

World & Nation

Despite many hardships, in Nicaragua 'Nobody gives up'

EDITOR'S NOTE: NC reporter Laurie Hansen recently returned from a Catholic Relief Services tour of Nicaragua. We are happy to present her perceptions of this troubled nation, beginning with this overview.

By Laurie Hansen

Managua, Nicaragua (NC) — Brightly colored government billboards on what seems to be every other street corner in dusty downtown Managua remind passers-by that in Nicaragua "Nobody Gives Up."

The residents of this Central American nation appear to be taking the Sandinista admonition to heart, although in different ways.

Nicaragua, a nation that is 87 percent Catholic, has been in recent years the subject of heated political debate in the United States and within the Catholic Church.

In their 1987 statement on Central America, the U.S. bishops wrote that public debate on the region has focused too little on "economic crises of growth, of inflation, unemployment and debt." Instead, they said, it has dealt almost exclusively with "one aspect of one country, Nicaragua's Marxism."

In Nicaragua, interviews showed conflicting opinions about the Sandinista revolution's effect on the nation's economy — now wracked by inflation and shortages. Some people were pessimistic. Some were optimistic. Most were philosophical about the hardships.

"Life is hard," said a woman interviewed as she sold bananas at a marketplace in Masaya, a town 20 miles outside Managua. "But life goes on," she added with a sigh as she made a sale.

"We are a country with high numbers of unskilled laborers. It is our inheritance from the Somoza years. But as more and more people are trained, we will leave the past behind," said Eduardo, a student at a school for auto mechanics in the town of Chiquitillo, north of Managua. His mention of Somoza referred to Anastasio Somoza, the late president of Nicaragua ousted by the Sandinista revolution.

"Prices have skyrocketed, and the poor are poorer than ever," said a well-to-do Managua businessman who called the Sandinistas "treacherous" and "Machiavellian." He said he now must bribe people and travel long distances to purchase "quality food and clothing."

Making ends meet is a daily struggle for the vast majority of Nicaraguans, as the economy continues to unravel. A U.S.-financed counterrevolutionary war, a U.S.-imposed economic blockade and the Nicaraguan government's own economic mistakes are blamed for causing severely curtailed services and supplies throughout the nation.

For example:

● Such items as shampoo and soap are nearly impossible to buy unless one has the right connections or lots of money. Only the best hotels have toilet paper, and only the finest restaurants offer patrons greater variety than tortillas, rice and beans.

● Food is rationed, and Managuans stand in long lines at the supermarket on designated days. Clothing stores are frequently out of stock.

● Gasoline is hard to come by, as are vehicles in good working condition. Owners of U.S.-made cars purchased before the economic blockade attempt to make their own repairs using Soviet or handmade auto parts.

● As a result of a bus shortage, many of Managua's workers travel to and from work each morning standing shoulder-to-shoulder on the back of pickup trucks. At stoplights children with baskets of bananas go from truck to truck to sell their produce. Many streets are unpaved.

● "Campesinos" — rural peasants who have their own small parcels of land to farm as a result of an aggressive land redistribution program undertaken since the Sandinista revolution — work the land using animal-driven plows. Tractors are few.

One reason for the food shortages, according to Nicaraguans, is that the bulk of the nation's 200,000 soldiers used to be farmers.



Two boys try to earn a few coins selling papers. Survival is a daily struggle in Nicaragua.

On the plus side, working with low-paid church- and private-agency personnel and "internacionalistas" — the label given to often young, idealistic foreigners who came to Nicaragua after the 1979 revolution — some Nicaraguans are getting their first experience in setting up cooperatives, studying new trades and building potable water projects in an effort to improve living standards.

"Most Managuans are poor, so they are reaping the benefits of the revolution," said Gilberto Aguirre Escobar, executive director of a Managua-based Protestant development association known as CEPAD.

Father Alfonso Alvarado, pastor of St. Rita Parish in the town of Teustepe in central Nicaragua, said he believes most Nicaraguans are better off under the Sandinistas.

"At least now the poor have rights. Before if a worker had a conflict with a landowner, the landowner would win every time. Now the poor are winning," the priest said.

But in rural areas, for example, the profits of some middle-class small landowners have been severely cut by the war economy and inflation, Aguirre said. "When there's a lack of rice and beans, people blame the government," he said.

Some Nicaraguans are dissatisfied with the pace of the Sandinistas' social reforms. Candido Medrano Hernandez, a member of a cooperative sponsored by the U.S. bishops' Catholic Relief Services in the town of San Isidro, said co-op members back the Sandinistas but are angry that the government has not responded to their request for a health clinic.

The Sandinista National Liberation Front — a coalition of Marxists, socialists and Christian Democrats — has been in power in Nicaragua since 1979 when it ousted Somoza, who was accused of institutionalizing human rights abuses.

Throughout Nicaragua, houses in which Somoza colonels once lived have been

converted into government offices or are now the homes of Sandinista officials. The Sandinistas have confiscated 3,500 of Somoza's properties nationwide, including farms and businesses. About 40 percent of the economy is government-controlled.

Economic challenges facing the Sandinistas are major, but the government has earmarked nearly 50 percent of the national budget for military spending and has sharply cut financing of social services. As a result, the nation has yet to recover from the night in December 1972 when an earthquake struck and downtown Managua fell.

Even today much of Managua is empty and overgrown with weeds. A few destroyed buildings that were never bulldozed remain. Among the landmarks still standing is the hollowed-out cathedral of Managua.

With 12,000 Nicaraguan cordobas to the U.S. dollar and an inflation rate exceeding 600 percent, U.S. tender is a hot commodity in Nicaragua. Despite government exhortations against the practice, Nicaraguans eagerly accept U.S. dollars in exchange for goods, and a black market is flourishing.

Nicaraguan journalist William Grigsby, writing in Managua's pro-Sandinista newspaper Nuevo Diario, argues that the government has mismanaged the economy.

He said the government puts its resources into a huge new sugar mill and a sophisticated dairy installation which are still several years away from production, while state coffee plantations lack minimal social services.

In addition, he said, Nicaragua's farm policy has enabled large private landowners to receive great incentives, while those with small- or middle-sized farms "have been hard hit by shortages of basic tools."

The current government's economic policies are erratic, Grigsby said. "While fabulous so-called strategic projects are under construction, the results of which are still not in sight, investments in (existing) productive installations in the countryside ... have been insufficient and incoherent."

Diocesan Appointments



Bishop Matthew H. Clark has announced the following appointments:

Father David L. Bonin from temporary campus minister at the University of Rochester's Newman Community to temporary administrator of St. Margaret Mary's Church in Apalachin, effective January 11, and for the duration of the sabbatical of the pastor, Father David P. Simon.

Father Bernard L. Carges, pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Ithaca, to sabbatical at the Institute of Continuing Theological Education at the North American College in Rome, from January 1 to June 30, 1988.

Father Monsignor George A. Cocuzzi, from temporary administrator of St. Christopher's Church in North Chili to temporary parochial vicar of Immaculate Conception Church in Ithaca, effective January 1, and for the duration of the sabbatical of the pastor, Father Bernard L. Carges.

Father Donald J. Curtiss, from parochial vicar to temporary administrator of Immaculate Conception Church in Ithaca, effective January 1, and for the duration of the sabbatical of the pastor, Father Bernard L. Carges.

Father William F. Laird, from vice officialis to officialis of the Diocese of Rochester, effective January 1.

Father David P. Simon, pastor of St. Margaret Mary's Church in Apalachin to sabbatical at The American College of the Catholic University of Louvain from January 11 to June 30.

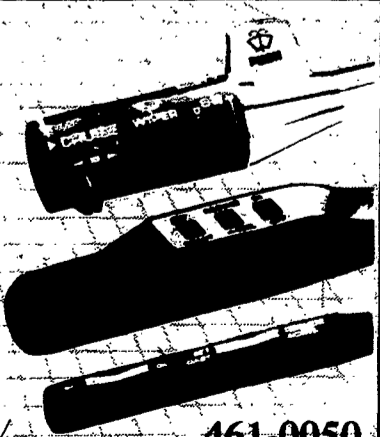
Father Daniel P. Tormey, director of Becket Hall and the Ministry to Priests Program, to sabbatical at The American College of the Catholic University of Louvain, effective January 1.

Father Thomas J. Valenti to temporary director of Becket Hall and temporary coordinator of the Review for Growth in Ministry Process, with residence at Becket Hall, while continuing as director of vocations and director of seminarians, effective January 1 and continuing for the duration of the sabbatical of Father Daniel P. Tormey.

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