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N I C A R A G U A
A N D T H E I N D I A N R E V O L U T I O N

by

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Nicaragua is more complex than a simple two-side conflict between Contras and Sandinistas. A third side is fighting a little known war against the Sandinistas and some day may have to fight against the Contras.

The only Indian army in the Americas is in the fifth year of bitter war with Central America's largest army over the invasion of Indian lands and communities. The Miskito, Sumo and Rama combatants are the acknowledged best fighters with unmatched military successes against the Sandinistas despite their being poorly armed. The Indian forces have advantages of widespread civilian support, home terrain, and a gutsy resolve to defend for a projected 20 to 30 years against the invasion. They are not included in any regional peace plans. Sandinista Nicaragua is mired in a war they are unlikely to win, and the Contras appear quite ready to continue the military annexation of Indian land if they should take power in Managua.

Two wars are being fought: one between the Cuban - and Soviet-backed FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) and the U.S.-backed FDN (Nicaraguan Democratic Force) which is over control of the Nicaraguan Government. The other war is between FSLN occupation forces and the Misurasata and KISAN Indian resistance and is over who will control Indian land and resources.

While the Contras and the Indians share a common Sandinista enemy, they each have different goals and means. The much better funded Contras seek to topple and replace the FSLN and to "economically integrate" the Caribbean coast which really means they plan to maintain exploitation of Indian land, resources and labor. At the same time the Indian resistance seeks an end to Managua's military occupation and economic domination by establishing an autonomous self-ruled region that would resist totalitarian regimes and cooperate with democratic governments in Managua.

Centuries ago the Miskito Nation stopped and pushed back the Spanish Conquest; today it is leading an Indian revolution against the Nicaraguan State. Referred to as Indian Lukanka by the Miskitos, their struggle is for self-determination of Wan Tasbaia, their nation. The Miskitos have defended their homeland for 500 years against colonialists, imperialists, capitalists, and now marxists.

With a population of 150,000 (almost the size of Belize), the 400-mile-long Miskito Nation has a strategic location southwest of Cuba along coastal lowlands and waters claimed by Honduras and Nicaragua. To the west is the 12,000-member Sumo Nation, and south of Bluefields is located the much smaller Rama Nation with less than 1000 people.

Nicaragua asserts that these peoples are minorities who have no distinct ownership rights to Nicaraguan land and resources. The Indian revolution rejects the apartheid labels of minority and ethnic group that attempt to classify unconsenting nation peoples as second-class citizens of a state in order to acquire their land and resources. Instead, the Indians say they are the true historical owners of their lands and waters, and that the Nicaraguan state has no bill of sale, no treaty with Indian peoples, no military victory, nor any vote that relinquishes Indian sovereignty and territory to Managua.

There are only two ways to be on Indian land: by invitation or by invasion. To the Indians, Nicaragua has invaded under a cartographic delusion that Indian lands "belong" to Managua and the Ladino people. What is ironic and contradictory is that the Sandinista state then turns around and accuses the United States of the same thing it is doing to the Miskito, Sumo and Rama nations - the use of military force to deny self-determination and a popular revolution.

In 1979, after the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship, the Sandinistas sent military units to Indian lands to secure and consolidate territory while making promises. Soon the FSLN and the Indians were on a collision course as the state expropriated indigenous lands and resources while the grassroots Misurasata organization worked to protect Indian lands and to promote Indian economic and cultural development. Major land disputes led to an August 1980 agreement with the FSLN that Misurasata would map Indian lands. But when the dimensions of the indigenous territories took cartographic shape, the FSLN made February 1981 mass arrests of the entire Misurasata leadership and many supporters. They were accused of being "separatists" (for claiming and mapping territory expropriated by the state), and "contras" (for not adhering to the invader's ideology).

The Indians took up arms to reclaim and defend their lands. At first they fought with arms recovered from ambushed Sandinista patrols and overrun garrisons. By 1982 out of economic and military necessity the new Misura organization sought help from the Honduras-based remnants of the Somoza government, while Misurasata did the same in Costa Rica with Eden Pastora and the original Sandinistas in ARDE (Revolutionary Democratic Alliance).

The weapons received were always few in number and of poor quality and small caliber. Nevertheless, the underarmed Indians were the first to shoot down a helicopter, blow up T-55 tanks, destroy a major fuel depot, make frogman raids, amphibious assaults, and carry out hundreds of ambushes as well as major toe-to-toe battles that often lasted several days.

In 1981 the FSLN began to systematically retaliate against unarmed Indian communities: half of the villages were burned to the ground, up to 20,000 Miskitos and Sumos were forced into state relocation camps and 35,000 fled to become refugees in Honduras and Costa Rica; remaining civilians were arbitrarily arrested, imprisoned and tortured; village-occupying FSLN army and security units were allowed free rein to rape, and to steal and destroy property; food and medicines were rationed and withheld; and military conscription was imposed.

But the Indians were hurting the Sandinistas in the ground war and in international opinion. In December 1984 the FSLN and Misurasata met in Bogota for the first of four futile rounds of negotiations that ended in May 1985. Unable to get the Indian leadership to agree to a cease fire without land rights, the FSLN Minister of Interior Tomas Borge began a "hearts and minds" campaign aimed at Indian civilians and fighters. In exchange for closing down some of the strategic hamlet-like relocation camps, Borge made cease fire agreements with individual Miskito commanders (whose men were desperately low on ammunition).

Meanwhile, the United States and the Contras pushed for an "or else" unification of all anti-Sandinista Groups into one FDN-dominated organization, the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO). Counterproductive, this plan has led to fragmentation, not unification. Eden Pastora was pushed out and the Indians became further divided over closer ties with the Contras who are as racist and against autonomous Indian territories as are the Sandinistas.

Both the Sandinista and the Contras are trying to incorporate the third-side Indians without dealing with their fundamental demand for political and territorial autonomy.

Even though fighting each other, the Contras and the Sandinistas agree on the suppression of Indian rights. ARDE's original Sandinistas in their Article 16, the FSLN marxists in Article 210 of the new constitution, and the "freedom fighters" on page 17 of UNO's 1986 "National Democratic Project" have made the same indistinguishable and interchangeable statement on Indian rights: indigenous peoples may keep their folklore and language, but their territory and resources belong to the Nicaraguan state. The only items of dispute is who will rule the state:

The Sandinistas want to sidetrack the Indian revolution and make a final solution later, and the Contras want to put the Indian revolution on the front line in order to deal with it now.

Rather than supporting the second war against the Sandinistas, the United States and the Contras are trying to

eradicate it. They are doing the Sandinistas' work for them. Indians are not about to fight for goals which are against Indian interests.

From the one hundred million dollars of U.S. aid, KISAN must receive funds through the anti-Indian UNO and FDN Contras, while the still independent Misurasata is boxed in and won't be able to use the five million dollars promised to it for military operations from Costa Rica which are forbidden by the Arias government. And Misurasata is forbidden from going to Honduras to unite with the bulk of the Indian fighters because the Contras and the CIA cannot control the Indian revolution.

Unless the Indians are able to fight their own war for their own goals - without imposed Contra commanders and Cuban-American and Mexican-American CIA advisors, many of the fighters might just sit this one out and wait to take on the weakened victor of the FSLN-FDN war. Or they might declare their nations to be neutral territories and request international peace-keeping forces. Another alternative would be to open up Honduras for the unification or parallel operation of the two Indian forces.

Right now, the U.S. Department of State and the CIA are faced with deciding to support the second war for Indian self-determination or just the Contra war for business as usual. Autonomous Indian nations should not be looked on as a threat but as a democratic regional counterweight to Managua's revolving door of totalitarian regimes.

Without land the only future Indian peoples have in Central America is to be cheap labor. Demands for autonomy are demands for a geographical democracy, where rights are tied to land which guarantee what no central government can: the survival of indigenous peoples.

Worldwide, the self-determination genie is out of the bottle and can't be restrained by state-sanctifying rules that shut out Fourth World indigenous nations. In Central America, but seven states claim sovereign control over some 50 indigenous nations and their six million people and 40 percent of the region's area. Internationally, 168 states assert hegemony over some 3000 nations. State invasion of indigenous nations accounts for 32 of the world's 50 hot wars, the majority of the refugees, and almost all of the genocide.

These state-nation wars over territory are very tenacious, something the contending Nicaraguan sides should consider. The Karen have been fighting against Burma for 38 years, the Eritreans against an Ethiopian monarchy and marxists for 25 years, and the West Papuans against Indonesia for 24 years. The Miskito have the determination and plans to carry on their struggle for a similar period if necessary. Without a territorial solution to Indian land rights, there will be no peace with Nicaragua, regardless of the outcome of the Contra-Sandinista war.

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