

Reagan expels Nicaraguan diplomats

MANAGUA, Nicaragua (AP) — An opposition leader says the Sandinista government's crackdown on domestic critics is meant to improve its negotiating position in future peace talks with Contra rebels.

Adan Fletes, a director of the Social Christian Party, also said Tuesday that the leftist government's expulsion of eight U.S. diplomats, including Ambassador Richard Melton, reflected in "extreme radicalization" in policy after President Daniel Ortega's June 27-30 visit to Cuba.

The government on Monday accused the Americans of inciting unrest and gave them 72 hours to leave the country. Mr. Melton left Nicaragua Tuesday. The U.S. Embassy said the seven others will leave Thursday.

In Washington, President Reagan retaliated by ordering Nicaragua's ambassador and seven other Sandinista diplomats out of the United States.

Also Monday, the government closed the Roman Catholic Church's radio station, Radio Catolica, and shut down the only opposition newspaper, La Prensa, for 15 days.

The actions mark a sharp setback in democratic reforms made in recent months to comply with a regional peace plan that aims, in part, to end Nicaragua's nearly 7-year-old civil war.

Mr. Fletes told The Associated Press the Sandinistas are seeking to use the crackdown on dissent as a bargaining chip in future peace talks with the U.S.-supported Contras, who suffered a major blow in February when Congress refused Mr. Reagan's request to continue supplying them with military aid.

Mr. Fletes said the government could offer an easing of press restrictions and more political freedom in exchange for rebel concessions.

He did not say what advantages the government could seek.

The Sandinistas said part of an alleged U.S. plan to destabilize their government was put into effect Sunday

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