



Militawoman guards a Sandinula vaccination post against contra attacks.

DOWN BUT NOT OUT

Over the past two months the United States' undeclared war against Nicaragua has entered a new phase, with the total embargo on trade with Nicaragua announced by President Reagan on May 1 and the congressional vote in June to renew aid to US backed 'guerrilla' forces known as 'contras'.

The renewal of aid to the 'contras' to the tune of \$27 million - twice the amount refused by Congress a month earlier - is more important as an indicator of the changed climate of opinion than anything else. In fact, the contras, or 'freedom fighters' as Reagan likes to call them, have never stopped receiving aid. When Congress banned CIA covert aid to them a year ago US corporations and individuals eagerly stepped forward to fill the gap. Argentina, Israel and other Third World countries also gave assistance, and a great deal of the US military aid to Honduras, Salvador and Guatemala wound up in the hands of the contras.

The degree to which the United States has 'assisted' the contras was recently revealed by defector Edgar Chamorro, who stated that it was not the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (NDF) which mined Nicaraguan harbours in 1984 but the CIA itself. Chamorro left the NDF in November 1984 because it was in the hands of ex-members of Somoza's notorious National Guard. Eden Pastora, leader of a contra group operating in the south of Nicaragua, ARDE, narrowly escaped assassination after he refused CIA pressures

to join forces with the NDF for the same reason. Pastora and Chamorro know what they are talking about. Seven members of the general staff of the NDF are ex-officers of Somoza's National Guard as well as eight out of nine commanders. Their methods have not changed since Somoza's time and the NDF is notorious for its murder of unarmed captives, often preceded by such forms of torture as gouging out of eyes, pulling out of fingernails, mutilation and rape. So many Nicaraguans have been killed in this way that the government has been forced to evacuate border zones and relocate the people elsewhere.

The Miskito contras (MISURA), are led by Steadman Fagoth, who is said to have been an agent of the National Security Office under Somoza. Not content with the spontaneous support of disaffected Miskitos, MISURA makes a regular practice of kidnapping Miskito Indians from their villages or refugee camps and threatening to kill them if they don't join.

The 10,000 members of the NDF, many of them foreign mercenaries, have never been able to hold a single town or city and, like the members of ARDE, are now on the run. The damage caused by the NDF has been mainly to the economy, with power stations, storage tanks, warehouses, government buildings and all kinds of vehicles destroyed. The need to evacuate the population from areas

where basic foodstuffs are grown has hit agricultural production, and the inevitable deflection of human and material resources to defence has also had its impact.

In spite of the plight of the Nicaraguan economy, hard hit not only by irregular warfare but also by the falling prices of its main exports, the recent US embargo will not have a decisive impact. Although in the short run it will force Nicaragua to cut back its health programme and other social projects and will affect agricultural and industrial production (due to the unavailability of spare parts for US built tractors and machinery), in the long run Nicaragua may well benefit by the diversification of trading partners.

The May and June tours of President Daniel Ortega and Vice-President Sergio Ramirez yielded encouraging results. A total of \$402 million was pledged in the form of loans, written-off debts and outright donations by an even mix of Western and Eastern bloc countries: \$202 million from the Eastern bloc and \$200 million from the Western countries.

Italy, for instance, along with France and Canada are giving, or writing off, \$84 million for a geothermic project designed to produce energy from Nicaragua's volcanoes and reduce its dependence on foreign oil. Renania, in West Germany, is donating a textile factory to be installed in Esteli, where a \$1.5 million grant from EEC countries will help resettle displaced peasants. East Germany is sending technicians to repair Nicaraguan buses, a third of which are at present useless. Member countries of the Latin American Economic System have promised to sell Nicaragua spare parts for US built machinery, and Mexico is renewing its oil deliveries. The EEC is buying the bananas earlier sold to the United States, and Japan snapped up the lobster and sea-food crop. Sweden has increased its aid from \$8.3 million to \$10 million and adding \$3.4 million in credit and emergency aid. All in all, Nicaragua may well benefit from the embargo by further diversifying her trade, already much less dependent than it used to be on the United States.

With the contras on the run and prospects for healing the economy looking up, the main real threat remains the possibility of invasion. With the military failure of the contras, in spite of nearly unlimited assistance and collaboration they have enjoyed, an outright invasion by US forces may seem more desirable, especially if the embargo fails to force the Nicaraguans to the negotiating table or fails to bring down the government.