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REAGAN ADMINISTRATION'S PLAN TO BRING DOWN THE NICARAGUAN REGIME

- Leak by Administration Dissident Describes Working of Pegasus*
- Honduras Scheduled to be the Spear-carrier; U.S. to Give Coup de Grace*
- Role Envisaged for Contras, Pastora, CONDECA, Costa Rica*
- Pegasus to Justify Widening U.S. Role in El Salvador as Washington-backed Regime Sags*
- Public Opinion and U.S. Catholic Church seen by Administration as Key Factors in Decision to Implement Pegasus*

The Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) has learned from a Reagan administration source that a military option paper has been urgently prepared by the Pentagon and the Department of State that envisages U.S. military action against Nicaragua within the period of three to four months. The disclosure came from the same source that informed COHA six days before the invasion of Grenada that an attack against the Caribbean island would take place within a week's time.

The option paper, which is now circulating within the Pentagon and the State Department, is based on an earlier contingency plan which has been hurriedly upgraded since the Grenada invasion. The rumored code-name for this paper is "Pegasus," the winged horse of Greek mythology. If that is the case, would be an appropriate designation, because the plan primarily calls for the use of U.S. air power as well as naval power to bomb Nicaraguan military targets broadly defined--which, in fact, would include major economic targets as well.

PEGASUS

Pegasus' scenario primarily involves the willingness of Nicaragua's neighbor, Honduras, to permit itself to be totally integrated into Washington's efforts to rid itself of the Sandinista regime. This is viewed as no obstacle, because in recent months the Honduran government has come under the operational control of military strongman Gen. Gustavo Alvarez, and the U.S. essentially has purchased the Honduran dictatorship's allegiance with promises of massive amounts of economic and military assistance.

Pegasus involves the commitment of U.S. air and naval power against the

Nicaraguans, and does not anticipate the use of U.S. ground forces. The commitment of U.S. land forces to what might be a protracted military campaign within Nicaragua is viewed as domestically too controversial, particularly in an election year, since it might invite congressional limitations under the War Powers Act. The bulk of the land phase of the military operation against Nicaragua will be the responsibility of others.

#### HONDURAS TO IGNITE THE PLAN

Key roles are anticipated for the Honduran army and air force, the upwards of 15,000 CIA-supported Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) contras in Honduras, the 3,000-4,000 Costa Rica-based Nicaraguan exile forces of ARDE, commanded by Eden Pastora and ARDE's political leader, Alfonso Robelo, and a joint military command of the Central American Defense Council (CONDECA) nations.

The implementation of Pegasus pivots around the role of Honduras, and anticipates a series of provocative actions against Nicaragua, coming from its neighbor, which will invite a Sandinista military riposte. A comparable effort was made in September, when the FDN launched massive raids into Nicaragua under the cover of Honduran military barrages, but Managua refused to retaliate, thus negating the pretext for U.S. involvement at that time. If the Nicaraguans now decide to retaliate, a series of steps will fall into place. The CONDECA nations, under a mutual security consultative pact signed in 1963, will provide the legitimacy for a U.S. intervention. In a role akin to that played by the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) against Grenada, the CONDECA nations will say that Nicaragua represents a military threat to the rest of the nations of Central America, as well as encourages subversive actions against its neighbors, and that U.S. assistance is essential to countering this threat. Even though Washington has provided no proof of Nicaraguan aid to the Salvadoran guerrillas, and Nicaragua has met limited success in countering Honduran probes into its territory, the allegation of Nicaragua's aggressive actions against Honduras will bring Pegasus into play.

Already, Honduran newspapers are saying that Nicaragua is making daily incursions into Honduras, promoting an atmosphere of imminent danger in the country. The Honduran charges seem to have little substance, but there is an impressive array of evidence that Honduran military forces are making systematic incursions into Nicaraguan airspace and territorial waters. In recent days, there have been repeated overflights of Nicaraguan air space by at least seven aircraft and three-to-five helicopters of the type known to be in the inventory of the Honduran air force. Several days ago, two Honduran coast guard vessels seized a Nicaraguan fishing boat in the latter country's territorial waters.

#### HONDURAS: ARMED TO KILL

Honduras has been a significant beneficiary of U.S. military aid in the recent past and stands to receive significantly augmented funds in the near future. In addition to bilateral aid programs, General Alvarez's military forces currently are direct beneficiaries of military transfers, including air strips and training facilities, by-products of the ongoing military exercises known as Big Pine II. Only recently, General Paul Gorman, head of the U.S. Southern Command, presided over the transfer of 12 105mm Howitzers to Honduran forces, during a visit to that country. The possession of these field pieces will augment the Honduran capacity to shell Nicaraguan border positions. In the past, Honduran border forces were limited to short-range mortar launches in aiding sorties into Nicaragua by Honduras-based contras.

#### THE PLOT

Pegasus anticipates that at some boiling point next January, the Nicaraguans will respond to unbearable military provocations by the Hondurans. Following a policy of denying that, in fact, such provocations had not taken place, the Reagan administration will then proclaim--using the Grenada formula--that its Central American ally is under attack, and that CONDECA has authorized U.S. military cooperation in conjunction with field operations by Washington's other regional allies.

A number of recent events have taken place that lend credence to the belief that the introductory phases of Pegasus are already being implemented. On Sunday, newly-appointed National Security adviser Robert C. McFarlane said on CBS' "Face the Nation" that some form of multinational military action might have to be resorted to by Nicaragua's Central American neighbors, if the Sandinista regime does not halt its exporting of subversion. Deputy Defense Secretary Fred Ikle, upon returning from his Central American trip,

aid that the joint maneuvers in Honduras may be extended into next year. If, as is likely, the maneuvers are extended into next year, the U.S. will have in place upwards of 5,000 ground troops in Honduras, if they are needed as a last resort for a ground operation against Nicaragua. The philosophical basis for the initiation of Pegasus was laid out by Ikle, in a highly controversial speech before the Baltimore Foreign Relations Council last September. In the hard-line speech, which apparently was not cleared by the White House, and was given over the objections of the State Department, Ikle stated that the U.S. should not tolerate the Marxist government in Nicaragua, or a continuing military threat being posed by the Salvadoran guerrillas. He also stressed that Congress must come forward with adequate funding levels to support U.S. strategy in Central America. His sentiments were buttressed in an article in the Fall 1983 Foreign Policy magazine by Nestor Sanchez, deputy assistant secretary of defense for inter-American affairs. Both Ikle and Sanchez have just concluded trips to Central America, where they held high-level meetings with local government and military leaders.

THE COSTA RICAN CARD

Costa Rica also is scheduled to play an important role in the implementation of Pegasus. In spite of fitful efforts to maintain an independent foreign policy, the economically-depressed government of President Luis Alberto Monge has been a diplomatic asset for Washington's regional policy-makers, and has accommodated itself to U.S. goals for the region. It is from Costa Rican field camps that former Sandinista hero Eden Pastora has launched his raids against Nicaraguan positions across the border. Although insisting upon his independence of action, and refusing to cooperate with the former Somoza National Guard leadership of the FDN, Pastora is believed today to be receiving CIA funds, and only recently has seemingly justified these contributions by saying that ARDE "will accept help from any source as long as it is unconditional." At the time Pastora made his statement in Panama, prior to his current visit to the U.S., Washington announced that about 1,000 combat engineers would be transported to Costa Rica to engage in "civic action" programs in that country.

Another factor in the regional buildup that is now taking place is the widely held belief that the CIA currently is in the process of supplying the contras with a number of Korean War-era jets, that, together with the Honduran air force, one of the largest in Central America, will have the role of attacking Nicaraguan economic and military targets once the all-out attack against the Sandinistas begins. In the last 24 hours, an FDN leader claimed that "interesting" developments against Managua will begin in January, a possible allusion to the beginning phases of Pegasus.

POSSIBLE LIMITATIONS ON NICARAGUAN ACTION

According to a reliable administration source, one of the key factors that alternatively may impede or accelerate the implementation of military actions against Nicaragua will be the state of U.S. public opinion and congressional attitudes during the early weeks of 1984. The administration has been buoyed by the public relations success of the Grenada invasion, and has been encouraged by the retreat of even liberal congressmen from their contention that U.S. civilians were not in imminent danger on the island. Of particular importance to the forward motion of Pegasus was the weak response of Rep. Michael Barnes, who chairs the House Western Hemisphere Affairs subcommittee. Barnes, who has a record of talking tough to the administration on Central American issues in the early of disputes, but backing down when the crunch is at hand, has made it difficult for other democrats to challenge a number of highly controversial contentions that the administration has been making to justify its intervention in Grenada. The White House also views the current stand of the U.S. Catholic Church in opposing the Reagan administration's funding of the contras as one that must be neutralized before Pegasus can move ahead. Nicaraguan specialists are not unmindful that the current high-pitched confrontation that the Nicaraguan Church is staging against the Sandinista regime can only serve to embarrass the U.S. Catholic leadership, which has strongly condemned many aspects of U.S. policy towards Managua as being too militarized, and not sufficiently interested in investigating the possibility of negotiated settlements to Central America's conflicts.

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