



MOTHERS OF POLITICAL PRISONERS



Mothers of political prisoners in Nicaragua who joined forces 4 months ago in an effort to bring the plight of relatives incarcerated for violating security laws to the attention of the public have themselves become the targets of reprisal by Nicaragua's Sandinista regime.

Several activist mothers have asserted that they have been detained and interrogated by members of Nicaragua's State Security (DGSE) police. They also said that family members have been harassed, abused, and arrested and that their imprisoned sons, husbands, and brothers have received harsher treatment. The mothers, however, are strong in their resolve to organize for more humane treatment and general amnesty for political prisoners.

The group, which calls itself the "January 22 Movement of Mothers of Political Prisoners," estimates that 10,000 political prisoners are being detained, including prisoners convicted of collaborating with resistance forces and some 2,000 former National Guardsmen. The



Above: Legal assistant Abel Reyes (left), and a mother activist meet with Gary Grappo, Human Rights Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Nicaragua.



Left: A mother cries as she explains that her husband died in the revolution and her three sons have been in prison for 3 years.

Ministry of Interior claims a total prison population of 9,691, according to the *New York Times*.

Approximately 1,500 mothers belong to the movement, although some say that as many as 4,000 women have joined.

The movement seeks to obtain a general decree of amnesty for all political prisoners, to obtain personal and legal assistance for the political prisoners, and to abolish the Anti-Somocista People's Tribunals (TPAs). The roundly condemned and highly political TPAs have a conviction rate of over 90 percent.

"It is most sensible to organize the mothers to achieve these objectives," said Enrique Sotelo Borgen, an opposition lawyer and member of the National Assembly representing the Conservative Party, who is advising the group, "because this is a regime of terror and in this regime it is the men who run the greatest risks. The majority of the prisoners are poor *campesinos* [peasants] who lack legal defense." He noted that they want to give at least some protection to the families as well.

Founders of the movement, who met while waiting in line at



Managua's two largest prisons to visit inmate relatives, approached Sotelo and others for assistance in organizing the group. The Social Christian Party has taken a position of support for the movement.

"We began to organize because we realized only then could we secure the release of our families," said a former Sandinista militant and one of the movement's founders. "We were motivated to organize. In this country anyone who speaks against the revolution is called a counter-revolutionary. We feel we have a moral responsibility to criticize what we see going on, and the government does not like this."

Chester Alberto Guevara, liaison between the Social Christian Party and the movement, explained that while the group has the protection of the party, not all the women are members of the party.

Affiliation with the movement is not risk-free. "All of these women have been the subject of repression because of affiliation," said Abel Reyes, a legal assistant working with the group.

"Even before the group was formed, we suffered repression," said

Silvia Aleman Mejia, one of the group's organizers. "We would go to CPDH [Permanent Commission on Human Rights], submit our statement, and our prisoner relatives would suffer the consequences. We have always run a risk, but because our loved ones are in jail, we are willing to take that risk. We're not doing it for our own relatives, but for everyone in the country who suffers."

According to a complaint filed in a Managua court last week, reported the *New York Times*, security agents visited Ms. Aleman at her home in Ticuantepe on March 21. She said in her complaint that the agents came "to threaten and intimidate me into stopping my participation in the activities of the January 22 Movement of Mothers of Political Prisoners, or else I would be arrested," the *Times* reported. "They also told me that in compliance with higher orders, they were warning me not to attend meetings of the committee," she said.

One activist mother who requested that her name not be used, said, "The day after we organized, the State Security occupied my house and took me to El Chipote [prison] for

8 hours. Four State Security agents entered my house. They wanted to find out if this group really existed, and if I belonged to a political party."

Another activist mother who also requested anonymity said she was detained and interrogated at El Chipote for 5 hours. "Some of us were stripped at El Chipote," she said. "While I was there, various people came in. They called on me to make a statement, took photos in various positions, and fingerprinted me."

On March 31, eight State Security agents and their police dogs entered the home of activist Concepcion Salazar Gonzalez, claiming they were searching for "counterrevolutionary documents." The security police struck her pregnant daughter and arrested her younger son, Fanor de los Angeles Salazar, 21. Her eldest son, Domingo Gamali Salazar Fornos, had been arrested in June 1986 and sentenced to 11 years, allegedly for being a member of the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance Force (FDN), a charge she vehemently denies.

Ms. Salazar was taken into custody and interrogated at El Chipote prison where guards tried to make her sign a document attesting that both her sons were members of the FDN. According to Ms. Salazar, the guards told her she would never see her sons again if she did not sign the paper. They also threatened to torture her sons if she continued her activities in the mothers movement, she said.

Her son's whereabouts were unknown between March 11 and 31, at which time she received word from him. "You see, we must continue to fight," she said. "He is not dead."

The mothers' first effort came in January of this year when they drafted a letter to the Secretaries General of the United Nations and the Organization of American States



The mothers hold a meeting at the Social Christian Party headquarters in Managua.

to seek help for the human rights abuses occurring in the Nicaraguan prison system. The movement currently is drafting its charter; however, it has not been granted the formal legal status required of all non-governmental organizations.

Although still in its embryonic stage, the movement already has sponsored two assemblies, which drew between 600 and 800 people despite government efforts to quell the demonstrations. The government succeeded in disbanding a third assembly on March 8 by blocking road access to the Social Christian Party headquarters where it was to be held.

"We plan to organize other events and lease a large house where we can meet and house people overnight, but our priority is to continue to fight for general amnesty," said Sotelo.

"The only chance we have is to be organized," added the former militant member of the movement.

Several of the mothers told *Times* reporter Stephen Kinzer that their sons had been singled out for harsher treatment in jail because news of the movement's activities had reached guards. Kinzer also reported that the movement is preparing a list of cases, which will include "names of some of the prison

SANDINISTAS STEP UP HARASSMENT OF MOTHERS

Concepción Salazar Gonzalez, a member of the January 22 Movement of Mothers of Political Prisoners, reported that 2 days after meeting with U.S. Reps. James H. Scheuer (D-NY) and Lindy Boggs (D-LA) on April 26, she was summoned to El Chipote prison by the State Security (DGSE) where four agents interrogated her about her involvement in meetings with visiting foreigners. They also cautioned that further involvement in the mothers movement could jeopardize the lives of her two sons. Undaunted, Ms. Salazar participated in a May 2 meeting with Rep. John J. Rhodes III (R-AZ).

Another mother active in the movement, Tomasa Hernandez, a former militant in the Sandinista National Liberation Front, said that the DGSE had summoned her to El Chipote on April 23 where she was interrogated on her involvement in the movement. Ms. Hernandez told the U. S. Embassy's human rights officer that her brother had just been drafted into the Sandinista army and that her 14-year-old son would suffer a similar fate if she continued her activities in the movement.

Ms. Hernandez said she refused to cooperate but that she had not gone to either the April 26 or May 2 meeting out of fear for her family.

authorities who take cruel reprisals in the jails."

Some of the prisoners have organized work and hunger strikes to

protest prison policies and treatment, according to the mothers. They said that 16 prisoners went on a hunger strike last January to protest State Security's policy of housing common criminals with Sandinista ties with political prisoners to harass and spy on the them. "There are many prisoners who refuse to work. They lose visitation rights and are denied food. There also is a group of prisoners who refuse to work because they are not given enough food or water," said one mother.

Another activist mother said her son refused to work "because he was accused of being a murderer, a thief, and against the revolution, and he didn't want to give credence to those accusations." □

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