

Month In Review

Foreign Relations

President Daniel Ortega, said at a ceremony on May 15 where he received 130 busses donated by the Russian government, that he did not expect the United States to renew Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) funding that was suspended after accusations of fraud during the Nov. 2008 municipal elections. He said that US Ambassador Robert Callahan had relayed a Secretary of State Hilary Clinton statement that the funds would not be renewed unless the election results were revised. Ortega said, "Thank God that, just as today the Russian Federation has given us these buses without conditions, we also have my dear brother Chavez who made the decision that the ALBA [Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas] will assume the burden of the suspended programs." The MCA board will meet June 10. You can send an email to the MCA making the point that only the poor will be hurt by a cut-off in aid at <http://www.mcc.gov/contact/index.php>. For more info, visit: <http://www.nicanet.org/?p=594>.

Ortega government officials also met last week with European counterparts to discuss European budget support suspended after the November municipal elections. Budget support funding is important because it can be used in any area where it is needed. After the meeting Mendel Goldstein, head of the European Commission Delegation for Central America and Panama said, "Here we are on the subject of governability. Within that subject there are several themes. The donors have expressed their concerns; what we think is that there has to be change in the future." He said that the European Commission respects Nicaraguan sovereignty and for that reason "we cannot force change." However, he said that the countries he represents "have good memories."

By the following weekend there were rumors that the government would revisit the cancellation of legal recognition of two political parties, the Conservative Party (PC) and the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), which lost their legal existence before the 2008 elections due to failure to field the legally required number of candidates by the PC, and failure to file required reports by the MRS. MRS leader Dora Maria Tellez said that the strategy would be to revive the PC and the party of dissident Sandinistas before the meeting of the Millennium Challenge Board on June 10 and the Budget Support Group on June 11.



Daniel Ortega listens with earphones to Barack Obama at Summit of the Americas.

The Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry released a communiqué on the night of May 4 rejecting an April 30 report by the US State Department which claimed that the Nicaraguan government maintains close relations with terrorists. The Foreign Ministry said "Nicaragua rejects any report that links us with terrorism. On the contrary, our political will to fight this evil is shown by our participation in all international legal covenants of the United Nations and of the inter-American community, including participating in the Inter-American Committee against Terrorism." The response continued: "Nicaragua has its own view about the conduct of the United States government on the international level; however, based on a desire to respect all nations' sovereignty, we will abstain from stating those views." To read the State Department report, go to: <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2008/122435.htm>.

On Apr. 22, during an appearance on the Cuban television program "Round Table," Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said that functionaries of the United States Embassy in Managua are conspiring against his government and that Nicaraguan officials have "all the information" about the conspiracy which they have not yet wanted to make public. "They class us as a dictatorship," he said adding that Embassy officials have been meeting with opposition

figures and offering opposition groups funding to unite against his government, even while they maintain respectful relations with the government. Ortega said that no one had been expelled because he was taking US President Barack Obama at his word when Obama said that he would not permit interventionist policies

On April 24, Nicaragua signed on to the U.S. sponsored Plan Merida which will provide the country's National Police with US\$1.4 million to fight international organized crime. The bulk of Plan Merida funding will go to militarize the US-Mexico border. In May, Ambassador Callahan said during ceremonies handing over four boats and four trucks and other equipment to Nicaragua's Naval Force, that the US is moving forward with a plan to donate US\$5 million to repair the La Mascota Children's Hospital and to provide it with medical equipment in exchange for the destruction of 651 SAM-7 missiles, evidently as part of a plan originally suggested by President Daniel Ortega.

At the Summit of the Americas, held April 17 – 19 in Trinidad and Tobago, the presidents of the Central American countries (plus Panama and the Dominican Republic) held a meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama which lasted over an hour. As the current president of the Central American Integration System, Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega presided over the meeting which, according to the President of Guatemala, Alvaro Colom, was "relaxed and friendly." After the meeting, Ortega talked with Obama for several minutes in what sources said was a cordial conversation. Ortega said of Obama, "I want to believe that he has the disposition, has the will, but he is president of an empire and that empire has its rules that he can't change; he has to deal with them." Ortega added, "That is the great challenge."

Abortion/Church

Supreme Court Justice Rafael Solis said that within the Supreme Court there has been a change with respect to the possibility of an imminent ruling on the issue of the constitutionality of the 2006 criminalization of therapeutic abortion when a woman's life and health are at risk. Solis said that the issue is not going to be resolved at this time. He confirmed that relations between the Ortega government and the Catholic Church have improved and after Catholic leaders meet with officials of the executive branch, the Supreme Court will receive them to converse about the suspension of the ruling on abortion.

The announcement was timed to coincide with a meeting of 60 Latin American Catholic bishops meeting at their 32nd assembly. Gone from their pronouncements were Vatican II concerns about economic human rights. Instead they expressed concern about moves toward popular democracy which they described as a "certain disenchantment with democracy that has led to the search for new political models mixed with populism," apparently targeting countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. They noted that the global economic crisis has caused a



*Latin American
Catholic bishops,
meeting in
Managua, said
mass at the
cathedral. Photo:
END*

resurgence of poverty in a number of countries. They condemned a "fragility" in many states when it comes to fully guaranteeing human rights, which they blamed on a "secularist current that silences religious and moral values." The closing document spoke in support of those who have been "persecuted" or have been "objects of slander, discredit and even of violence." Observers took that to be a message of solidarity with Nicaraguan clerics who were recently accused of corruption in a letter posted to a government listserve but later repudiated by the government.

Politics

The alignment of Deputies in the National Assembly has changed considerably since the 2006 presidential and legislative election. Then, the breakdown was 38 Sandinista Front (FSLN), 25 Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC), 24 Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN), and five Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) deputies.

Benches are what we might call caucuses in the US. A bench receives staff and a budget if it has a minimum of four members. The ALN bench has been particularly decimated by defections and is now down to only five members. The PLC has lost six members, several of whom were expelled for taking positions opposed by the party leadership. The MRS only held on to its status as a bench when remaining members Enrique Saenz and Victor Hugo Tinoco were joined by two other deputies who switched explicitly so that the dissident Sandinista bench would not

lose its status. Two of the original five MRS delegates joined the FSLN and Monica Baltodano is now the lone independent in the Assembly besides former President Enrique Bolaños who has a seat by law but doesn't occupy it.

On April 14, Baltodano announced that she was leaving the MRS bench saying that she did not agree with a series of decisions taken by the leadership which has been trending increasingly to the right. She said that she was following a decision made by the Sandinista Rescue Movement (MPRS) to which she belongs. The MPRS joined the MRS for the presidential elections of 2006. She stated, "In the last few months the political spokesperson of the MRS took decisions with which we differed and the last big difference was with the position that Edmundo [Jarquin] took with relation to the elections in El Salvador when he practically went to campaign for ARENA (Nationalist Republican Alliance)."

A new bench in the National Assembly with seven members has taken the name Nicaraguan Unity Bench (BUN). Observers noted that if, as expected, the members of the bench vote with the FSLN, and the ALN continues its frequent alliance with the FSLN, their combined 12 votes bring the Sandinistas to 50 votes, close to the 56 vote super majority needed to make constitutional changes. These include moving from a presidential to a parliamentary system and allowing consecutive re-election of the president and prime-minister as well as other elected officials.

The Nicaraguan Democratic Bench (BDN) is now the third largest bench in the Assembly with 14 members. Last week all BDN deputies announced that they would sign letters of resignation that they would give to Managua Archbishop Leopoldo Brenes for safe-keeping. The letters would go into effect if they voted for constitutional changes that would allow presidential re-election. This came after members of the PLC signed a document the previous week promising not to support those changes.

On April 21, Supreme Court Justice Rafael Solis told a Managua media outlet that if amendments to the constitution that would allow Daniel Ortega to run for re-election are not approved by the National Assembly, First Lady Rosario Murillo could be the Sandinista candidate for president in the 2011 election. Murillo, 57, is coordinator of the Council of Social Communication and Citizenship, principal promoter of the Councils of Citizen Power (CPCs), which are neighborhood groups promoted by the Sandinista government as vehicles for citizen participation, and she shares power with her husband to a degree not seen before in Nicaragua. According to the M&R Consultants polling firm, Murillo has only 17.4% approval rating among the citizenry.

Banana Workers

After Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Victoria Chaney threw out two consolidated lawsuits (Mejia vs. Dole Food and Rivera vs. Dole Food) by Nicaraguan banana workers, Dole Food Company reveled in its victory. With its US\$7.6 billion in net profits in 2008, Dole is the largest marketer of fruit and vegetables in the world. At Camp Nemagon in Managua, banana workers said they would not give up the fight for justice. The judge agreed with Dole that two lawyers for the workers had recruited clients to give false testimony that the pesticide DBCP (Nemagon and Fumazone) used by the company had made them sterile while working in Dole banana fields.



A Los Angeles judge threw out two law suits by Nicaraguan banana workers. Photo shows banana workers camped in Managua. Photo: Kathy Hoyt

Judge Chaney said that this month she will initiate new procedures to determine if fines should be imposed against the plaintiffs and their lawyers. She said that other cases in California should be suspended and said that she was alerting courts in other states where banana worker cases are moving forward not to accept legal documents, medical reports or court rulings from what she said was the "corrupt legal system of Nicaragua." She said that she had obtained her information about the Nicaraguan legal system from the U.S. Department of State.

Attorney Antonio Hernandez, who with Los Angeles attorney Juan Jose Dominguez had brought the cases against Dole, said that they had used specialized laboratories in Nicaragua and the United States which proved that the plaintiffs were sterile and suffered other physical and mental conditions due to their exposure to Nemagon and Fumazone. He said that although they had presented evidence that Dole had tried to suborn testimony [www.nicanet.org/?p=666], the judge rejected that evidence. He urged the government of President Daniel Ortega, the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman and the Foreign Ministry to protest the decision.

Indigenous

On April 18, Miskito Council of Elders proclaimed an Independent Caribbean Coast Nation with the election of Rev. Hector Williams as the Wihta Tara (grand judge) or maximum leader of Moskitia. He, along with a Council of Ministers of the Communitarian Miskito Nation, will hold the reins of government, according to the proclamation. An Indigenous Army of Moskitia was formed as well.



*The Miskito Council of Elders travelled to Managua to try to get a meeting with Daniel Ortega.
Photo: La Prensa*

The unsatisfied historical demands for land, self-determination, and respect for culture along with exploitation by successive local, regional and national governments were some of the causes that pushed the elders to declare independence according to the proclamation. The Council of Elders proclaimed independence July 2002 but never took the steps to set up a government and army. The proclamation announced a period for the turnover of government from the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN). The proclamation called for suspension of all elections within the Miskito Nation and the Elders later announced that they would block March 2010 regional elections. They ordered businesses to stop paying taxes to the Nicaraguan government, announcing that they will be collected by the Miskito government.

Only a week after the declaration, the Mayangna indigenous people of the same Caribbean Coast region, declared themselves the Indigenous Mayangna Nation of Nicaragua, but stated that they had no intention of seceding from the Republic of Nicaragua. They stated their declaration in terms of preserving their land, culture, and language. The Minister of the Caribbean Coast Development Council of the Ortega government promised to respect and support the Sumu-Mayangna indigenous nation.

The Rama indigenous community of Tiktik Kaanu near Bluefields in the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS) asked President Daniel Ortega to suspend titling of land to colonists on indigenous lands. The Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH) confirmed violent incidents in the zone and also sent a letter to James Anaya, Special Rapporteur for Indigenous Peoples of the United Nations. The indigenous appealed to President Ortega to “instruct government functionaries to stop illegal titling of land and to publicly reiterate your promise to respect indigenous communal property.” They also urged him to take effective measures to carry out the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and “to adopt the methods of protection for the life and physical integrity of the indigenous communities.”

CAFTA

In an outcome forewarned by opponents of US-sponsored “free trade” agreements, Nicaraguan pig farmers say that imports of pork from the United States are pushing them towards bankruptcy. Minister of Trade Orlando Solorzano said that nine importers, among them PriceSmart, Delicarne, and Delmor, have licenses to import pork into Nicaragua under the quotas established by the trade agreement with the United States known as the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA). Solorzano said that for this year there is a quota of 1400 tons that can enter with no import tariff and that the quota will grow each year by 100 tons until 2020. US-corporate agriculture is heavily subsidized by US taxpayers enabling transnational corporations to dump agricultural products in Mexico and Central America at prices with which local farmers cannot compete.