

# Nicaragua's Indian War: Clash Between Two Worlds

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*"Scores of thatched-hut villages are burned, farm stock are slaughtered, and the natives are rounded up and marched off to join other natives from other scorched villages in a specially built, fenced compound. The heavily armed Spanish soldiers act as sentries guarding the compound and the governor proclaims the natives secure and protected from threatening bandits. Other natives still on the loose organize small bands of warriors and attack the soldiers in the swamps, the forests and in the highlands. More soldiers are garrisoned in native territories to pacify more villages. The natives increase their resistance and a war commences."*

A sixteenth century confrontation between Spanish *conquistadors* and American Indians? The Brazilian Government's battle against the Yananomou Indians along the Amazon in the 1970's and 1980's? Perhaps, it is a description of the Guatemalan Government's treatment of the Mayan Indians since the late 1970's. Or, maybe it is a description of the war against the Pipil Indians being waged by the El Salvadoran Government since 1979. In truth, it is a general description of all of these confrontations, and it describes the four-year war between the Miskitu, Sumo and Rama Indian Nations and the Government of Nicaragua. They are all confrontations between the ancient world of the Americas and the *colonizers* who seek land and riches.

Over a period of four hundred years, the Western Hemisphere saw countless wars, skirmishes and battles between European settlers and Indian Nations from the southern tip of South America to the Arctic Circle. Out of this period emerged more than thirty-five new states superimposed on the territories of thousands of ancient nations and tribes. But, despite the protracted wars and the europeanization of the Americas, more than two thousand Indian nations and tribes persist in their hold on parcels of land occupied by their ancestors for thousands of years.

As we near the close of the twentieth century, Indian wars have been renewed only now with a difference. Instead of European powers crossing the ocean to invade Indian territories to spread religion and gather riches, American states are *imploding*, and invading the remnants of Indian homelands to spread political ideologies and gather riches.

The Chilean government has carried on a policy of oppressing the 500,000 Mapuche Indians, the Bolivian Government marginalizes the Quechua Indians who constitute the majority population of that state, the Guatemalan government attacks Mayan Indians who are the majority population in that state, the El Salvadoran government and the rebels opposed to the government have jointly

killed one-third of the Pipil Indians since 1979 and the Nicaraguan Government, along with the rebels who oppose that government, have killed more than a thousand Miskitu, Sumo and Rama Indians since 1980.

### *Third and Fourth World Conflicts*

While all of these confrontations between American states and Indian peoples share common characteristics, Nicaragua's Indian War has some important differences. All of the violent confrontations involve Fourth World Indian Nations and Third World States. They are all concerned with Fourth World Nation claims to lands and natural resources and political sovereignty, and Third World state claims to national sovereignty, natural resource development and integration. Unlike the other states involved in Indian wars, Nicaragua is engaged in a self-proclaimed revolution for social, economic and political justice – a revolution guided by Marxist ideologies. Unlike any other Fourth World Nations in the Western Hemisphere, the Miskitu, Sumo and Rama Indian Nations have organized their own revolution, their own defensive military and their own Indian political ideology in response to what they consider to be an overt invasion of their homelands by the revolutionary government of Nicaragua.

The clash between Nicaragua's interests and the interests of the Miskitu, Sumo and Rama Nations has a special significance because of the revolutionary model that both parties represent. Nicaragua's revolution has been portrayed by its supporters as the first truly revolutionary example for other hemispheric Third World states if it succeeds. Similarly, Fourth World Indian Nations throughout the hemisphere (and, indeed, many Fourth World indigenous nations elsewhere in the world) have come to view the revolutionary experiment of the Miskitu, Sumo and Rama Nations as a potential example to be followed if it succeeds.

For six months, the political and military organization of the Miskitu, Sumo and Rama Nations, MISURASATA, and the Government of Nicaragua have conducted four rounds of Autonomy–Peace Talks aimed at bringing the four– year Indian war to an end. As a result of an agreement between Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and MISURASATA General Coordinator Brooklyn Rivera last summer, cautious hopes were raised that real peace talks between Indian Nations and a state would be conducted on the basis of mutual respect and mutual interests.

These hopes were especially aroused because the Government of Nicaragua was viewed as revolutionary in the true sense of the word. Unlike the Governments of Guatemala and El Salvador which are clearly practicing genocide against Fourth World peoples, many Indian peoples in the hemisphere were hopeful that the Government of Nicaragua had truly come to recognize the folly of its widely publicized statements about "mistakes in the treatment of the Indians". Indeed, within two weeks following the third round of peace talks, Nicaragua's Omar Cabezas was quoted in the press as "warmly" describing MISURASATA as "a group that took up arms to rebel against our mistakes."

## *High Stakes and Critical Risks*

The fourth round of the MISURASATA/Nicaragua Autonomy Peace Negotiations broke down in May. The Government of Nicaragua charged that MISURASATA violated a limited *humanitarian agreement* that had been reached during the third round of talks by committing offensive military actions against Nicaraguan forces. MISURASATA countered by saying that Nicaragua had violated the spirit and the intent of the agreement by failing to fulfill its commitment to allow humanitarian aid to Indian villages, and by the government's offensive bombing of Indian villages before the beginning of the fourth round of talks.

Despite the breakdown of the peace talks, there is still a small hope that MISURASATA and the Government of Nicaragua can find a peaceful solution to the Indian War. Indeed, many believe that they must find a mutually acceptable peace solution. For both, the stakes are very high. The humanity and integrity of the Nicaraguan revolution rests in large measure on how it deals with Fourth World peoples. If it fails to recognize and accept the fundamental social, economic and political rights of the Miskitu, Sumo and Rama Nations, the Nicaraguan revolution and all other similar revolutions will be regarded as a fraud, and they will be violently opposed by Fourth World peoples.

In the Western Hemisphere, this is especially significant because Fourth World Nations have a collective population of more than eighty-five million. In the Third World states of Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, Peru, Bolivia and Chile Indian Nations are either the majority population, or they are a dominant population occupying a major portion of the states claimed territory. Fourth World Nations are actively forming political and military alliances throughout the hemisphere, thus strengthening their individual capacity to confront states as significant economic, military and political forces. The Fourth World will either become an important ally of Third World revolutionary movements, or it will become a significant opponent. As Che Guevara learned in Bolivia: Without the support of the Indian nations, revolutionary movements are doomed to failure, and such revolutionaries cannot succeed unless they understand and recognize the interests and aspirations of Fourth World Nations.

The Soviet Union has already demonstrated its inability to comprehend the interests and aspirations of Fourth World Nations as it continues to conduct its war against the tribes of Afghanistan. It has also shown its blindness to the Fourth World by its support of the Vietnamese in Kampuchea and Ethiopia as the military forces of these states confront Fourth World peoples. The Soviet Union, like the United States, is actively engaged (either directly or indirectly) in twenty-three wars around the world involving a state in violent combat with one or more Fourth World Nations. The revolutions that created both the Soviet Union and the United States were in large measure conducted at the expense of Fourth World peoples. Their foreign policies continue to reflect this tendency toward indigenous peoples throughout the world.

Nicaragua has an opportunity to become the first truly revolutionary state without oppressing Fourth World peoples. It can still reject state models which have brutalized indigenous peoples. The Government of Nicaragua still can formulate a revolution that is uniquely characteristic of the Western Hemisphere, but only if it agrees to coexist with the Miskitu, Sumo and Rama Nations, and accept Fourth World aspirations as a legitimate part of revolution.

The stakes for the Miskitu, Sumo and Rama Indian Nations and the Fourth World are equally high. If the MISURASATA/Nicaragua Autonomy Peace Talks fail, these Indian Nations risk total annihilation at the hands of the Nicaraguan military. Having suffered the destruction of nearly half of their villages as a result of Nicaraguan scorched earth policies and aerial bombings, as well as attacks by the Nicaraguan rebel forces located in Honduras and Costa Rica, the Miskitu, Sumo and Rama Nation have already realized the risks and high stakes involved in defending their homelands against invasion by Nicaraguan forces. While the Nicaraguans will be seen as having committed genocide, the Indian Nations will be dead.

Fourth World peoples throughout the hemisphere and elsewhere in the world also have a stake in the MISURASATA/Nicaragua negotiations. Failure of the talks will confirm suspicions widely held among indigenous peoples that left-wing or Marxist revolutions and the states they produce are no different than capitalist or rightwing movements. Both will be fully seen as *two sides of the same coin*. Indeed, the experiences Fourth World peoples have had with socialist states in Burma, Vietnam, China, Spain, Ethiopia, Afghanistan and New Caledonia (France claims this island territory) already confirm this suspicion. Relief from state wars against indigenous nations in India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and at the hands of other capitalist and socialist states will only come when indigenous nations succeed in forming global alliances for mutual defense or when all indigenous nations are annihilated.

Nicaragua's Indian War and the MISURASATA/Nicaragua Autonomy Peace Talks do have a special significance for Third World and Fourth World peoples. A mutually acceptable conclusion of the talks will create a new dynamic for political revolution - a dynamic which demonstrates that Third and Fourth World Peoples can peacefully coexist and mutually benefit one another. A successful conclusion to the only peace negotiations between a Third World state and Fourth World Nations currently even partially active in the world can produce a revolutionary blend that can serve as a real alternative to the fraudulent systems offered by the United States and the Soviet Union. MISURASATA and the Government of Nicaragua risk failure by continuing their peace negotiations, but such a risk is outweighed by the possibilities for success. They guarantee failure for the Nicaraguan revolution, the death of three Indian nations, and the collapse of new possibilities for Third and Fourth World Nations if the war goes on to a bloody conclusion.