

World & Nation

Mediator's ouster worries U.S., Nicaraguan churchmen

By Laurie Hansen

Washington (NC) — A decision by Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega to end Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo's role as mediator with the U.S.-backed rebels has sparked criticism from officials of both the U.S. and Nicaraguan Church.

"We believe the pursuit of justice and peace requires the active support and involvement of the Church in Nicaragua and (of) its chief shepherd," said Archbishop John L. May of St. Louis, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, in a March 4 message telexed to the Managua cardinal.

Monsignor Bismarck Carballo, director of communications for the Archdiocese of Managua, called ending Cardinal Obando Bravo's participation in the talks "premature" and an attempt to discourage the House of Representatives from sending humanitarian aid to the Nicaraguan rebels.

Monsignor Carballo made the comments in a telephone interview March 3, the same day the House voted 216-208 to defeat efforts to provide more humanitarian aid to the rebels, known as counter-revolutionaries or contras.

The House plan to provide the contras with \$30.8 million in non-lethal aid had been pushed by Democrats as a way to ease pressure for sending the contras more military assistance.

In a surprise move March 2, Ortega pro-

posed that direct, top-level cease-fire negotiations with the contras take place in Nicaragua without a mediator.

The Nicaraguan president informed Cardinal Obando Bravo that his role had ended, and named his brother, Defense Minister Gen. Humberto Ortega, to head the government delegation for new cease-fire talks. Ortega said the talks were expected to take place March 9-11 in southwestern Nicaragua.

Rebel leaders reportedly have agreed to the talks but insisted that Cardinal Obando Bravo participate as "moderator and observer."

Meanwhile, tensions were reported to be running high only 20 miles outside of Managua, in the Nicaraguan city of Masaya, where there has been strong popular sentiment against the military draft. In one of the most violent reactions to anti-government protests, gangs of pro-government party members swung clubs and hurled rocks March 6 to break up a rally of women protesting the draft.

In his message to the Nicaraguan cardinal, Archbishop May wrote that he was "distressed and concerned by recent actions of the Nicaraguan government which limit the crucial contribution you are making to the peace process."

He said the U.S. bishops "hope and pray" that both sides in the conflict will "use every available opportunity to heed the call of the Church to pursue good-faith negotiation, honest and sincere dialogue, an effective end to the violence and true respect for the dignity" of all Nicaraguans.



Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo posed with contra leaders at the beginning of peace talks. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega since has removed the cardinal as mediator.

Before Ortega's announcement that the cardinal's services were "no longer needed," Nicaraguans were hopeful that the negotiations would bring about peace, Monsignor Carballo said in the interview.

"Now, however, I don't know what to say... The Nicaraguan people have been saying the president's decision was a political tactic," he said. "They are afraid this move will bring an end to Esquipulas II," the peace plan signed by the five Central American presidents at Esquipulas, Guatemala.

Monsignor Carballo denied Ortega's accusations — made in a letter to the cardinal — that Cardinal Obando Bravo had favored the

contras during February negotiations in Guatemala. "The cardinal was not partial," he said.

Before the House vote on non-lethal contra aid, Monsignor Daniel F. Hoye, general secretary of the U.S. Catholic Conference, said in a March 1 letter to House Democratic and Republican leaders that a humanitarian aid package "could become a useful step in the process."

He said that package would provide "food, clothing and medicine to the contras and assistance to children who are victims of the violence, without providing further military aid to the contras."

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