

Nicaragua's Soviet-Era Missiles Locked in Limbo

The Washington Post
September 3, 2007

MANAGUA, Nicaragua -- At a secret location somewhere in [Nicaragua](#), shoulder-fired missiles capable of taking down a jetliner lie behind heavy fencing and locked double doors.

The missiles are dangerous artifacts of another era, a time before the end of the Cold War, when the [Soviet Union](#) fed arms to Marxist [Sandinistas](#) then in power, and the United States surreptitiously countered by organizing and arming an anti-Sandinista force known as the contras. The bloody conflict between the Sandinistas and contras during the 1980s is long gone, but the Soviet weapons remain, locked in a kind of limbo between Nicaragua and the United States, which fears the missiles could fall into the hands of terrorists.

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, a former Sandinista rebel, has proposed exchanging the missiles for medical supplies, an offer that a [U.S. State Department](#) official, speaking on condition of anonymity, called "unprecedented." Paul A. Trivelli, the U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua, immediately pronounced the offer "very good."

But the deal hasn't happened, and since Trivelli's initial remark, U.S. officials have been reluctant to speak publicly on the matter. The reasons, some Nicaraguan and American observers say, are that the proposal has not been put on paper and that suspicions remain in both countries that Ortega -- who frequently taunts the United States -- might be luring the Bush administration into an embarrassing diplomatic trap by making a complex offer that might never come to fruition.

"Ortega's going to go around six months to a year from now and be able to say, 'We made this generous offer and the U.S. ambassador came out the next day and said 'great idea,' and what have we gotten for it?' " said Eduardo Gamarra, director of the Latin American and Caribbean Center at [Florida International University](#). "Yes, he's playing them."

Manuel Coronel Kautz, Nicaragua's vice minister of foreign relations, said in an interview that "[Daniel Ortega](#) has never made a proposal that wasn't serious."

American officials have been pressing Nicaragua for several years to get rid of its stockpile of more than 1,000 shoulder-fired, anti-aircraft missiles -- one of the largest caches in the Western Hemisphere outside the United States. Ortega is offering to destroy 651 of his nation's missiles, while keeping 400 that his military advisers say are necessary to maintain a balance of power with other Central American nations. Still, the destruction of more than 600 missiles would be a major coup for U.S. diplomats, and more than 22 times the number of missiles the United States helped destroy in [Bolivia](#) in 2005.

The diplomatic push to destroy Nicaraguan missiles is part of a worldwide effort that has led to the destruction of 17,000 shoulder-fired missiles in the past five years, according to State Department figures. More than 1 million of the weapons have been manufactured in countries around the world, including the United States, and while many of those have been destroyed, no one knows how many are still in circulation.

The campaign to eradicate missiles gained momentum after a 2002 attack in which two SA-7 missiles nearly struck an Israeli airliner in [Mombasa, Kenya](#), and again after a 2003 strike on a cargo plane in [Iraq](#) that caused damage but no fatalities.

The following year the United States, concerned that the Nicaraguan missiles were vulnerable to theft, began paying to build a facility to store them. The missiles that American officials want to destroy are now kept in state-of-the-art bunkers that cost the United States \$130,000 for construction and staff training, according to a State Department source. The United States also has funded weapons storage facilities in [Cambodia](#) and [Bosnia](#), the source said.

Ortega offered to exchange missiles for medical supplies on July 31, saying "this won't be a gift, but simply a barter with them." Ambassador Trivelli, who declined multiple requests through a spokeswoman to be interviewed, told Nicaragua's La Prensa newspaper that he would pass the offer along to U.S. authorities "with great pleasure."

The offer has puzzled some in Nicaragua, particularly because Ortega has spent the ensuing weeks bashing the United States and trading broadsides with Trivelli in the Nicaraguan press. On Aug. 13, Ortega called the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks "insignificant" compared with the U.S. nuclear attacks on [Hiroshima](#) and [Nagasaki](#) during World War II. Trivelli said Ortega's remark was "disappointing."

Ortega lost the Nicaraguan presidency in 1990 after 11 years in office, then staged a comeback in last year's presidential election, winning the top job in the Western Hemisphere's second-poorest nation. Some U.S. officials believe that Ortega's antagonistic rhetoric is an attempt to appeal to his left-leaning base and that his actions behind the scenes are much less hostile.

"This offer is an encouraging sign," Avil Ram?rez Valdivia, a former Nicaraguan defense minister who now heads an American chamber of commerce in [Managua](#), said in an interview. "Ortega needs a justification for turning over the missiles, and the medicine deal could be it."

A former Nicaraguan official who has been involved in past missile negotiations said the only way he could see the deal working would be if the Bush administration slipped additional money into an aid program, such as the U.S. government's Millennium Challenge Corp., without openly admitting a quid pro quo.

Political posturing aside, the Nicaraguan leader might have the biggest incentive to make the missile deal happen, said Roger F. Noriega, the former top Western Hemisphere official at the State Department.

"If they get into the wrong hands," Noriega said, "he's going to be the one held accountable."