

World & Nation

Development workers claim they are attacked by Contras

By Laurie Hansen
Managua, Nicaragua (NC) — Nicaraguan development workers who are helping the poor to form cooperatives and improve farming methods told members of a Catholic Relief Services study tour that they are targeted by U.S.-backed anti-Sandinista rebels.

Atrocities are committed by both Sandinista soldiers and Contra rebels, but the rebels are attempting to destabilize the nation's economy by attacking development projects, said Jesuit Father Antonio Fernandez Ibanez in a November interview.

The priest works for the John XXIII Institute, a private organization that promotes social and economic development projects in Nicaragua. He and other relief and development workers spoke to social action leaders from five U.S. dioceses who

visited Nicaragua in November to view CRS projects.

On October 15, for example, when the Contras tried to take the town of Santo Tomas, located to the east of Managua, they exploded a bomb outside the Clinica Santo Tomas, a health clinic funded in part by Catholic Relief Services, the overseas development agency of the U.S. bishops.

"It is our belief that the bomb was aimed at us," said a clinic staff member.

"All the patients left saying they would rather die elsewhere," the clinic's nurse said in an interview less than a month later. "We haven't had any patients staying overnight since then."

Gilberto Aguirre Escobar, executive director of CEPAD, a Managua-based Protestant development agency, said that four agency workers had been killed by the

Contras. "They cut the throat of a 21-year-old lady who was one of our health promoters," Aguirre noted.

When Catholic Relief Services, working in cooperation with CARE, tried to set up a course in the town of Chaquitillo to train women to be car mechanics, they searched long and hard before they located an Oakland, Calif., woman who was able and willing to teach the course, said Fred Royce, a CARE project coordinator. Two weeks after the woman arrived, a Contra attack three miles from Chaquitillo killed numerous civilians, and the woman decided to return home, Royce said. Until a female auto mechanic can be found, the CRS-sponsored classes are on hold.

As at development projects throughout the country, Sandinista soldiers carrying rifles stand guard at the CARE-sponsored Luis

Hernandez Aguilar School of Agricultural Mechanization in Chaquitillo.

"People are surprised there are soldiers all over the place," said Royce, a native of Jacksonville, Fla.

"The Contras like to attack anything that represents progress and change, especially new programs that train people, like co-ops and health facilities," Royce explained. "It's just a fact of life in rural Nicaragua. Everybody's got guns."

A 1986 report by the human rights organization Americas Watch criticized the Sandinistas, their military opponents and the United States for the "worsening" human rights situation in Nicaragua. The report said the victims of the human rights violations "are the people of Nicaragua; their oppressors are the Nicaraguan government, the Contras and the United States."

Sandinistas are willing to 'pay a heavy price' for peace, Jesuit observes

By Laurie Hansen
Managua, Nicaragua (NC) — Sandinista government officials, aware that Nicaraguans have grown tired of war, are now willing to "pay a heavy price" in exchange for peace, said a Jesuit priest and former top university official. But, he said, they're not ready to quit until the United States stops funding the anti-Sandinista Contra forces, officially known as the Nicaraguan Resistance Movement.

"The Sandinistas are ready to say 'no' to Soviet advisers and weapons from abroad on the condition that the war ends. But they are afraid the United States will not agree to pull its Contra bases out of Honduras," said Father Antonio Fernandez Ibanez, who served as vice president of Managua's

government-funded, Jesuit-run University of Central America.

Father Ibanez said the Central American peace plan signed August 7 by the presidents of five Central American nations had given Nicaraguans "tremendous hope." He called the government's decision to name Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo head of the Nicaraguan National Reconciliation Commission a good political move.

"It shows, in my opinion, that the government does want peace," Father Ibanez said.

The priest made these comments less than one week after the peace plan was scheduled to go into effect. Since then, one attempt by the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan Resistance to indirectly negotiate a cease-fire

with the cardinal's mediation ended without agreement. A second meeting, scheduled for December 14, was delayed by the Sandinistas at the last minute.

A Spaniard, Father Ibanez works for the John XXIII Institute, a private organization on the university campus promoting social and economic development projects in Nicaragua. A primary source of funding for the John XXIII Institute is the Quixote Center, a Catholic justice and peace office based just outside Washington.

Father Ibanez said that as long as the United States continues to fund the Nicaraguan rebels, the Sandinistas will not call a real cease-fire. "A country has to defend itself," he said.

The priest described the Sandinista leaders

as both "altruistic" and "romantic."

"They are generally good people, but they have made big political, social and economic errors" he asserted. "Their lack of management ability is evident. They have not obeyed a consistent plan or strategy since they assumed power."

While advances have been made in the areas of literacy and health education under the Sandinistas, Father Ibanez said individual Sandinista soldiers have been responsible for myriad human rights violations.

"Most often the violations have occurred when a young kid is given a uniform and a rifle. He gets drunk one day and goes out and kills somebody," he said, adding that those accused of committing such offenses are given trials and many are eventually imprisoned.

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