

NICARAGUA

Sandinistas offering false autonomy

opinion

by Tim Doucette

Dorothea Wilson of the Nicaraguan National Assembly spoke to a small group of York students on October 26 about the country's upcoming election and its government's autonomy plan for the indigenous peoples of the eastern Atlantic Coast region. Wilson is trying to raise money for both causes.

Wilson was a nun working in the mountains when she met up the Marxist revolutionary Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in 1975 and was convinced that this was the army that would save Nicaragua. In July of 1979, after a long and bloody war, the Sandinistas overthrew the corrupt Somoza family dictatorship and installed the current government, which has been engaged in a counter-revolutionary war with the US-backed contras ever since.

The February 1990 election will consist not only of a national election but, as per the Autonomy Law written into the constitution in September 1987, elections for the two "autonomous" governments of the Atlantic Coast (North and South). I put that word in bunny ears because it means self-government and that is not what the Sandinistas are offering the coastal peoples. (Yeah, OK, this is an opinion piece.)

Although Wilson went into technical detail on the law, she did little to explain why many indigenous people, particularly Miskitos, have taken up arms against the FSLN, other than to cite "US manipulation" in 1981-82. But as one Miskito leader who took part in that uprising, Reynaldo Reyes, has said, "We did not think in terms of overthrowing the Sandinistas and we did not know about the Reagan administration programme for that purpose. We just wanted to get the Sandinistas off our backs and to regain our traditional freedoms."

This is not to imply the Sandinistas are responsible for the natives' lost freedoms. Those have been eroded since the 17th and 18th centuries, when Spanish/British colonial warfare forced the peoples on the coast — the "frontier," in settler terminology — into a role similar to that of the Iroquois Confederation during the French/British invasions into North America.

In 1824, the British formed a protectorate over the Mosquitia, which lasted until the 1860 Treaty of Managua transformed it into the "Mosquito Reserve," reducing the size of the autonomous territory and giving Nicaragua sovereignty over what was left.

Christian missionaries continued their civilized genocide. With the British military out of the picture, the US, drunk on the bloody Monroe Doctrine that makes all America a Yankee golf course (apparently OK'd by God Himself), began to fantasize about ripping an interoceanic canal through southern Nicaragua which they, of course,

would control. By 1890, North Americans controlled 90 percent of investment in all of Nicaragua, including the Mosquitia.

In 1894, the Reserve was dissolved and occupied by Nicaraguan troops with the help of the US Marines, and soon North American multinationals started settling down to business. With the establishment of a cash economy and "wage" labour ("slave" if you want to get literal), subsistence agriculture and fishing declined, necessitating reliance on imports. Meanwhile the boom/bust enterprises (such as gold mining, lumber, bananas and rubber) produced unemployment, cash dependency, tuberculosis, ecological disaster, etc.

In 1927, Augusto Cesar Sandino, namesake of the Sandinistas, began a national war of liberation against US military and economic interests, notably the Standard Fruit Company in the Mosquitia. The Miskitos fighting in the war were led by Adolf Cockburn, a Miskito general in Sandino's army. In 1933, Sandino was shot by Anastacio Somoza, head of the US-established National Guard, who used his position to install himself as lifetime dictator. Cockburn had been assassinated in 1930 by the US Marines. Although Standard Fruit and the Marines were expelled by the end of the struggle, US domination and exploitation continued under the puppet Somoza, and the country was sunk into a deep economic depression that continues today.

In 1960, the World Court established the border between Honduras and Nicaragua at the Coco River, the heart of the Mosquitia, leaving some 40,000 Miskitos in Honduras and another 80,000 or so on Nicaragua's Atlantic coast.

So that's the historical context; the coastal peoples were colonized by Spanish, British and American imperialists; their land was stolen; their people murdered; their culture, environment and natural human rights desecrated. Today, they have the desire for and the right to self-government. The issue is not to "give" the peoples back their land, but to end a 400 year-old occupation. Which brings us to the revolution.

Reyes explained why he took up arms against the Sandinistas in 1981-82. "The Sandinistas did not understand us," he said, "[They] didn't respect our language and customs. It's not that they were repressive in the beginning, just insensitive. My people thought they were rude and arrogant. Their experts came in and tried to tell us how to use our land, how to farm, how to fish, when we have been surviving by our own ways for centuries.

"They didn't understand how we use our land communally, and they tried to divide it up and give us land titles. Imagine the arrogance of 'giving' us our own land! It became embarrassing, as an Indian, to be associated with the Sandinistas."

A vicious cycle was quickly established: as more Indians rebelled, many joining the contras and getting their guns from Uncle Sam, the Sandinistas grew more suspicious and more repressive. At the time of February 1981 shootout that left four Miskitos and four police dead, the entire leadership of MISURASATA (Miskito, Sumu, Rama and Sandinistas united) (about 30 Miskitos) were in jail. Whole communities have been forcibly relocated from the

border, although this was in the context of massive kidnappings and assassinations by the contras. Since 1981, at least 40,000 Miskitos have migrated to Honduras, to escape the contra war, or to join it.

Now, with the upcoming election and the plans for "autonomy," 30,000 indigenous people have returned home, and another 15,000 are to be repatriated in the next few months, if Wilson's government can afford to process them. Also returned are several of the top leaders of Yatama, the Honduras-based indigenous armed organization (which includes MISURASATA), including Miskito leader Brooklyn Rivera, one of the most outspoken critics of the FSLN autonomy law.

Ironically, Rivera will not be allowed to run as a candidate in the 1990 election because of the past-year residency stipulation in the law.

In 1987, representatives of Rivera presented the MISURASATA critique of the Autonomy Law, as well as an alternative proposal. The difference between the two being that the proposal is a treaty, that is, "a proposed agreement between the indigenous peoples of the Atlantic coast region and the Nicaraguan government, as opposed to a unilaterally decreed statute that can be altered at will be the central government." The critique notes that, under the current law, the "autonomous" governments "effectively would operate as local consultative and administrative arms of the central government."

In fact, the citizens of the "autonomous governments" could even be drafted into the Sandinista army.

The critique also proposes the Greenland Home Rule statute, which allows the Greenland government control over all internal matters independent of the Danish government, as a possible model for Atlantic coast autonomy.

The Autonomy Law consistently avoids referring to the five distinct indigenous coastal peoples — the Miskitos, Sumus, Ramas, Creoles, Garifunos — as peoples; Wilson spoke of them as "ethnic groups." The FSLN's fear is stated concisely by Ortega Hegg, a member of the original autonomy commission in 1985, at the beginning of the autonomy process, "One must distinguish between the limits of autonomy and its content. The plan has already set its natural limits in relation to the central government. Greater or lesser independence would determine its transformation into a separatist plan, or simply a greater degree of decentralized administration."

But as the Minority Rights Group (MRG) points out, "Since autonomy is precisely a partial transfer of sovereignty from the central state, not simply of central government functions, all consultations and discussions which took place subsequently were not really about the form of autonomy but rather mechanisms of implementation of an already decided policy."

Whatever its shortcomings, the Autonomy Law must be seen in the light of the much more repressive practices of other American states. Whereas, in Canada, the federal government decides who the "real" Indians are, the Autonomy Law states that "the members of the communities of the Atlantic coast have the right to define and decide their own ethnic identity."

The law also provides for the preservation and promotion of native natural medicine in the health programmes, in sharp contrast to the cultural genocide being perpetrated in this country. One can only hope that it will lead to real autonomy without further bloodshed.

As Reyes said, "The war will not resolve our problems. We are caught between various cross-fires; the pro-war members of KISAN [Miskito combatants], the Somocistas of the FDN [contras], the CIA and even the Sandinistas themselves, although the real danger does not come from them, but rather from those who do not want peace."

The MRG report (#79, 1988), which provided much of the background and all of the direct quotations for this article, is on one-day reserve in the Scott library. Nancy Farmer, of Tools for Peace (a material-aid organization), who introduced Wilson can be reached at 922-0852.