

US reviews aid to Nicaragua after election concerns

Reuters

November 24, 2008

WASHINGTON— The U.S. government is reviewing a \$175 million program of aid to Nicaragua because of concerns about recent elections there, a spokeswoman said on Monday after a lawmaker called for the aid to be suspended.

Rep. Howard Berman, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said irregularities surrounding Nov. 9 municipal elections in Nicaragua are part of "a consistent pattern of behavior by the government of (President) Daniel Ortega that calls into question Nicaragua's respect for the rule of law and good governance."

Berman, a California Democrat, wrote to the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which manages grants to developing countries, urging a suspension of its five-year program aimed at increasing the incomes of rural farmers and entrepreneurs in Nicaragua. The program was begun in 2005.

"MCC shares the concerns expressed by Chairman Berman about the events surrounding the municipal elections in Nicaragua," an MCC spokeswoman said on Monday evening when asked about Berman's letter.

"We are currently considering the appropriate action to take with respect to MCC's engagement with Nicaragua," she said.

Members of Ortega's leftist Sandinista party won 105 of 146 races in the nationwide municipal elections. Critics of Ortega charge the elections were rigged and have sought to have the results canceled. But the government says the voting was fair.

Nicaragua's Sandinistas were voted out of office in 1990 but Ortega returned to power in a 2006 election. Since then, the ex-rebel has spoken out against U.S. "tyranny" in Latin America and irked Washington by allying himself with anti-American Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.