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Is a softer side of Ortega emerging?

Tuesday, March 11, 2008

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MIAMI — It has been just over a year since Daniel Ortega — the one-time guerrilla leader considered by Washington to be a menace in Central America — resumed the presidency of an impoverished Nicaragua, a post he coveted for more than 15 years before being re-elected.

Though Mr. Ortega remains an outspoken critic of the United States, he appears to have tempered some of his hard-line leftist ways by honoring a recently brokered free-trade agreement between Central American nations and the United States.

He remains on good terms with the International Monetary Fund.

The Nicaraguan president has also been onboard in promoting poverty reduction, with the help of U.S. aid, surprising many by his apparent willingness to cooperate with Washington.

"Ortega's big goal is to alleviate poverty. Our goal is to alleviate poverty in Nicaragua as well," said a U.S. State Department official, calling the shared goals a welcome "coincidence."

The United States pledged \$175 million to Nicaragua during the administration of Mr. Ortega's predecessor, Enrique Bolanos.

The money, set to be delivered over a five-year period, is designated for helping raise incomes for Nicaragua's small businesses and farmers, improving access to international markets for local goods and improving the country's infrastructure, among other projects.

So far during his first year in office, Mr. Ortega made no efforts to tamper with the funding provided by the U.S.-funded Millennium Challenge Corp.

"Ortega has been incredibly practical in this front," said the State Department official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "This is his goose laying the golden egg, and he doesn't want to mess with it."

The Nicaraguan president has also been surprisingly agreeable to Washington's efforts to combat drug trafficking in his country, telling a visiting group of U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and State Department officials last month of his willingness to cooperate.

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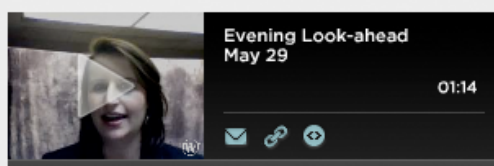
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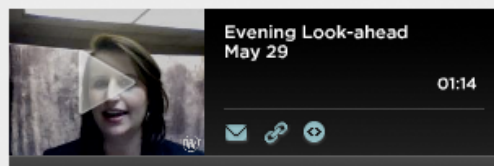
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