eyes on the ground," he said.

"So far, all have been released, but with warnings that they will be under surveillance in the future," he said.

The State Department yesterday also criticized Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega for rejecting the latest peace proposal by the four-nation Contadora group.