

INDIAN WAR AND PEACE IN NICARAGUA

By Bernard Nietschmann

Berkeley--Nicaragua's Miskito, Sumo and Rama Indians have been fighting the Sandinista government for almost three years. The Indians were the first to revolt against the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) starting in February 1981 and today their struggle is waged throughout eastern Nicaragua and from Honduras and Costa Rica. The Indians call it a revolution and it is the most widespread of the three wars against the FSLN. Because they are part of the armed opposition they must also be considered as part of any realistic efforts to seek resolution to the conflicts. Failure to recognize the rationale and goals of the Indian revolution or denial of Indian participation in the peace-seeking process, will doom any political or military solution. The Indians are committed to regaining their territory--most of eastern Nicaragua or 38 percent of the national area--and their war will go on until that is achieved regardless of what government may be in power in Managua.

The Indian struggle has been misunderstood, misrepresented and hidden from public view by pro- and anti-Sandinista rhetoric. The Reagan Administration uses the Indians' human rights situation simply as an example of oppression in Nicaragua, ignoring what the Indians are fighting for and focusing only on what has happened to them. The United States has no interest in backing--politically or militarily--a movement that seeks self-determination and liberation for indigenous peoples.

Similarly, the Nicaraguan government and its supporters have limited their descriptions to self-serving portrayals of the Indian opposition as an externally provoked and supported counterrevolutionary operation that uses

and manipulates "politically backward" Indians as part of an overall CIA-somocista plan to destabilize and overthrow the FSLN.

The Indians are in the middle as usual--between the left and the right, East and West, Managua and Washington--and their position, their struggle, their reasons for resisting the FSLN are totally ignored by both the left and right. Certainly the Indian revolution is in many ways part of the larger anti-Sandinista conflict; but it is not just another side of the issue, it is another issue entirely.

To learn more about the Indian struggle I spent three months this summer with resistance leaders and refugees in Costa Rica and Honduras and with Indian warriors and villagers in Nicaragua. From the Indian perspective their war is in response to Sandinista military, economic and political oppression of their people and expropriation and control of their land and resources through FSLN "agrarian reform." The Indians say that the land is the only thing they have to live from and to give their children. Without it they say they would die as a people. They are willing to die to regain it. They say that their revolution has a greater chance of success than those fought by ARDE or the FDN because they have widebased popular support, their goals are only to push the Sandinistas from their land and villages, they are fighting on their home ground, and they have yet to lose a military confrontation with Sandinista soldiers.

Because their goal of an autonomous indigenous territory does not fit into larger geopolitical concerns, the Indians are political orphans and they have had to make alliances with anti-Sandinista groups to obtain arms and support. It would be a mistake to believe that the Indians are manipulated by these "marriages of convenience." Brooklyn Rivera is the leader of MISURASATA (union of Miskito, Sumo and Rama Indians) that is part of

ARDE (Democratic Revolutionary Alliance) based in Costa Rica. Erratic Steadman Fagoth leads MISURA which is associated with the FDN (Democratic Nicaraguan Force) in Honduras. The differences between the two organizations, two leaders and alliances with both right and left rebel groups are of little concern to Indians fighting inside Nicaragua or to the almost 20,000 refugees and 17,000 in relocation camps waiting to return to their villages and lands. The objective is to recover and control Indian lands and resources any way possible.

Outside interests promoting a political or military solution to Nicaragua should realize that the Indians will resist any negotiated settlement or invasion that ignores Indian controlled Indian land. Dispossession of their land and subjugation of their leaders and interests led the Indians to rebel against the Sandinista revolution and to participate in the anti-Sandinista revolution. They openly discuss the possibility of a third revolution that they'd fight against any government in Managua that did not grant them their traditional land rights.

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November 28, 1983

Letters Editor
The Times
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Dear Sir:

The enclosed letter concerns Miskito Indian Rights and Revolution. Although it is longer than most letters you publish I hope you'll be able to find the space to use it. I've had the rather unique opportunity to be the first person to go into the Indian areas of eastern Nicaragua unaccompanied by Sandinista authorities. Following research methods used to elicit verifiable oral history as I have done for three books on the Miskito, I recorded a tragic situation that has been thrust upon the Indians. I trust your readers would be interested in a firsthand report. Much of what has happened to the Indians is shocking but I am staking my professional reputation on the authenticity of my statements.

Sincerely,

Bernard Nietschmann
Professor

BN:nv



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28 November 1983

Letters Editor
The Times
200 Grays Inn Road
London WC1X 8EZ
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Sir,

UN Ambassador Jeane Kirpatrick's interview in "Spectrum" (October 12) attracted several letters with contrasting views on the Miskito situation in Nicaragua (October 15, 27 and November 16). Indian human rights violations and military resistance are the subject of considerable world attention and highly politicized explanations and denials. The Reagan Administration uses the human rights violations suffered by the Miskito, Sumo and Rama Indians as an example of oppression in Nicaragua, and the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional) uses the Indian's military resistance as an example of US-backed aggression against Nicaragua. Lost amidst Washington's and Managua's self-serving descriptions is any understanding of what is, in fact, an indigenous revolution that has been going on for almost three years which seeks recovery of Indian lands, and autonomy and self-determination for Indian peoples.

Independent outside observers have been prohibited from traveling freely without accompanying Sandinista authorities to Miskito, Sumo and Rama villages for more than two years. Reporters, representatives from human rights organizations, and inter-governmental agency officials have had to rely on interviews with people in or working with the Sandinista government, reports provided by refugees in Honduras and Costa Rica, and visits to "relocation camps" where Indians have been forcibly moved and live under close government supervision. No one has gone into eastern Nicaragua to learn what Indians in villages and in secret military base camps have to say about their experiences since the 1979 Sandinista revolution and why they are resisting.

I was invited by the Miskito, Sumo and Rama Nations to go with their warriors to see firsthand conditions inside Nicaragua. The invitation was made because I have known these people for 15 years beginning in 1968 when I started the first of several research projects with Indian peoples in eastern Nicaragua. They asked me because I know what conditions were before the revolution, I am familiar with the area and most of the villages, and because I had expressed my desire to find out the truth. I spent a month inside Nicaragua with Indian warriors and villagers and two months in Costa Rica and Honduras with exiled Indian leaders and refugees.

From my investigations I found that Indian peoples have been subjected to a brutal systematic policy to force them into the Sandinista revolution stripped of Indian culture, identity, rights, lands, resources, or freedom to influence their own destiny or to determine their own choices of how to live. Briefly stated, the Sandinistas have implemented a policy of Indian ethnocide that is generated internally from their own Marxist ideology and racist attitudes that deny the Indians the right to remain Indians. When the Indians resisted, the FSLN began an escalating program of counterinsurgency that continues unabated. These are but a few of the FSLN violations against Indian peoples: 1) one-fourth of the coast's 165,000 Indians are either in "relocation camps" or refugee camps, 2) one-half of Miskito and Sumo villages have been destroyed, 3) 1000 Indian civilians are in prison, missing or dead, 4) Indian rights to self-government, land, resources have been abolished, 5) subsistence cultivation, fishing and hunting are strictly controlled to the point of non-existence in many areas and access to staple foods is so limited that hunger is an everyday problem and starvation a real probability, 6) many villages have had no medicine or doctors for over two years, 7) freedom of movement is denied or severely restricted and in many areas canoes--the people's major means of transport--have been confiscated or their use prohibited, 8) more than 35 communities have suffered massive Sandinista military invasions during which innocent civilians are subjected to arbitrary arrests, killings, interrogations, torture, rapes, theft and destruction of property in an effort to force the people to divulge the location of the Indian warrior's secret base camps and to terrorize the villagers so that they won't support or join the military resistance.

The Indians gave too many eyewitness testimonies, too many detailed independent descriptions of atrocities, too many lists of missing and dead villagers and destroyed villages (miles from border areas) to deny that these things happened or to claim they were done by contras. Other people will run the Sandinista blockade of the coast and verify and amplify my findings. Meanwhile, the FSLN and its supporters will attempt to pass over what has happened by admitting to "past mistakes" and "excessive enthusiasm," and to coverup the relocations, atrocities and bombings of non-combatant Indians by blaming the contras. For example, the Sandinistas claim that the 1982 forced relocation of Río Coco Miskito were done to protect the Indian from across the border contra raids (the mythical Navidad Roja plot), when in fact it was a group of 66 unarmed Miskito boys and young men ("the Astros") that attacked Sandinista garrisons with the support of Indian villagers. With captured weapons their raids intensified and culminated with the taking of San Carlos. To avoid an insurrection the Nicaraguan government forcibly relocated the Río Coco Miskito. Similarly, the October 24-29, 1983 bombings of Indian villages south of Puerto Cabezas (100-150 miles from the Honduras border), from Wawa to Prinzapolka, has been blamed on contras but it was done by the Sandinista Air Force from "push and pull" airplanes and helicopters. These communities were subsequently invaded by government soldiers to arrest and interrogate surviving villagers. This area was under nominal Indian control and the bombings were done to avert what was becoming a large liberated Indian territory. If there are readers who don't believe that the Sandinistas would bomb Indian villages I suggest they contact Tomás Borge, Daniel Ortega, Jaime Wheelock or Roberto Sánchez and see if it would be possible to visit any of the following villages: Wawa, Haulover, Wounta, Layasiksa, Karata, or Walpasiksa.

Under Somoza the Indians lived in poverty and their labor was exploited by various foreign and national resource-exporting companies. Under the Sandinistas

the Indians have been stripped of their land and rights to live as they choose. They have defended their land for more than 450 years against conquistadors, colonialists, imperialists, and they are now trying to regain it from marxists.

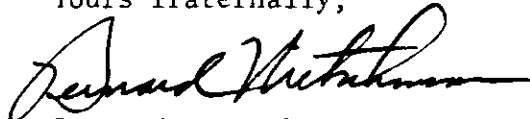
Because their goal of an autonomous indigenous territory does not fit larger geopolitical interests, the Indians are political orphans and they have had to make alliances with anti-Sandinista groups (ARDE and FDN) to obtain arms and support. The Indians are not mercenaries nor have they been duped into resisting. The significant point is what they are fighting for, not what they are fighting with. They are fighting for an indigenous cause, Indian lands, Indian autonomy, Indian self-determination. To liberate their lands and villages, to bring the people home from the refugee and relocation camps they would take arms from any source. Would their struggle be more politically acceptable to some if they obtained arms from China, Libya, Israel, or Angola's UNITA force?

The nature and history of the Indians' struggle may be misrepresented by opposing governments for self-serving ends, but they will continue to fight to reclaim their land and to win the freedom to live and advance as Indians. Others may see them as "expendable peoples" to be sacrificed for the "greater good" of the Sandinista revolution. But the warriors have not lost a military confrontation with Sandinista soldiers in almost three years of fighting. So they have the capacity to resist and despite what others may decide or what excuses are made, they will not give up. It is important that outside interests realize this. However, so far none of the parties trying to peacefully resolve the Nicaraguan conflict include the Indian situation as part of their deliberations.

The Indians are inadequately armed and are fighting against a far superior military force, but they are engaged in a do or die struggle that is led and fought by Indians for Indian goals--something that has not been seen in the Americas for many decades.

As I was leaving eastern Nicaragua, a Miskito leader told me, "I may die but that's not important because the boys will carry on our struggle. I'm going to stay here and fight to free my people and our land. Please give fraternal revolutionary greetings from an Indian warrior to your people and tell them that we are not coming out of the bush until we get our land back."

Yours fraternally,



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