

The Executive Memorandum

The Heritage Foundation

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PUTTING NICARAGUA ON NOTICE: HANDS OFF AMERICANS

Nicaragua's communist regime is on notice: It will be held responsible by Washington for terrorist acts against Americans. Last Wednesday, July 17, in an unusually strongly worded note handed by U.S. Ambassador Harry Bergold to senior Nicaraguan officials, the Reagan Administration warned that "any Nicaraguan-supported terrorist attacks against U.S. personnel in Honduras would be viewed as the direct responsibility of the government of Nicaragua," and that "the United States should be expected to react accordingly." In the wake of the recent Beirut hostage crisis and the murder last month of six U.S. citizens, including four off-duty Marines, at a San Salvador sidewalk cafe, it is time for the Administration to launch a new anti-terrorist campaign against those who would kidnap and murder Americans abroad.

Evidence has mounted over the past six years that the Managua regime fully supports terror attacks against the U.S. and its allies. In fact, since the accession to power of the communists in July 1979, Managua has become a magnet for international terrorists. Libyan and Palestine Liberation Organization advisors have come to Nicaragua to train Nicaraguan militants. Meanwhile, Argentine, Chilean, Colombian, Salvadoran, Honduran, Costa Rican, and Guatemalan terrorists have opened offices in downtown Managua, along with members of the Spanish Basque ETA, the Italian Red Brigades, and the West German Baader-Meinhoff Gang.

Since 1979, Managua has participated in a lengthening list of terrorist assaults. Among them:

*** Throughout winter 1979-1980, Nicaraguan communist terrorists stalked the streets of Guatemala's capital city, hunting down former officials of Nicaragua's deposed Somoza government. Guatemalan police blame them for at least three murders and suspect them of others.

*** In September 1980, Argentine and Chilean terrorists, directed by Managua, tracked down former Nicaraguan President Somoza in Asuncion, Paraguay, where they murdered him. Upon hearing the news, Nicaragua's communist officials "urged" the Nicaraguan citizenry to "celebrate the execution" of Somoza.

*** In March 1981, Nicaraguan terrorists claimed responsibility for bombing the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica, boasting that this was to retaliate against U.S. assistance to El Salvador.

*** Also in March 1981, Honduran terrorists, trained in Nicaragua, hijacked a U.S.-bound airline to Managua and demanded that Honduras release 15 prisoners (including 13 Salvadoran FMLN guerrillas who had been caught smuggling arms from Nicaragua). During the episode, Honduran officials were denied access to the control tower radio by Nicaraguan authorities; Nicaragua also refused to allow a commando assault by the Hondurans. The Hondurans ultimately acceded.

*** Throughout 1983 and 1984, Spanish Basque ETA terrorists were being used by Managua to kill Nicaraguan opposition leaders based in Costa Rica. In July 1983, two Nicaraguan communists were killed when a bomb that they had intended to plant in the Costa Rican Interior Ministry detonated early; that September, Costa Rica formally charged Managua with sending ETA hit teams into Costa Rica; and the following May, ETA terrorists planted a bomb that exploded at a news conference called by Nicaraguan opposition leader Eden Pastora at a jungle stronghold on the Nicaraguan-Costa Rican border, killing four and wounding 27.

*** During his visit to the U.S. last March, Italian Prime Minister Bettino Craxi condemned Nicaragua's communist regime for harboring the Red Brigades terrorists who had assassinated former Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro in 1978.

These are but a few of the dozens of terrorist incidents in which Managua has played a direct or an indirect role. Even the murder of the six Americans in San Salvador last month bore Nicaraguan fingerprints: Managua supplies arms, training, and funds to the Revolutionary Central American Workers Party (PRTC), the Salvadoran guerrilla group that claimed responsibility for the attack.

Nicaragua's communists, therefore, are no strangers to terrorism. The nine Commandantes who run Nicaragua clearly embrace Lenin's declaration that "the purpose of terrorism is to terrorize." As such, the Reagan Administration's tough diplomatic note to Managua is long overdue. But it is only a first step. U.S. actions must match its rhetoric if Washington is to be taken seriously in its vow to protect Americans from terrorism.

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For further information:

"Background Paper: Nicaragua's Military Build-up and Support for Central American Subversion," U.S. Departments of State and Defense, 1984.

"The Soviet-Cuban Connection in Central America, U.S. Department of State, 1985.

"Sandinista Intimidation of Its Neighbors," unpublished paper by William W. Pascoe, III, Office of the Coordinator for Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean, U.S. Department of State.