

Nicaragua — the



A Nicaraguan lawyer with a Sandinista soldier: "Our message to the world — peace."

Interview

by Andrew Spence

Since the Nicaraguan revolution in 1979, which freed the people from the American sponsored oppression or the Somoza regime the Sandinista government has made real gains in providing the Nicaraguan people with a free, equitable country in which to live—all in the face of war and intense American pressure to deprive Nicaraguans of these basic human rights.

The Gateway recently spoke with Oscar Ammar, who is a political science graduate of the U of A, a former student councillor, and who had been prominent in campus politics and Cheryl Davies, a graduate in psychology from the U of A. The two have just returned to Edmonton from Nicaragua, where they gained an insight into the many problems confronting the Sandinistas.

Their statements expose the shocking realities of the contra attacks; the repugnant manifestations of the Reagan administration's policy towards Nicaragua. In addition, their statements dispel some of the myths and distorted facts which we, in North America, have come to believe as being indicative of what Ronald Reagan has called "a cruel and brutal regime."

Gateway: The image that most of us in North America have of Nicaragua is fashioned by the North American media. From what you saw of Nicaragua, how is their revolution going, and in what ways has Nicaragua received international support?

Ammar: What is really important for Nicaragua is that their story be told. What they would like to do is encourage people from all over the world to support their revolution. Of course they like financial help, as it is one of the essential elements to keep the revolution going.

For example, a group of Swedes will arrive and take on a project to build a school. This is the kind of solidarity they appreciate.

The money that Nicaragua receives goes into projects they feel are most necessary. Transportation is a real problem. The government bought 60 buses last year. That might not be a big deal in Canada, but it is in Nicaragua. The revolution is going ahead, and international aid has helped.

Gateway: From where does Nicaragua receive its foreign aid?

Davies: Nicaragua receives aid from many sources. For example, Sweden contributed a large sum of money to the electoral process in Nicaragua and recently, Cuba cancelled a \$64 million dollar loan to Nicaragua. Contrary to popular belief, most trade and aid is with non-socialist countries, specifically those of Western Europe.

Gateway: Since the revolution, have there been any major economic gains?

Ammar: Yes, although there is a lack of skills in Nicaragua, a lack of materials and still a lack of international aid. Managua is very, very poor.

Gateway: To what degree is illiteracy still a problem, and how successful have attempts to give people their basic skills needed for economic growth been?

Davies: In 1980, a national literacy campaign was undertaken—this project reduced the illiteracy rate from 50 per cent to 12 per cent. Since then, the Nicaraguan government has formed new programs, expanded the educational system and developed new methods.

However, the lack of material resources and U.S.-contra aggression have been forcing the education system to limit their resources.

Ammar: These are not people that can read Marx and Lenin and fully understand it, but what the Nicaraguans have tried to do is teach their own people basic skills so they can function so they could begin to get involved in the economy—so they could understand what the elections are about—that they could read the material of the various political parties.

Gateway: Which political parties took part in the elections?

Ammar: There are several political parties who had candidates. The main party is the Frente Sandinista (FSLN).

There is the communist party, the Popular Action Movement-Marxist-Leninist (MAP-ML) and the Socialist party. On the right you have the Independent Liberal Party (PLI), the Social Christian Party (PPSC) and the Conservative Party.

The Social Christian Party appealed to those that thought the Sandinistas were going to oppress their religious beliefs and to those opposed to the patriotic military service.

The Conservative Party would try to appeal to those that were bothered by shortages. They'd say we're going to get Crest, we're going to get Colgate—we're not going to have shortages any more. But many realized that to get these products would mean a shortage of many more basic products.

For instance, instead of buying one colour TV the government will buy ten black and white TVs. This would not go well with the upper classes of Nicaragua.

Gateway: There was much controversy in the North American press over the legitimacy of the Nicaraguan elections. Was there any cynicism within Nicaragua over the fact that Alturo Cruz and Devi Pastora were not participating in the elections?

Davies: Most Nicaraguans did not respond to the demands and criticism of Arturo Cruz of the democratic coordinating committee and evidence for this can be found in the massive voter registration for the elections. Also, the Democratic Coordinating Committee had small turnouts for their demonstrations.

Gateway: Surely the elections were democratic even if those people didn't participate. They had their chance to file their nominations?

Davies: Yes, and with full political rights and freedom of the press.

Gateway: Were the nominations reopened to demonstrate to the west that the elections were being conducted as fairly as possible, in an attempt to give the elections legitimacy, and to gain western recognition?

Davies: The Sandinista government created optimum conditions for participation in the elections because of its commitments to the Nicaraguan people, not because of international opinion.

Ammar: There is a real difference between what they call free elections in El Salvador and real free elections in Nicaragua. The various parties in Nicaragua were free to operate, to distribute their literature. They had exactly the same time on national television that the Frente Sandinista had—by law. 80 per cent voted, 67 per cent of the popular vote went to the Sandinistas. A clear show of support for the Sandinistas came when the Frente called for a demonstration in the Revolution Plaza and three-quarters of Managua's population showed up.

Nicaraguans believe the Sandinistas are very honest people and are trying to move ahead—whereas in El Salvador, those were demonstration elections. How can you have elections when half the population is in liberated zones? And if they do come into town they're going to be massacred.

Gateway: Oscar, you spoke earlier of an upper class in Nicaragua, does an elite still exist?

Ammar: Yes. There are still people that had a great deal during Somoza, and somehow still have a great deal; who have had no confiscations, who live in very nice homes. But there are restrictions today in Nicaragua for these people. There should be. For example, if these landowners decide they don't want to work a piece of land, then it will be confiscated because they (the Nicaraguans) want that land to be worked, and they want to give work to the peasants.

Another stipulation the government has put on them is that they pay minimum

wages—something that some businessmen didn't like—and they left. Alfonso Robelo, who's with the contras today, decided to leave because of this.

95 per cent of the Nicaraguan people do like the fact that they limit the oligarchy.

Gateway: You mentioned the contras, how effective have they been in disrupting the progress of the revolution?

Davies: The counter-revolutionary war has forced the country to direct resources from greatly needed development projects to defence. The contras have destroyed factories, co-operatives, daycares and other projects. So, the U.S.-backed aggression has disrupted the government's attempts to improve both the economy and the country. However, the contra-war has only strengthened the peoples' determination to defend, support and work for their revolution.

Ammar: There are shortages. The contras are prepared, and taught, to actually go out and seek economic objectives. For example, you'll hear that a certain co-op was burnt last night, six children were killed in the process. I'd like to give an example of the cruelty of the contras.

A cooperative was hit. They were mostly women, six children were outside in baskets—no older than 12 months—and they shot them. This is the kind of effectiveness they have.

Gateway: Have the contras slowed down attempts by the Nicaraguan government at economic growth?

Ammar: I don't think they are going to put a halt to growth—the revolution can only advance. Yes, the contra attacks are effective—there are shortages.

If you're in the northern part of Nicaragua you are risking your life. You never know where they are going to hit next. They have come within 50 miles of Managua and actually carried out terrorist attacks there.

Gateway: What factions of the Nicaraguan people make up the contras?

Ammar: There are various groups. The main group is in Honduras, the FDN (Nicaraguan Democratic Forces), who are brutal Somocista counter-revolutionaries. What they do to strengthen their forces is to kidnap peasants and take them into their forces. These people have no choice. It's a war, they don't want to die. They do what they have to do (to avoid death). That's why the Nicaraguan government gives amnesty, gives freedom to a peasant they catch involved in a contra attack, because they realize it isn't his fault. In many cases they don't believe what they were doing was for freedom—they were forced to do it.

The biggest problem facing Nicaragua is that the contras are receiving more sophisticated weapons than ever, they're receiving more financial aid, and they're also receiving more attention in the press.

Gateway: Considering that there are those amongst the contras who are not there willingly, has this decreased their potential for destruction?

Davies: Certainly, those recruits do not make for particularly good fighters. In fact, the Sandinistas always defeat the contras in battle. However, with heavy U.S.-financing and support, the contras can still cause great destruction economically even if they cannot do so militarily.

Gateway: How do the Nicaraguan people perceive the attitude of the Reagan administration towards their country?

Davies: The Nicaraguans were oppressed through U.S. imperialism for decades and are now being attacked economically, politically and physically by the Reagan administration.

Gateway: Do they perceive a difference between the American people and the American government?

Davies: I did not see any evidence of hostility towards the North American people. They appreciate the many North Americans who are giving their services and resources to the Nicaraguan people. Yes, they perceive a difference.

Ammar: That's exactly how the Nicaraguans feel—that there is a difference. Yes, they view Reagan as a senile old man, as I do. But they have every reason to do so. Every peace proposal Nicaragua has made every attempt to achieve a political solution in Central America has been refused. Reagan is so God damn arrogant that he would not meet with Ortega, the president, after Ortega had pub-