

Exiles fear deportation following Chamorro victory

By Laurie Hansen
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Jubilation over Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's recent political defeat has been short-lived in the Nicaraguan exile community, where concern grows daily over anticipated asylum denials and deportations.

During the past eight years of war between U.S.-backed contra rebels and the East bloc-supported Nicaraguan army, large numbers of Nicaraguans in the United States who were denied legal status or never applied for legalization have been allowed by tacit agreement to remain here.

But now that former President Ronald Reagan's dreams have been realized, Ortega's Sandinista Party is out of power and U.S.-backed Violeta Chamorro is in, many fear such special consideration will become a thing of the past.

"We anticipate a major rise in asylum denials" for Nicaraguans, said Jesuit Father Richard Ryscavage, deputy director of Migration and Refugee Services at the U.S. Catholic Conference.

While many Nicaraguan exiles would like to return to their homeland, "the situation there is still unstable, and could develop into a civil war again," Father Ryscavage said.

He said the Chamorro victory "cuts the heart out of" proposed "Moakley-DeConcini" legislation that would have officially suspended deportation of Salvadorans and Nicaraguans until conditions improved in their nations.

Bob Maynes, spokesman for Sen. Dennis DeConcini, D-Ariz., agreed. "Obviously the change of government in Nicaragua significantly reduces the reason" for including Nicaraguans in the legislation, Maynes said April 27.

If the bill were to be amended to include only Salvadorans — as it was originally introduced seven years ago — supporters fear it would not get Republican support needed for passage. "The reverse argument is that the more people included (in the bill), the more concern there would be about unrestrained immigration," Maynes said.

He acknowledged, however, that the legislation — which was approved by the House and pending consideration on the Senate floor prior to the Chamorro victory — is apt to go nowhere soon.

Meanwhile, church officials are demanding that the federal government accept responsibility for Nicaraguan exiles' plight, which they point out has been affected by U.S. State Department policy.

Suggesting that Nicaraguans who sold everything and abandoned homes before leaving their "patria" can suddenly "pull up stakes" and return as a result of the Chamorro victory is "too simplistic," according to Father Ryscavage.

"The issue of employment has to be considered. There's no work" in Nicaragua, he said. Observers blame the civil war, a U.S.-imposed economic blockade and Nicaragua's own economic mistakes for the nation's devastated economy.

The U.S. government is apt to get pressure from Chamorro to refrain from deporting Nicaraguans in hopes that a delay would give the tiny nation time to rebuild its faltering economy, said Monsignor Bryan O. Walsh, director of Catholic Community Services for the Archdiocese of Miami.

Denying Nicaraguans' asylum claims and beginning deportations soon will serve to "drive more people into the



U.N. observers (in the foreground) watch a column of Sandinista army trucks pulling out from a military base at El Ayote on Sunday, April 22.

underground economy" in Miami, Monsignor Walsh said, since at this point "there's nothing to go back to."

Father Ryscavage compared the Nicaraguans' plight to that of Poles, whose applications for refugee status once were automatically approved.

But what country would grant refugee status to a Pole today with Solidarity running the country, asks Father Ryscavage. "Many Poles got stuck in the pipeline. They liquidated all their property in Poland," he said.

Concerned Nicaraguan exiles arrive daily at Miami's Our Lady of Divine Providence Parish, located within blocks of the city's Little Managua neighborhood.

reported Josefina Paguaga, 65, a Nicaraguan exile who is a volunteer counselor at the parish.

Sending them back to Nicaragua now would be unjust, she said. "I love my country, too, and wish to return one day. But the Nicaraguan economy cannot support us all yet. Many of the homes there still have no water or light. Food is difficult to find," Paguaga said, noting that her home in Ocotal, Nicaragua, was taken over by Sandinistas and is now occupied by another family.

Vilma Reyes, 42, a member of the parish who fled Boaco, Nicaragua, in 1988, and has applied for asylum, says she was told

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