

By Alan Gottlieb

OCOTAL, NICARAGUA

THE LOW-INTENSITY WAR IN THE NORTHERN mountains and central jungles of Nicaragua has escalated over the past two months, according to residents and officials of this mountainous region along the Honduran border. Contra forces, almost non-existent in this region during much of 1986, have apparently begun infiltrating through the area again.

While the contra presence causes serious difficulties, it is the side effects of the war that have, of late, brought so much pain to the northern part of Nueva Segovia province. People interviewed here this month say they feel confident that the Sandinista army can keep the contras under control. But rampant health problems and a crumbling economy are not dealt with so easily.

An epidemic: Since November of last year at least 300 people in this city of 24,000 have contracted typhoid. Six have died; scores more are still seriously ill. Health care officials and doctors have traced the problem to Ocotol's notoriously contaminated water supply.

David Rivera, director of Ocotol's Modesta Agurcia Moncada Hospital, says he believes the typhoid epidemic can be attributed to

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germ warfare by the contras. "It seems very strange to us that people in this region have been drinking the water for years, and until recently we had never seen a case of typhoid," he says. "To be sure, we've had plenty of other health problems related to the water, but never typhoid before."

Since the river from which Ocotol's water comes originates in southern Honduras, in an area known to be occupied by a large number of contra troops (see story on page 9), local officials fear Rivera may be right. And they wonder what might come next.

It is problems like this, rather than the contras' actual presence, that have people in this area worried. Despite a noticeable increase in contra activity in the region this year, people throughout the area go about their daily business, betraying little concern about the military situation.

On a jeep trip from Ocotol to Teotecacinte, a hamlet 50 miles northeast of Ocotol and half a mile from the border, travelers see farmers hoeing their fields, women washing laundry in streams and children playing in the dirt. Dozens of contra bands have moved through the region in the past few weeks, occasionally clashing with government troops. But residents say this does not concern them.

"Sure they attack us sometimes, but they never leave alive," says Adilia Maraviada, a mother of five who lives in a resettlement town outside the often-attacked town of Jalapa. "Every family here has a rifle, and when we catch a contra we kill him. We don't let them go. And there are hundreds of [Sandinista] soldiers watching at every moment."

Passing through: Although the Jalapa-Teotecacinte area has been targeted by the contras in the past, it is now too heavily fortified to be attractive, local officials say. Contra troops these days seem more interested in passing through the region en route to the jungle provinces of Central Zelaya, Boaco and Chontales, farther to the south and east.

Estimates of the number of contras inside Nicaragua range from 4,000-12,000. Most have entered since early January. Officials



One of the estimated 2,000 war orphans in Ocotol, a Nicaraguan city of 24,000 near the Honduran border.

Along contra war zone, life and death go on

and observers say the contras tend to slip into the country in small bands, which join together farther to the south. The areas of heaviest combat in recent weeks have been to the east, where the mountains meet the jungle, and up to 70 miles south of the border.

"It really doesn't matter to us how many contras are inside the country," says Orlanda Picado, a high-ranking Ocotol official. "Twelve thousand contras haven't got the balls of 120 Sandinistas. They fight with their backs turned, fleeing. They might enter, but they can't do anything militarily."

The contra leadership, however, claims its troops have been inflicting heavy losses on the Popular Sandinista Army. In a communique issued March 2, the contras said they shot down a Soviet-made attack helicopter February 27 in the province of Zelaya, deep inside the country. The Sandinistas deny this report.

According to information released by the Ministry of Defense, 805 contra soldiers have been killed in the last two months. In that same period, some 150 Sandinista soldiers have died, the ministry says. Because of the irregular nature of the war, these figures cannot be independently confirmed.

But the figures released by the ministry acknowledge a significant escalation of the war over the last two months; there have been, according to official information, more than 10 battles a day during this period—more than twice the number reported at the

end of last year. Despite the apparent escalation, army spokesmen claim that the army is in total disarray. The contras, however, have continued attacking civilian and economic targets.

War orphans: The long-range impact of the war is evident throughout the country, but nowhere is it felt more strongly than in the war zone. Picado says there are 2,000 war orphans in Ocotol and more than 8,000 in the province of Nueva Segovia. In areas of Central Zelaya, under partial control of the contras, children denied access to health

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care have been dying of measles, according to missionaries who live in the area.

In Ocotol's hospital, typhoid victims and wounded soldiers share crowded wards. Medicine is in short supply and so, at times, is food. Hospital director Rivera says the Ministry of Health's budget for this year is the same as last year's. With inflation at 700 percent, this has cut deeply into services, he says.

"We're just trying to keep from sliding too far backward," he says. "But we're lacking simple things that could save lives, things

like valves for oxygen tanks and intravenous fluid."

In the war zones of Nueva Segovia, Rivera says, 70 percent to 80 percent of the children suffer some degree of malnutrition. Agricultural production has been hurt by the contras, and distribution channels in those areas are not operating effectively. Also, he says, the contras are killing and stealing large numbers of cattle.

"You see the effects most clearly in the children," Rivera says. "Many are so malnourished that a common cold becomes potentially dangerous. And we are so short of food in the hospital we have trouble restoring them to health. We can't afford to hospitalize anyone for very long."

Facing fire: Another problem in the border zone, Rivera says, is that local peasants have grown so confident about the army's ability to defend them that they have returned in large numbers to some areas that aren't necessarily safe. "As a consequence, we are seeing more civilian wounded in this area," he says.

In Teotecacinte, one peasant exhibits such confidence. Standing in front of his house, which faces the hills of Honduras just a few hundred yards away, he speaks nonchalantly about a contra base camp soldiers say is just a mile into the hills.

"They haven't shot at us for 10 days," he says with a shrug. "When they shoot, they fire 50mm anti-tank shells at us, but they hardly ever hit anyone."

Asked if the presence of the contras makes him nervous, he shrugs again and says, "When my time comes to die, I'll die." And walks toward his corn field, a few hundred feet from the border.

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WHO KILLED OLOF PALME



By Diana Johnstone

STOCKHOLM

AFTER NEARLY HALF A CENTURY OF SOCIAL Democratic government, Sweden's security police remain firmly in the grip of right-wingers whose notorious hostility to the late Prime Minister Olof Palme makes them prime suspects in his unsolved murder. This fact stands out as possibly the most significant amid the debris of the botched year-long investigation of the Feb. 28, 1986, assassination of Palme, who, among Western European leaders, was the most actively committed to world peace.

The Swedish security police, known as SäPo, are responsible for investigating foreign subversion and keeping tabs on domestic security risks. By all accounts, people in SäPo "hated Palme's guts."

SäPo was supposed to protect the prime minister. But according to knowledgeable sources in Stockholm, SäPo had a file on Palme that was by no means for his protection. Many SäPo officers regarded the prime minister as a security risk who was selling out Sweden to the Soviet bloc.

In his neat apartment in Stockholm, retired SäPo officer Melker Bentler told *In These Times* that right-wing indoctrination in Swedish security police goes back to pro-German feelings in the '30s. At the end of World War II, the pro-German attitude changed to pro-Americanism. The constant factor was viewing Communism as the enemy.

SäPo depends on the CIA for information about Latin America and considers all political refugees potential "terrorists," according to Bentler, who retired in 1980 at age 65 after 27 years with SäPo. "What the CIA says is the word of God. They depend on it 200 percent," he said.

The security police also depend heavily on the West German BND and the Israeli Mossad. During the colonels' dictatorship in Greece, SäPo passed along information on Greek political exiles to the Greek junta's police via the secret services of NATO allies, Bentler recalled.

And although the Swedish Social Democratic government helped the Mozambique liberation movement FRELIMO that led the country to independence from Portuguese colonialism, SäPo regarded FRELIMO as terrorists, he added.

Bentler also said that it was hard to believe that 45 percent of Swedes are Social Democrats, since he had never met any in SäPo. He became isolated as a maverick in the service after his 1978 complaints about illegal wire-tapping became public.

Several years ago, on the occasion of another assassination, Bentler recalled hearing colleagues say they wished someone would do the same to that devil Palme. When Palme was assassinated, Bentler said, his first thought was that it must be some extreme conservative group with help from SäPo.

Hatred of Palme was shared by several

military officers, especially naval officers. Palme was skeptical of the very existence of the "Russian submarine threat," dear to Swedish naval officers in their battle to wrest appropriations from parliament.

Suspicion of Palme within SäPo and the armed forces was fed in the Reagan years from such international networks as the World Anti-Communist League and the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's CAUSA, with their military and intelligence agency connections and support from the White House.

Unofficial Reagan administration spokesmen such as strategist Edward Luttwak publicly suggested that Palme was "manipulated by the Russians." In a November 1984 interview with the Danish business magazine *Management*, Luttwak predicted Sweden would let Soviet forces cross Swedish territory to invade Denmark and said if he were a Dane he would consider Olof Palme more dangerous than the Russians.

When Palme was murdered, the investigation was taken over by Stockholm Police Chief Hans Holmer. This was not usual procedure, but then neither was the assassination of a Swedish prime minister. Police often seem to have been rattled by the enormity of it all.

Among the various police agencies working on the Palme murder, special contribution was the "Kurdish track." This is the wild goose chase that mobilized police throughout the crucial first year of the investigation.

Now a year has passed, snows have melted and fallen again, tracks are covered and memories are blurred. Statistically, only a 10 percent chance remains of solving the case. And this depends mainly on voluntary testimony by someone inside the conspiracy—if there was a conspiracy.

On the wrong track: Holmer has been forced to abandon both the investigation and the special "Palme room" in Stockholm police headquarters where he had coordinated investigations by federal, state and local police forces. His frequent appearances at press conferences, optimistically claiming to be "on the track" of the killers, made him a popular figure here—"Sweden's man of the year," according to Swedish TV.

Holmer projected the image of the tough cop opposing stodgy bureaucrats. In fact, observers note that Holmer was an administrator with no experience as a crime investigator. He was a Social Democrat, and for a while in the '70s had been put in charge of SäPo in one of the Social Democrats' vain attempts to get political control of the security police. By all accounts he was a figurehead.

The police bungled the investigation from the start. Of the two bullets fired by the assassin, one was found six hours later, the other 36 hours later—both by passers-by, not the police.

One suspect, an eccentric 33-year-old rightist who had been associated with Lyndon LaRouche's anti-Palme campaign in Sweden, was arrested last March 17 after wit-

