

Nicaraguan Indians join rebels — but fight for self-rule

By Steve Fishman
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Brooklyn Rivera, one of two rival leaders of Nicaragua's largest minority, the Miskito Indians, uses the same arguments — at times even the same words — as his allies fighting the Sandinista government in Managua.

The Sandinistas, he says, have betrayed the principles that united Nicaraguans against dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979.

The Miskitos, like other anti-Sandinistas, have taken up arms against the Sandinista government. Sometimes they fight side by side with non-Indian rebels, at other times simply in coordination with them. The Miskitos often announce victories over government forces in the Atlantic zone of Nicaragua, the jungle and swamp region that has served for centuries as the Indians' home.

But there are wide differences between the Indian and non-Indian rebels — differences in history, in lifestyle, and in goals.

"We're not fighting just for the overthrow of the government, we're fighting for our aboriginal rights, including regional autonomy," says Rivera, who leads Misurasata, an umbrella group for Nicaragua's Miskito, Sumo, and Rama Indians.

Some call the goal of Indian autonomy a pipedream. And Rivera admits there is considerable resistance to the idea even from his current allies. But, he says it is the one goal for which the Miskitos are willing to fight.

"The only guarantee [of autonomy] is with arms in our hands. While any other situation exists, no one is going to recognize us," says Rivera.

The Atlantic (Caribbean) coast, where the Miskitos live, has a long history of isolation from the rest of Nicaragua. It was only in 1894 that the eastern region was integrated into independent Nicaragua. Only about 10 percent of the nation's people live there, and the predominant religion is Moravian Protestant, while in the rest of the country it is Roman Catholic.

The region saw little of the fighting that led to the overthrow dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979. But the Miskitos hoped the revolution would bring change. Under Somoza, the Miskitos were largely neglected. But neglect also brought to certain autonomy. Their lifestyle followed traditional patterns.

Under the Sandinistas, the Indians say their situation has not improved. The Sandinistas saw the Miskito lands as a weak link in their security system and set out to integrate the Miskitos into the rest of the country. It was the Indians' first experience with a strong central government.

And for the Sandinistas, the attempt to integrate the Miskitos with mainstream Nicaragua brought them into contact with a culture they didn't understand.

"We had serious problems with the Miskitos," admits a government official. "There was mutual incomprehension."

Conflicts followed almost immediately.

Rivera dates the Miskito armed resistance to the Sandinista government to February 1981. At first the Miskitos fought with hunting rifles, machetes, and bows and arrows. In January 1982, after rebel incursions from Honduras, Nicaragua decided to evacuate the Indian population from their ancestral homelands around the volatile border.

About 10,000 Miskitos were moved to "settlements" near Rosita, a mining town near the Honduran border. About 6,000 Indians fled to Honduras.

Rivera charges that the Sandinistas have killed 1,000 Indians, jailed 600, put 15,000 in settlements, and destroyed 60 Indian communities.

As the rebel groups expand their war, the Indians are playing a greater military role. The Miskitos fight in the eastern province of Zelaya, where they have lived. Some coordinate their battles with the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, a group supported by the CIA. In the north, Steadman Fagoth Müller, a Miskito who was once served as adviser to the Sandinistas, leads a well-armed group estimated at 2,000 men. Despite Honduran denials, the Indians say they trained in Honduras.

Rivera's Indian soldiers are affiliated with the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance, which operates mainly in the south of Nicaragua. In the south, Rivera reported the Miskitos recently formed an Atlantic front separate from ARDE commander Edén Pastora Gómez. Rivera said his troops, who take orders from Pastora, will not launch an offensive before July.

Rivera's key military problem, he says, is the same as Pastora's — lack of arms. "We cannot understand how the United States can have confidence in the FDN and not us. We've been asking for a long time. And they've been promising for a long time. But so far only promises," Rivera says.

How steadfast the Indians will prove to be as counterrevolutionary allies remains to be seen. While some skepticism has been voiced about their abilities as soldiers, their familiarity with the difficult terrain is said to make them the best candidates for military operations in the east.

The irony may be that resorting to armed conflict as a way to realize their dreams of autonomy may have finally integrated this isolated group into the mainstream of the country.

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Miskito refugees in Honduras

UNHCR photo

Miskitos initially trusted the Sandinistas — but many of the Indians eventually became refugees and guerrillas

Nicaragua, Choose a New Path

By Arturo José Cruz

Nicaragua's revolution is, in my judgment, in danger of dying in its infancy. Yet, like many Nicaraguans, I continue to pray that the Sandinistas — who are courageous in war and show real concern for the destitute — may see the wisdom of admitting their errors and may have the will to redress them in order to save the revolution for the sake of Nicaragua.

I joined the revolutionary Government with pride and served it with loyalty founded on a conviction that the revolution would be good for Nicaragua. My experience disillusioned me: Dogmatism and adventurism seem to have wiped out its original democratic and pluralistic ideals.

The lamentable condition of the revolution cannot be blamed solely on Washington or Nicaraguan reactionaries. There is also something self-destructive in the conduct of the revolution — a puzzling rejection of pragmatism by certain Sandinista leaders. The allegiance to an internationalist ideology that they profess — perhaps unwittingly — at the expense of Nicaragua's interests is unacceptable.

Some people see the Nicaraguan revolution as a rebellion against injustice; others see it as an East-West confrontation that affects the security of the United States. Very few approach it from the premise that there may be a combination of both factors.

It was never a secret that the hard core of the Sandinistas was Marxist. However, the non-Marxists in this alliance of political parties, labor unions, businessmen, students and professionals were comforted by the pluralistic spirit that prevailed at the beginning of the revolution. Nearly everyone felt confident that the Marxist vanguard was going to promote a social democracy. And, then as now, no one rejected the Sandinistas' pre-eminence — and this is not simply because of their military power. They earned their moral authority during the war of liberation.

It is thus distressing to observe how totalitarian trends are gaining the upper hand — impairing the moral authority of the revolution. It is truly a pity, tragic by any standards, that the Sandinistas may waste an opportunity to build a unique model revolution.

I have heard people say that Latin American revolutions choose socialism because it conforms to our cultural preference for authoritarianism. However, I strongly believe that my country does not have an indigenous vocation for tyranny. On the contrary, it has every right to aspire to a revolution as originally proposed by the Sandinistas. Any people, however backward, aspiring to justice and freedom, cannot accept absolutism as synonymous with revolution.

It was on the first anniversary of the revolution that our foreign policy began to show how senseless our goals were. Instead of dedicating all our energy to building the ideal society for which our people hoped, we were chasing chimeras abroad. It was a game with a high cost: Today, we have exchanged the well-being of Nicaragua for a seat on the United Nations Security Council. Declaring ourselves nonaligned, we were, in fact, leaning to the socialist bloc, changing our status from hacienda to satellite.

How tragic it is that my country's Government gambles with the security (and safety) of its people — misguided by delusions of grandeur, seeing itself, foolishly, as an important piece on the chessboard of world politics. As the poet and journalist Pablo Antonio Cuadra has suggested, if the Sandinistas love Nicaragua, they should start by being prudent — to protect it from harm and avoid exposing it to danger.

How ironic that Nicaragua may have missed an opportunity to liberate its political destiny from eternal dependency on the United States. We could still achieve self-determination if only the Sandinistas would choose a new path for the revolution — one of less notoriety, where we could bury the grudges of the past. Instead, unfortunately, Washington may again become the arbiter of our destiny.

The present crisis is a monster with two heads. One of them is underdevelopment and social injustice. To deal with it, social reforms and financial assistance are required. However, this will be a futile effort if the other head — violence — is not also severed. Consequently, as President Reagan indicated, negotiations to remove all foreign military advisers and troops from the region are most desirable.

Even as the revolution may now appear an unattainable goal, the fact is that it ought to be irreversible. The United States, while preserving its security from any threat, should understand that the Nicaraguan revolution, while in a state of sickness, is still worthy of an effort to heal it. It is my opinion that the former guerrilla chieftain Edén Pastora is today one of our most valuable political assets and that we can call upon him to uproot the contradictions and vices hiding the social, political and economic transformation that justice and decency demand. This is a cause that the United States should consider promoting, as a sign of its acceptance of revolution in this hemisphere.

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Arturo José Cruz served in the Nicaraguan revolutionary Government — as head of the Central Bank, member of the ruling junta and Ambassador to the United States — until November 1981, when he resigned in dissent. This article is adapted from a longer one in the current issue of Foreign Affairs.