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Letter to the Editor
The New York Times
229 West 43rd St.
New York, NY 10036

COVERING THE SANDINISTA-INDIAN WAR

To the Editor:

French philosopher Alain wrote that "the human paradox is that everything has been said and that nothing is understood." Your two stories on Nicaraguan Indians (July 5 and 10) provide considerable information but not much clarity on the second war against the Sandinistas. The press, with few exceptions, mistakes Indian combatants for Contras because the Indian war is covered from the edges of the Miskito, Sumo and Rama nations and from the perspectives of Ladinos-- be they Contra or Sandinista -- who are attempting to repress an Indian revolution for self-determination being fought by the Americas' only Indian army. More reporters have been inside Afghanistan with mujahedeen fighters than have been inside the Indian nations with combatants and civilians who are resisting the Sandinista invasion.

Contrary to your stories, Miskito, Sumo and Rama fighters are not counterrevolutionaries (contras), but revolutionaries who are attempting to remove the Sandinista occupation forces and imposed "revolution" from their territories and communities, and to bring Indian control and Indian development to Indian nations. To do so requires weapons and weapons are available from sources that wish to fight the East-West, not the Indian war. If the Miskito nation had been attacked by Guatemala, not Nicaragua, leaders probably would have sought weapons from Cuba or China, not the United States.

The Miskito see themselves as a separate people with a distinct and communally-owned historical territory, not a Nicaraguan "tribe" living in a "vast swamp wilderness on Nicaragua's Atlantic coast." Wan Tasbaia, the Miskito Nation, has been inhabited and settled for hundreds of years and not only isn't it a "wilderness", only some 20 percent of it is "swamp" (wetlands), the rest being pine savanna, rain forest, fish-rich coastal waters, coral reefs and islands.

After the Sandinistas took control of the Nicaraguan state in 1979 they moved to take over and annex Indian lands and resources under the guise of "integrating the Atlantic Coast into the Revolution." The Indians are fighting because a Ladino military invasion force occupies their lands and communities and oppresses their peoples, not because, as you report, they "became angered" and "seem unwilling to

forgive past mistreatment." Were the French people only angered by and unwilling to forgive the occupying German Army?

The who, what, why, when and where of the Indian war is land. The Indian peoples have defended their nations for five centuries against colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and now, marxism. The Miskito, Sumo and Rama peoples have not lost their sovereignty, or sold, given or voted away their land. Nor have they been defeated. The Sandinistas occupy and claim Indian nations by invasion, not invitation. When the Indians resisted seizure of their lands, they were accused of not adhering to the invader's ideology, that is, of being "contras."

You refer to "20 armed guerrillas commanded by Anpinio Palacios of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force" taking 26 men from the Talpawas refugee camp of Sumos, "a separate Indian tribe that has been far less willing to fight the Sandinistas than the dominant Miskito tribe." But you fail to mention that Ampinño Palacios and his fighters are themselves Sumo, who have been waging a courageous and extremely effective campaign within the Sumo Nation against Sandinista army (EPS) and security (DGSE) occupation forces since 1982. Palacios' guerrillas are loosely allied with the FDN "Contras" because that's where the weapons are.

Fighting on their own lands and for their own self-determination, Miskito, Sumo and Rama combatants are not mere "Contras", or "rebels", or "angered" and "unforgiving" tribes.

Journalists should leave the edges and the spokesmen and go cover the Indian war from the other side of the frontier. Make it 21 with Palacios.

Sincerely,



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Professor

(It is Ampinño Palacios, not Anpinio)

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Bernard Nietschmann has worked with the Miskito, Sumo and Rama nations for 18 years and was the first outsider to go to Miskito-defended territory.

