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NICARAGUAN REPRESSION OF MISKITO INDIANS

THE CHRISTMAS EXODUS

Heightened repression of Miskito Indians in Nicaragua by the Nicaraguan government has once again gained outside attention. Since 1979, Sandinista practices of confiscation of private property and the forced export of local agricultural products has left the population facing severe shortages. The east coast Indian population has also had to face shortages of other food items, medical and school supplies, and clothing.

Despite Sandinista assertions concerning the releases of many Miskito political prisoners in the fall of 1983, and the Nicaraguan government's promotion of a limited amnesty, Miskito Indians continue to flee the country due to the lack of freedom.

The amnesty is limited in time (it covers only the period after December 1981) and in scope (only northern Zelaya province). The Indians are dissatisfied because they must return to Nicaragua, without any guarantees of safety, to take advantage of the program.

Opposition leaders have also stated that the amnesty does nothing to redress the grievances that prompted them to flee Nicaragua in the first place.

The Christmas exodus of over one thousand Miskitos who fled to Honduras on foot and at times under attack by government troops took place against a background of Sandinista repression and cruelty. Because the Sandinistas have prohibited domestic and international press from traveling to the region without first obtaining a special permit, news from the east coast is difficult to obtain.

The Miskitos

The East Coast region of Nicaragua has long been physically, historically, and culturally isolated from the country's mainstream. The population is primarily Indian, mostly Miskito Indians, and black.

They are traditionally religious (Moravian, Roman Catholic and Church of God), conservative in manner and keenly proud of their ethnic uniqueness. They were allowed relative autonomy, even under former Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza.

What Has Been Happening

Despite Miskito support for the Sandinistas against Somoza, the Nicaraguan government in 1979 embarked on a program to "rescue" the Atlantic Coast. Cuban and Nicaraguan personnel began to flood into the area.

The net effect of this program, according to the human rights group, Freedom House, "is to deprive them of their socio-cultural identity, an identity based on a communal lifestyle, a democratically based selection of leadership and a passable way of life centered on their churches."

Almost immediately, the Indians' long-cherished autonomy began to fade away. Their traditional and freely elected leaders were replaced with Sandinista-appointed authorities. Many were Cuban; most were strangers. The lives of the Indians were redrawn along Marxist lines.

From the outset, the triumphant Sandinistas experienced difficulties bringing the Indians under their dominion. Demonstrations, some turning violent, broke out along the east coast as Indians and blacks protested the presence of Cuban security force advisors and teachers in 1980.

Beginning in 1981, thousands of Indians were evacuated from communities in the Rio Coco area and the northeastern coastal area in an attempt to move the entire population to areas under close government control.

The reason given for this was the danger of attacks by anti-Sandinista forces. However, the evacuations began before contra activity along the border with Honduras began in earnest. Even afterwards, the Sandinistas overreacted.

According to the Freedom House report: "The government's claim to be reacting to a security threat ... would be a gross over-reaction even if the charge of some guerrilla activity is verifiable. Eleven raids by small bands of guerrillas cannot justify one of the largest military operations in Nicaraguan history." (Emphasis added)

Nicaraguan troops attacked Miskito refugee camps in Honduras, where they had fled to escape Nicaraguan internal deportation; some Indians were buried alive, clergy and leaders were imprisoned; women and children were executed during the evacuation process; and whole villages were burned.

An American professor from the University of California at Berkeley has lived with and studied the Indians for the last fifteen years. He found that Indian peoples have been subjected to a brutal systematic policy to force them into the Sandinista revolution. This, he says, strips the Indians of their culture, identity, rights, lands, resources, as well as the freedom to influence their own destiny or to determine their own choices of how to live.

Briefly stated, the Sandinistas have implemented a policy of Indian ethnocide that is generated internally from their own Marxist ideology and racist attitudes. When the Indians resisted, the Sandinista Front for the Liberation of Nicaragua (FSLN) began an escalated program of counterinsurgency that continues unabated.

These are but a few of the FSLN violations of the Indian peoples: One-fourth of the coast's 165,000 Indians are either in "relocation camps" or refugee camps. One-half of Miskito and Sumo villages have been destroyed. One thousand Indian civilians are in prison, missing, or dead. Indian rights to self-government, land, and resources have been abolished.

Subsistence cultivation, fishing and hunting are strictly controlled to the point of non-existence in many areas and access to staple foods is so limited that hunger is an everyday problem and starvation a real possibility. Many villages have had no medicine or doctors for over two years. Freedom of movement is denied or severely restricted and in many areas canoes -- the people's major means of transport -- have been confiscated or their use prohibited.

More than 35 communities have suffered massive Sandinista military invasions during which innocent civilians are subjected to arbitrary arrests, killings, interrogations, torture, rapes, theft and destruction of property.

The Sandinistas try to force the people to divulge the location of the Indians' secret base camps and to terrorize the villagers so that they will not support or join the military resistance.

The Sandinista ruling council has banned all Miskito radio stations and publishing, prevented the teaching of indigenous languages, and has required clergy in areas under their control to submit sermons for Sandinista censorship prior to delivery. Indians must carry Sandinista-approved travel documents in order to move outside of their respective villages and towns. Children are recruited into the militia. If the children fail to report for militia duty, they are imprisoned.

Miskito Objections

The Miskitos have not accepted this situation. In the words of one noted authority on Miskito Indians, contained in an article in the New York Times December 12, 1983:

"From the Indians' perspective, their war is a response to Sandinista military, economic and political oppression of their people and expropriation of their land under the guise of agrarian reform. The Indians say that the land is all they have to provide a living and to give to their children. Without it, they say, they would die as a people. They insist that their rebellion is more potent than those of the other major anti-Sandinista guerrilla factions because it has wider popular support, its goal is solely to push the Sandinistas from Indian land and villages, and it is being fought on home ground."

The Refugees

Since the forced internal deportations began and other Sandinista violations of human rights intensified, thousands of Miskito Indians have sought a better way of life.

They have "voted with their feet," with most of them going to Honduras. They are accustomed to basic individual liberties and object to harsh Sandinista controls imposed under the guise of "the revolution."

In Honduras, the Indians have been able to engage in farming of private plots, although most have been forced by economic circumstances to remain in refugee camps assisted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) until they are able to return to Nicaragua.

The Christmas Exodus

The story of the latest group of Miskito Indians to flee shows only too well the seriousness of Sandinista repression. It illustrates not only the dangers of attempting to evade a harsh, Marxist-Leninist government, but also the cynicism and deception of that government in the face of international public criticism.

On December 19, 1983, the residents of the resettlement town of Francia Sirpe in northeastern Nicaragua attended Mass in a festive mood, knowing that plans had been made to depart to Honduras on the following day. According to the Indians, the Sandinistas were preparing to transplant the whole Indian population of Francia Sirpe to the mountainous region north of Managua.

The villagers had voted on the question of leaving, with the majority deciding to leave. Bishop Salvador Schlaefer, the Bishop of Zelaya, and a Roman Catholic priest, both American citizens who had long worked with the Miskito Indians, were told of their intentions and decided to accompany them. According to Father Wendelin Shafer, one of the priests, the Indians "lacked the freedom to live their own culture" as they want to live it and have always lived it.

It was a matter of escaping the control of a government that was oppressing them. As Bishop Schlaefer put it: "The Miskito people had the idea that the government tended toward Marxism and Communism and ... they wanted respect for the temples of God and for their religion."

Bishop Schlaefer, continuing a career of spiritual service to the Indians that has spanned over 30 years, accompanied the Indians.

Later, in Honduras, other refugees reported that many villagers had been convinced to go when they heard the experiences of Miskito political prisoners. Those released by the government relayed experiences of torture and beatings while being held in Sandinista prisons.

One of the former prisoners who made the trek to Honduras bore bayonet marks on his neck. He reported that he had been jailed because he tried to get medicine for his sick brother in a nearby town.

He said the Sandinistas arrested him because he did not have the appropriate travel documentation. When he did not return, his ill brother inquired as to his whereabouts to authorities and was also thrown into jail.

Government Attacks

During the second day of their exodus from Nicaragua, Sandinista troops attempted to intercept them, but were prevented from doing so by a group of armed Indians from whom the village leaders had requested protection.

Father Shafer reported in Honduras that he thought the Sandinistas were trying to attack the fleeing Indians. According to villagers, Nicaraguan government planes flew overhead on two different days, apparently trying to spot the marchers.

At the same time, the Nicaraguan government had circulated false reports to the press regarding the villagers' departure, alleging that they were coerced into leaving by an armed anti-Sandinista force and that they had kidnapped Bishop Schlaefer and an American priest.

Apparently the Sandinistas were confident that they could prevent the fleeing Indians from reaching the Honduran border. Sandinistas repeatedly attacked points where the villagers were expected to cross the river from Nicaragua into Honduras, but all Miskito Indians were able to slip across on December 23.

Both Bishop Schlaefer and Father Shafer arrived safely, despite genuine worries for their safety after the Sandinistas had announced to the world press that the Bishop had been killed. Nicaragua and other governments which operate with totalitarian methods often will claim someone has died even before they are actually able to accomplish the killing.

The Honduran Army, along with the UNHCR, was alerted to the Nicaraguan government's attempt to use the media to avert a propaganda disaster created by a thousand Miskito Indians fleeing their repression. They were able to assure the Indians' safety once they reached the other side of the river.

The statements of these men, as well as the testimony of the Miskitos themselves, cast new light on the deplorable record of human rights violations perpetrated by the Sandinistas.

Current Situation

The continuation of forced internal deportation, harassment, suppression of freedom of religion, freedom of movement, freedom to choose one's political leaders, freedom to choose one's place of residence, and other violations of human rights are the reality for Miskito Indians in Nicaragua.

The recent limited amnesty has been loudly proclaimed by the Sandinistas but the Miskitos as well as the international community appear justified in their skepticism. In fact, recent reports indicate that the Indians have been so unresponsive to the amnesty proposal that Sandinista soldiers have crossed the border into Honduras and attempted to force some of the Indians to return, presumably to demonstrate the amnesty's attractiveness.

This view was underscored by the use of Sandinista troops to attack innocent Miskito villagers trying to leave their homelands and by the clumsy attempts of the Sandinistas to lay the ground work for the murder of the American citizen priests who had accompanied the Indians.

As a Miskito leader recently told the visiting Berkeley professor:

"I may die, but that's not important because the boys will carry on our struggle. I'm going to stay here and fight to free my people and our land. Please give fraternal revolutionary greetings from an Indian warrior to your people and tell them that we are not coming out of the bush until we get our land back."