

Nicaragua resisting U.S. interference



by Sarah Cox
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On the northern side of Nicaragua's mountainous border, thousands of U.S. troops are fighting an imaginary war on the Honduran territory. Two aircraft carriers hover off each Central American coast, soon to be joined by an additional naval battle group. And in the largest display of CIA overt aid in history, American trained rebels are sabotaging vital Nicaraguan oil lines and ports.

Father Ernesto Cardenal, Nicaragua's culture minister, says Nicaragua will be invaded before the next U.S. election.

"In January, Reagan starts his electoral campaign and he wants to show the people of the United States that he has already solved the 'crisis' in Central America," Cardenal said at a recent public forum in Vancouver.

"We don't know how much this is going to cost us in blood and suffering, this craziness of Reagan trying to overthrow the government so he can win another election."

Four years have passed since U.S. backed dictator Anastasio Somoza was overthrown by the Sandinistas, but Nicaraguans still have vivid memories of half a century of military rule and a history of U.S. intervention. Warnings of an impending U.S. invasion have been broadcast on Nicaraguan radio stations since American troops landed in Grenada, and Cuban teachers, technicians and military advisors have been asked to leave the country.

Cardenal says the Reagan administration prefers to use force rather than dialogue to solve its differences with Nicaragua.

"The reason why Reagan wants to destroy the revolution is because he sees it is going to be a bad example for the rest of Central America."

After the 1979 Revolution, the Sandinistas cut rents in half. The government made health care and schooling free, and subsidized basic foods. A massive literacy campaign taught thousands of people to read and write, and unemployment was greatly reduced through co-operatives and land reform programs. Laws protecting women from economic and social discrimination were quickly passed and women assumed a more equal role in Nicaraguan society.

Author Margaret Randall, a Nicaraguan resident, says the country is building a "unique revolutionary project" based on a mixed economy and a certain amount of redistribution of wealth. Sixty percent of the economy is privately owned and the government has indicated this will continue, Randall said recently.

"The Nicaraguan revolution is not a communist revolution," she says. "It is not even a socialistic revolution."

Both of these ideologies have been drawn upon, but Nicaragua's politics stem from the country's own history and deeply Christian background, says Randall, who prefers not to stereotype the revolution.

"To see the conflict in Central America as an East/West conflict is missing the point of what the struggle in Central America is all about."

Cardenal says Nicaragua's reform programs are based on a desire to serve other people, a fundamental value for Nicaragua's vast Christian majority.

"There is a total unity of views between Christians and the revolution. We are demonstrating that we can have a revolution without it being an atheist revolution."

Two priests hold positions in

the government and more than half of the cabinet are practising Christians, says Cardenal. Supporting the revolution is their duty because it represents what the Bible teaches, he says.

"We're faithful to the Gospel. The program of the revolution is to feed the hungry, dress the naked, teach the one who knows nothing."

But the clergy's participation in politics has been criticized by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Randall says tremendous hope was placed on the Pope's spring visit to Nicaragua because Christians felt such a prestigious visitor could make an influential plea for peace in the border war with Honduras.

"But what really happened was like a slap in the face."

The day before the Pope held mass for 80,000 people, 17 youths were killed in an ambush on the Nicaraguan border. Their mothers held up pictures of their dead sons for the Pope during mass, but he made absolutely no reference to the tragedy, says Randall.

"The Pope's answer to these women was 'silence'. Then thousands of people began to shout 'There is no contradiction between the revolution and Christianity'."

The Pope's refusal to acknowledge Nicaragua's political situation made the Vatican lose a great deal of its credibility, says Randall.

The U.S. government criticises Nicaragua for failing to hold elections. But when the Sandinistas won the war they said elections would take place in 1985, and preparations are underway to keep this promise. A legislature which represents both right and left leaning political parties tried to arrange for electoral commissions to visit European and socialist countries as well as the U.S. to

gather information about different electoral processes. The findings of these commissions were to determine how Nicaraguan elections will be held, Randall says.

"But the entire commission was denied a visa into the U.S. last month (September)."

In January 1983, Associated Press reported that CIA director William Casey confirmed the U.S. backing of the Honduran based counter-revolutionaries. Sergio Ramirez, a member of the Nicaraguan government, said in a July interview with the *Globe and Mail* that the contras could not survive without the help of the U.S.

"They have rockets that are so modern they fire without a tube, and rubber rafts that hold 40 men, and both are manufactured in the U.S.," he said. "They also have U.S. army rations, special paraffin for cooking, M-16s and ammunitions...We're dealing with nobody but the U.S."

Led mainly by wealthy supporters of ex-president Anastasio Somoza, the contras train in Florida and California - a direct violation of U.S. neutrality law. According to the *Miami Herald*, CIA officials told Congress they are in full control of the day-to-day contra activities - pinpointing targets, plotting attacks and conferring with rebel field leaders who conduct the raids into Nicaragua.

Eight hundred Nicaraguans have been killed in the attacks since January, says Randall, and she and Cardenal say the contras burn villages, torture peasants, and rape women.

As part of the Pentagon's \$21 million program for Western Caribbean airfield improvement, U.S. army engineers are building new roads, bases, and airstrips in Honduras along the Nicaraguan

border. According to the *New York Times*, the bases will be able to "handle large United States military transport planes and jet fighters."

Sophisticated radar installations along the Honduran and Costa Rican borders also allow planes using American intelligence equipment to photograph Nicaraguan airfields, military encampments and troop movements.

American aid has been defended on the grounds that Nicaragua is supplying weapons to Salvadoran guerrillas - aid the Reagan administration wants to stop.

But evidence of the supposed flow of weapons has never been found, says Cardenal. "The CIA would come to Nicaragua in any case."

"Since the contras haven't made any gains, we assume that Reagan is going to use other methods, possibly using the armies of Honduras, Guatemala, Chile or Argentina, or their own to intervene."

But Cardenal has a message for those trying to destabilize Nicaragua's revolution. "The government of Nicaragua has warned that those people who want to cross the border with arms and without a visa are going to be returned to the U.S. in a plastic body bag."

Economic limitations prevent the Nicaraguan army from expanding, says Cardenal, but people have been given weapons to defend themselves.

"This shows the popular support of the revolution because if dictatorial regimes gave arms to the people they wouldn't last one day."

"We are sure of our victory, even though our aggressor is one of the biggest powers in the world."