

Sandinistas Sink Rumsfeld-Bolaños Deal to Destroy Soviet-era SAM-7 Missiles

Internal political divisions have derailed the commitment made by President Enrique Bolaños to destroy Nicaragua's entire stock of portable antiaircraft missiles. Bolaños made the announcement on November 12 during US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's stopover in the country on the way to a hemispheric security conference in Ecuador. The US had pushed for the destruction of the shoulder-fired missiles, arguing that their portability makes them especially attractive to terrorist groups.

Bolaños's aggressive prosecution of corruption cases, which has included jailing former Liberal president Arnaldo Alemán -- under whom he served as vice president -- has earned him many enemies among Nicaragua's political leaders. Ironically, he has faced corruption charges of his own involving illegal campaign financing in the 2001 elections. Most recently, Bolaños's APRE party performed dismally in municipal elections on November 7, with the Sandinistas emerging as the main victors across the country, including Managua.

Bolaños's foes in the legislature were quick to sabotage his pledge to the Americans. On November 16, the National Assembly passed a motion prohibiting the president from unilaterally authorizing the missiles' destruction. According to José Figueroa, a Sandinista deputy and vice president of the Defense and Governance Commission, 56 of the Assembly's 90 members will have to approve any attempt to destroy the missiles. "We can't leave to the criteria of a single official, no matter who it may be, an issue as sensitive to our country as our national defense," he added.

Bolaños's supporters in the Assembly were quick to condemn the motion as a Liberal-Sandinista plot to weaken the president's authority.

Nicaragua destroyed 666 SAM-7 missiles this year, of an arsenal of 2,166 acquired from the Soviet Union and Cuba in the 1980s. Until these most recent developments, the remaining missiles were scheduled to be destroyed in installments, leaving about 400 for national defense purposes.