

"Nicaragua: This Land is Their Land"

by Pat Hoffman

It was an extraordinary time to be in Nicaragua, November 3-10, 1984. Our group of twenty, mostly from southern California, had arranged an independent visit with the help of Peggy Heiner, a Methodist missionary working with C.E.P.A.D., the Evangelical (which means Protestant) Committee for Aid and Development, who set up appointments and made arrangements for us. We observed that country's elections on Sunday, November 4, had substantive interviews with twenty leaders in churches (including the largely Miskito Indian Moravian Church and the Roman Catholic Church), in community organizations, and in government. We were there when the U. S. spy plane seemingly intentionally broke the sound barrier while doing daily overflights, and a U. S. frigate parked inside Nicaragua's territorial waters at Corinto Harbor.

In spite of the U. S. government's illegal overflights, illegal entry into their territorial waters, illegal and devastating mining of the Corinto harbor earlier in 1984, the loss of more than 7,000 citizens at the hands of the *contras*, salaried, uniformed, and armed by the U. S. government, the people of Nicaragua greeted us with kindness and hospitality. They talked to us, prayed with us, sang with us, hugged us, and beseeched us to do all we can to stop the war the U. S. is conducting against them.

I won't attempt to report all we saw and learned. But I want to report on two major issues: the effect of our war on their country and opportunities for pluralism, dissent, and religious freedom.

The War

The U. S. backed war being carried on by the *contras* is devastating the economy of Nicaragua, has caused over 7,000 deaths, many of them civilians, has displaced 130,000 people from their homes and farms, and has orphaned 5,000 children.

Nicaragua is a very small country, about the size of Southern California, with a population equal to that of the city of Los Angeles-3 million people, 400,000 of whom live in Managua. Attacks by the *contras* come regularly across the northern border from Honduras, and sometimes across the southern border from Costa Rica. But much death and destruction has occurred even in the central part of Nicaragua. Southern Californians can picture it like guerrillas coming from the Tehachapi mountains for raids on civilians in Mojave, Lancaster, and as far south as San Bernardino and Redlands.

Nicaragua is spending 25 percent of its budget on defending itself. In so poor a country such an expenditure is painful, but it isn't a lot of money. In our meeting with Bob Fritz, the General Consul at the U. S. Embassy in Managua, he told us, "Nicaragua has no attack jets. Honduras and Salvador have a few old jets. The Sandinista navy is no threat to its neighbors." Our Administration has expressed concern about Nicaragua's purchases of tanks, hinting at their possible use to aggress against neighboring Honduras. However, most of the shared border between Nicaragua and Honduras is rain forest, a terrain unsuitable for use of tanks. A more likely use of tanks is to protect Managua in the event of a direct U. S. invasion. The *contras* have expressed concern about the government's acquisition of six M1-24 helicopters, which can carry up to eight soldiers and can be equipped with matching guns and missiles. The predominant arms in Nicaragua are rifles which have been distributed to citizens serving in the militia. (It is worth noting that an unpopular government would not arm its citizens.)

Bob Fritz, the Embassy spokesman, told us, "The *contras* do not kill women and children. The only go after military targets." This is in contrast to all other reports we received.

Last June 13 I interviewed a long-time acquaintance, sister Julie Marcicq, who was born in Panama and is a teacher in Jalapa, near the northern border. She has lived in Nicaragua for five years. I asked her about the *contra* attacks in Jalapa county.

(Beginning in 1982) the peasants had to flee the mountains. Many of their families had been killed. They then came in closer to the town of Jalapa and other villages that are closer to the middle of the county, where the road goes by. The fact that they can be trained into the militia and that they are given the arms, makes them a little more able to defend themselves, even though the *contras* come in with much more sophisticated and powerful equipment. The *contras* come in even to destroy our little schools that we have built; our little health post, because they always go for those things. Along the northern border (health and education and economic facilities) have been constantly under attack. In fact two weeks ago Friday (June 1) at 4 a.m. in Ocotol, there was a very heavy attack. *Contras*, very heavily armed, attacked Ocotol in two hours of continuous fire, and there the granaries were lost, and also a saw mill. They always look for the spots where some of the economy or some of the benefits to the people (can) be destroyed. Of course, also, lives are lost in these kinds of things.

While we were in Nicaragua we read a news account of the deaths of six small children in the Nueva Segovia region. Dead were Carmen Rosa, 5; Donald Miguel, 7; Marta Azucena (all in the Castellano family); Rodolfo Castellano, 6; and Myra Soza, 8. The attack in which they died began at 5 a.m. from the mountains with mortars fired into their small community of about 50 families which operate an agricultural cooperative.

We traveled to the city of Matagalpa where we met with Diogones Martinez, who is the Minister of the Region of Matagalpa. We asked about *contra* activity. He told of daily invasions in the eastern portion of

the region all the way to its southern border. He reported 12 deaths of civilians traveling in pick-up trucks in the western sector, east of Jinotega. (That night when our group met with a Nicaraguan coffee producer, Gladys Bold, she told me that her husband had been killed two months previously in the morning as he drove to one of their farms.) Martinez said that on Nov. 2, two days before the election, the *contras* attacked people traveling to the areas where they were registered to vote. A nurse from Managua, a teacher, and a FSLN member, and two other people were killed in these attacks.

The deaths of civilians at the hands of the U. S.-backed *contras* continue. On Dec. 6, 1985, there was small item in the *Los Angeles Times* reporting the deaths of 23 "Nicaraguan civilians" killed near Esteli. "The victims, who included students and workers, were ambushed on their way to work as coffee pickers in the northern province of Nueva Segovia. . It was the largest single casualty figure since the guerrillas started a campaign to sabotage Nicaragua's coffee bean harvest." I phoned Peggy Heiner, our guide in Managua, to get more details about these deaths. She gave me the following report that came from two survivors of the ambush. The victims were traveling to the fields in a truck when the ambush began with gun fire. The guerrillas then moved in on the wounded and dying and bayoneted them. While some were still alive, the guerrillas poured kerosene on the truck and set it afire. The two survivors had been shot and left for dead by the side of the road.

We may ask how and why our government is supporting the killing of innocent people in Nicaragua. Last October, the Congressional embarrassment caused by the publication of a CIA manual that gave instruction on how to "neutralize" community leaders in Nicaragua, resulted in Congress voting to cut off aid to the *contras*. But there were stipulations. \$14 million is in reserve for the *contras* and will be available as of March 1985 if the President can verify that Nicaragua is a threat to its neighbors, and if both houses of Congress agree.

I believe the Administration's campaign to convince the U. S. public that Nicaragua is a threat began the very week Mr. Reagan was reelected. The now verifiably false reports that Russian built MIG fighter planes were arriving in crates at Corinto were accompanied by showy U. S. military bravado: the U. S. spy plane breaking the sound barrier daily and the U. S. frigate (and a few days later a second one) entering the territorial waters at Corinto. We can expect a continuing barrage of false or skewed reports on the "military buildup" in Nicaragua, and statements that the U. S. has no intention of invading that country (If the Administration indicated that we might invade Nicaragua, it would be admitting that there was a reason-in addition to defense against the *contras-for* Nicaragua's purchases of military equipment on the international arms market.)

Recently, *contra* leaders were interviewed and asked how they were able to carry on during this funding gap. Their replies, carried on national public television, were that they are receiving everything they need from the Salvadoran and Honduran military. I don't suppose anyone

reading this report is unaware that the United States is the predominant supplier of money and arms to the Salvadoran and Honduran military. Representative Addabbo of New York, chairman of the House defense appropriations subcommittee has written to Secretary of State George Shultz questioning whether this aid circumvents the will of Congress.

Democracy in Nicaragua

We found the elections in Nicaragua to be well-organized, free and open. Our group of 20 split up into three groups to observe at several polling places in Managua. One of our members was an official observer in the extreme southern part of the country, where she spent two days in and around the town of San Juan del Sur. We took time as a group to compare experiences and observations. We had a breadth of experience that surfaced no contradictions. Many good articles have been written on the elections, so I will not give details about the elections, but I want to emphasize that I consider it a tragedy that this first time ever, fair election in Nicaragua was discounted by our administration as a "sham".

Our group had a particular interest in whether there was religious freedom in Nicaragua. To research this question, we scheduled nine interviews with religious leaders. The people we met with were: Rev. Norman Bent and Rev. Fernando Calomer, Moravian pastors to the Miskito, Rama, and Sumo Indian community; Jim and Margaret Goff, long-time Presbyterian missionaries in Latin America and organizers of Centro Valdivieso in Managua; Dr. Augusto Parajon, President of C.E.P.A.D., a Baptist pastor and a medical doctor; a Catholic sister who asked that her name and community not be mentioned because of previous reprisals from the Catholic Church; Monsignor Pablo Vega, Bishop of Boaco, and President of the Bishops Council (there are ten bishops in Nicaragua); Gilberto Aguirre, Executive Director of C.E.P.A.D; as well as Peggy Heiner, a Methodist missionary with extensive experience in Latin America. These interviews were in addition to worshipping with three different congregations, Baptist, Moravian, and Catholic, during our stay.

Our overwhelming conclusion was that there is full religious freedom in Nicaragua. The Moravian pastors discussed serious and continuing problems between the Miskitos and the government but emphasized that these problems are centuries old, are unrelated to religious expression, and are being resolved. Both pastors had been encouraged and touched by acts of humility and goodwill on the part of government officials who have readily admitted their mistakes in handling resettlement of Indians away from the war zone. Responding to requests from Church leadership, the government has released from prison 367 Indians suspected of collaboration with the *contras* (twenty were still in prison at the time of our interview); the government has given an amnesty and another amnesty is promised soon; Daniel Ortega, newly elected president, invited Miskito leader Brooklyn Rivera to return from exile in Costa Rica to engage in dialogue, and that is happening.

The Catholic hierarchy in Managua has been most vociferous about religious persecution. Bishop Vega told us about four people in his diocese who had been killed. In 1982 the husband of his secretary was taken to jail and was killed there. On July 19, 1983, a woman, her husband and a neighbor were picked up by unknown persons, and three days later found partially burned and partially buried. We asked a number of questions of Bishop Vega, and concluded that these tragic deaths were isolated acts of violence and not reflective of any national policy. They reminded us of accounts in the United States of brutality in jails and by police.

It was clear that Bishop Vega does not feel at home with the Nicaraguan government. He spoke of his freedom under Somoza to go to the jails and speak to the military. He does not feel that freedom now. He also mentioned that there are many more people in jail since the Revolution than under Somoza. We followed up on that issue when we met with the Director of C.E.P.A.D. Aguirre agreed that there are more people in jail now, because "under Somoza they were killed."

All other church leaders we met with spoke with expectation, excitement, and hope for the Sandinista government, the continuing revolution, and the benefits to the poor, who comprise the great majority of the population.

Gilberto Aguirre, Director of C.E.P.A.D., told of several instances in 1981 when local authorities confiscated church buildings from Mormon, Church of the Brethren, and Assembly of God congregations. C.E.P.A.D. went to the government and asked for the return of the buildings to the congregations. The buildings were returned in twenty-four hours. C.E.P.A.D. asked for an explanation of the confiscations and got it. On September 3, 1981, Daniel Ortega came and spoke before three hundred people representing the denominations. Aguirre said, "We are a minority and we were able to make this happen."

The opening paragraph of the new book on Nicaragua, called *Responding to the Cry of the Poor* by Drs. Richard Shaull and Nancy Johns says:

Soon after coming to power, the Sandinistas issued a declaration which reversed the trend of opposition to Christianity evident in modern social revolutions. In it, they stated that "Christians have

been an integral part of our revolutionary history to a degree without precedent in any other revolutionary movement in Latin American and possibly in the world." They guaranteed fully the freedom of everyone to profess and propagate his or her religious beliefs as well as their "profound respect for all the religious celebrations and traditions of our people."

Three Catholic priests have served in the government since its inception in 1979: Fr. Ernesto Cardenal, as minister of Culture, Fr. Miguel D'Escoto, first as National Director of the Adult Literacy Campaign, and now as Vice-Coordinator of the National Organization of Sandinista Defense Committees. I have been fortunate to meet Ernesto Cardenal and Miguel D'Escoto in Los Angeles, and found both men to be gentle, caring people. While in Nicaragua we met with Dr. Reinaldo Tefel,

Minister of the Institute for Social Security and Well-being. He is a committed Christian who has spent his life working with the poor. The "Junta" asked him to direct the Institute. Dr. Tefel said, "The revolution has indeed given me an extraordinary opportunity to live out my Christian faith, serving the poor."

On the issue of pluralism and dissent, we observed a much broader range of positions in the seven parties running candidates in the Nicaraguan election than was present in the United States. There were three parties to the left of the FSLN (the Sandinista Party) and three to the right politically. I personally saw the presidential candidate from the Communist Party (MAP-ML) when he came to his neighborhood polling place to vote. The press was clustered around him with T.V. cameras and notebooks just as occurs here. We saw campaign posters from all the parties all over Managua and in Matagalpa. People we talked with seemed relaxed about telling us which party they supported (and they weren't all for the Sandinista). One man was frank to say he wasn't voting because "It won't make any difference." That sounded familiar.

We met with Xabier Chamorro, editor of *El Nuevo Diario*, one of three newspapers in the country, and, I think the most independent. *Barricada* is a government paper, *La Prensa* is so partisan against the government that it frequently shirks its responsibility to report the news. (For instance, *La Prensa* did not report news about the CIA manual.) We asked Chamorro about press censorship. He said, "I'm not happy with it. There was no censorship the first two years after the Triumph. Censorship began after Reagan came to office and the 'Sante Fe' document was issued." (A document written in Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1980 which asserted that war not negotiations would bring peace in Central America.) Chamorro went on to say, "Only military news is censored. It must come from government sources. It can be supplemented by our own sources, but the government censors it to be sure it doesn't give information to the *contras*."

In conclusion, I would say that the biggest threat to democracy in Nicaragua is U. S. intervention in that country's life through: the war we are waging by our surrogates, the *contras*; the C I A's interventions, such as mining of their harbors; the economic collapse we are orchestrating through pressuring international banking organizations and other nations to refuse loans to Nicaragua, and by restricting trade. If Nicaragua becomes dependent on the U.S.S.R. it will not be because Nicaragua desires dependency on any nation, but because the United States left them no other options.

We found the Nicaraguan people to be kind, generous, and determined. They are a people who have caught a vision of a nation that embodies Christian values: care for the poor, equal concern for all people, a readiness to confess short-comings, a willingness to offer forgiveness. Gilberto Aguirre said, "We are not living in heaven. We are living in a country, just like you." It is their country and I would like the United States to leave them alone to develop their vision.