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Open Letter to Nicaragua Solidarity Activists

By Chuck Kaufman, National Co-Coordinator, Nicaragua Network

The Nicaragua Network has received many notes and emails about our coverage of Nicaragua in recent months. Some think we're too supportive of the government of President Daniel Ortega, while others think we are too critical. Still others have written to thank us for what they consider to be balanced information in a highly polarized situation. We welcome the dialogue and constructive criticism and are encouraged that so many people are still paying attention to Nicaragua and the US role in that small, poor country.

In my more than 21 years on the national staff of the Nicaragua Network, it has never been more difficult to determine the best way to present the information and analysis we provide to solidarity activists in the United States. In the 1980s we saw our mission to be to explain to the US solidarity community the actions of the Sandinista government in the context of the brutal US-manufactured contra war and economic sabotage. That resulted in the appearance of uncritical support of the Sandinistas on our part.

In the era of the neoliberal governments, news and analysis was easy. We opposed neoliberalism, US domination, and the efforts to wipe out the gains of the Sandinista revolution. Today our work is more difficult because there are both positive and negative aspects of the current government's political project, and there are divisions within Sandinismo about how to move forward. Our staff and board have had many long phone and email conversations in an effort to sharpen and balance our analysis.

Many people came to their love of Nicaragua after the 1990 electoral defeat of the Sandinistas, and thus have no experience with the Sandinista revolutionary period. This is especially true in the Sister City movement which began in the 1980's but it is the only sector of Nicaragua solidarity

to add significant new members after the 1990 electoral defeat. I have the greatest respect for the sister city groups; they are the ones who have stuck with their partners in Nicaragua through thick and thin while many of those whose solidarity was motivated primarily by ideology have



Chuck Kaufman at the celebration of Nicanet's 25th anniversary. The 30th will be in Feb. 2009.

long since moved on to other progressive causes. I am not for a moment implying that people in sister city groups are apolitical; a conversation with our board, most of whom represent sister city groups, would dispel that error quickly.

Still, it is hard for anyone who joined the solidarity movement after 1990 to understand the historical importance of the FSLN to those of us who traveled to – and supported – Nicaragua in the 1970s and 1980s. After 1990, the neoliberal Nicaraguan governments worked hard to eradicate the memory of the Sandinista revolution and the Sandinista struggles to protect the Nicaraguan people from attacks by the US-sponsored contras. Our government and corporate media worked equally hard to eradicate those memories in the United States. However, many of us in the Nicaragua Network haven't forgotten.

I think it would be useful, both for new

and older solidarity activists, if we review the roots of the Nicaragua Network to better understand the context in which we develop our current information and analysis.

The Nicaragua Network was born 30 years ago this coming February 24 at a conference in Washington, DC. A number of major cities already had solidarity committees working to support the Sandinista armed liberation movement. They decided they needed national coordination to make their work more effective. So, the Nicaragua Network was formed first and foremost to provide solidarity support to the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) and its struggle to overthrow, by force of arms, the brutal US-backed Somoza dictatorship.

The Sandinista triumph on July 19, 1979 was met with joy not only in Nicaragua but here in the United States as well. The wedding of the Sandinista socialist program with liberation theology's "preferential option for the poor" created what Oxfam-Great Britain later called "the threat of a good example." The Empire was quick to strike back. I don't need to go into the whole history of the illegal and immoral contra war and the relentless efforts by the US government and the corporate media to vilify and delegitimize the Sandinista government, both before and after it became a duly elected representative democracy in 1984.

The campaign of misinformation, disinformation, and outright lies was enthusiastically waged by the US corporate media, led by the Washington Post and New York Times. I was surprised when someone referred us to an article in the New York Times to demonstrate the Nicaragua Network's bias. When have we ever been able to believe a word about Nicaragua that was printed in the New York Times? When reporters like Raymond Bonner tried to report factually and impartially

See Open Letter, p. 5.

Interview with Miguel de Castilla: **The New Education--a giant and inspiring task**

Interview by Karla Jacobs, www.tortillaconsal.com

[Nicaraguan Minister of Education Miguel De Castilla is a sociologist, educator and education administrator who has published over 500 articles and dozens of books about education in Nicaragua and the region. He was vice minister of Education during the first Sandinista government of the 1980s. For the longer complete interview, visit <http://www.tortillaconsal.com/decastilla.en.html>]

Tortilla con Sal: The three governments that preceded the Government of Reconciliation and National Unity introduced systematic cuts in the Education Ministry's Budget. What state did you and your colleagues find the public education system in when you took office in January 2007?

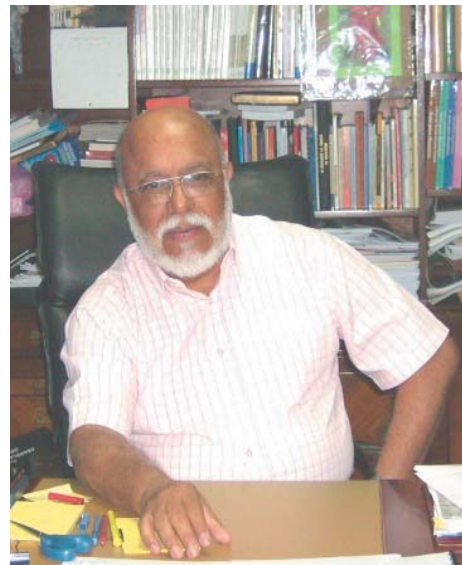
Miguel de Castilla: The most important aspect of the Nicaraguan public school system when we took office was that it had been privatized; pupils paid to attend school. Pupils were charged for registration, they were charged monthly fees. All the services the schools provided were sold to pupils. Of course this meant it was very difficult for many families to send their children to school.

We believe that around 100,000 girls and boys would not have registered in 2007 if schools had continued to charge for the education they provided. Five days before the registration for the 2007 school year began, the Ministry of Education published a decree eliminating all monetary charges in Nicaraguan public schools. Year by year in Nicaragua the number of registrations grows by around 40,000. But in 2007 there were 140,000 new registrations; 100,000 of those new pupils would not have registered if we had not undone the privatization of our public education.

Another mechanism that had been introduced as part of the perverted way in which the education system used to be run was the method used by the Ministry of Education to fund schools. The Ministry of Education sent money directly to the schools. The quantity was calculated depending on the number of pupils the school had. If, for example, a school had 100 pupils, then a certain amount of

money was sent, if a school had 500 pupils then that amount was multiplied by five, if a school had 1,000 pupils it was multiplied by ten, etc.

But the schools were not required to inform the Ministry of Education about how the money was spent and therefore the Ministry had zero control over the money. This system resulted in widespread corruption in the handling of the money, the most visible example being that school directors would send false reports about the number of pupils



Miguel de Castilla abolished school fees in Nicaragua's primary schools. Photo: Tortilla con Sal.

they had registered in the school. They exaggerated the number of registrations. We carried out an investigation into this phenomenon in March 2007 as a result of which we discovered that around about 125,000 pupils registered in 2006 had never existed but the schools had received money for them. That money that the schools had received generally went into the pockets of the directors, teachers and other school staff.

It was an environment in which forces competed to make greater profit and in which knowledge had been converted into a product like any other which was bought and sold on the marketplace.

TcS: If you could talk a little about the work you and your team have carried out with the aim of overcoming this corruption within the public education system, and also if you could talk about the fundamental principles on which the Ministry of Education's

work has been based over the last 22 months.

Miguel de Castilla: What we have been doing is constructing an altogether different concept which we call the Participatory Revolution in Education. This concept includes the involvement of NGOs, of civil society, of parents, of teachers. As part of this process we carried out a national consultation project that involved 17,500 people from across the country, among them teachers, parents, students, NGOs. During 2008, based on those experiences, the new curriculum has been created.

We have transformed the educational model in Nicaragua. The new model for Nicaraguan education is now based on five fundamental pillars: First of all is the new curriculum which will come into operation in January 2009. The second pillar is the Evaluation, Planning and Educative Training Workshops which we refer to as TEPCEs. These workshops take place once a month in the schools which have been classified as Base Schools as part of the model of Educational Nuclei which we have introduced. These Educational Nuclei form the third pillar. An Educational Nucleus is a determined space within the national territory where there is a Base School and a number of neighboring schools. There are 1,423 Educational Nuclei across the country: The fourth pillar is the classrooms, which we are rebuilding and rehabilitating. And the fifth pillar is the teachers who give life to all of the other four components. The teacher is the very heart of the Sandinista Revolution's Model of Quality in Education.

In every municipality of Nicaragua there is a certain number of Educational Nuclei. Each month an Evaluation, Planning and Educational Training Workshop (TEPCE) takes place in each Base School with the participation of the teachers from all the schools within that Educational Nucleus. So we are involving the teachers in a process of profound training. We are also transforming the curriculum of the teacher training colleges.

Apart from this we are building schools. We inherited 27,500 schools, but in those schools there were 15,000 classrooms

See New Education, p. 6.

A Partnership for the Future of Solentiname

By Jim Walker with assistance from Junior Arellano, Luis Arellano and Evert Ugarte [Jim Walker is the North American coordinator of the Alianza para Solidaridad de Solentiname; Junior Arellano is the President of the Alianza and Luis Arellano and Evert Ugarte are Solentiname Co-Coordinators. They can be contacted at: ssa@solentiname.org.]

The Alianza para Solidaridad de Solentiname is a collaborative partnership of the people of Solentiname and other organizations to promote social and economic justice through alternative models of sustainable community development and activism.

The Archipelago of Solentiname is probably one of Nicaragua's best-kept secrets. It holds the mysteries of civilizations past; the wonder of Lake Cocibolca's (Lake Nicaragua) abundant wildlife; and the artistic passions of a people who have indelibly made their mark in Nicaragua's cultural history. It is composed of 36 enchanted islands in the southern-most sector of the immense Lake Nicaragua—near the Río San Juan delta. The archipelago has great bird life and is the best jumping off point to visit the pristine Los Guatuzos Wildlife Refuge, home to more than 380 species of birds, monkeys, crocodiles, turtles, sloths, iguanas and the Jesus Christ lizard. Solentiname was categorized as National Monument in 1990 because of its natural, historical and cultural importance. Its name comes from the ancient Nahuatl language, and it means home to many people or home to many visitors. So you feel as if you were at home when you visit Solentiname Islands!

Part of what makes these islands so special is their immense silence, the peace and tranquility of their beauty. They are also home to subsistence farmers who have learned to paint and carve nature scenes that their daily lives are immersed in. Modern amenities, including electricity and running water, are quite rare in the islands.

1966 was a crucial turning point for the poor and humble folks of Solentiname: the later-to-become-famous Nicaraguan



Solentiname is composed of 36 enchanted islands where a school of primitivist painters arose with the encouragement of Fr. Ernesto Cardenal.

priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal came to the islands to found his own religious community. He brought work and income to the inhabitants of Mancarrón by improving agriculture and cattle breeding. The Managua artist and friend of Cardenal, Roger Perez de la Rocha, visited Cardenal in 1967. Cardenal asked him to lend Eduardo Arana painting utensils. With this material, Eduardo Arana created

the first painting of the so-called primitive arts: A map of Solentiname according to his imagination. More artists joined him; Doña María Guevara Silva, Rodolfo Arellano, Doña Elba Jimenez, Fernando Altamirano among others. Part of what makes Solentiname so special is that nearly every house on the different islands has some artist or artisan living there.

The unique painting techniques introduced here have become the foundation of Nicaragua *primitivista* art, and is passed from generation to generation. There are now 4 generations of painters painting in the Rodolfo Arellano and Elba Jimenez studios. The pictures show idyllic landscapes representing the wealth, beauty and the harmony of the islands' nature. The artists express their feelings in their pictures and give a

small insight into the life of Solentiname. According to the famous artist Doña María Guevara Silva, who lives on Elvis Chavarría Island, "painting is inspiration itself; you gain inspiration simply from painting."

The Vision of Alianza para Solidaridad de Solentiname is to affirm a shared membership in one human family and commit ourselves to work for justice and peace, honoring the dignity and strengths of each person guided by the principle of consensual decision making. Our Vision is different from the conventional charity model; our goal is work for independence, self-sufficiency and sustainability within our community, steering away from continued dependence on external donations and outside assistance. The Alianza is governed by a local 18 member board of directors and a five member junta. Luis Alexander Madrigal Arellano is the coordinator and computer professor, and Evert Ugarte is vice-coordinator and responsible for ESL classes.

Sobresalientes is the foundation

See Solentiname, p. 8.

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Building Healthy Communities

By Dr. Jim Fleming

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“There is no road to solidarity; solidarity is the road.”

Motto for the Nicaragua-U.S. Solidarity Conference, July 2007, Managua

What is it about Nicaragua that keeps those of us from the U.S. and elsewhere coming back, year after year? The land certainly, with all its beauty and diversity, the rich culture and revolutionary spirit, the opportunity to make a difference perhaps. But it's the connections with people, I would say, that is most attractive, a chance to work with and learn from people and communities with open hearts and indomitable spirits; people who know how to continue working together in the face of decades of war, economic hardship and natural disasters.

Last spring while contemplating what shape my fifth annual trip to the land of volcanoes was to take, I thought back to my first trip in 2004: when I went on a medical mission trip with a church-based group. I chose the trip for its convenience in timing, duration and the fact that it was to a Latin American country. We ended up seeing hundreds of patients in five different communities. I'm sure we made a positive difference for many of the people we saw, but I was concerned about the non-sustainable character of this type of care, termed “medical tourism” by naturopath Dr. Tabatha Parker, co-founder of Medical Doctors International and staff physician at the hospital in Moyagalpa on the enchanting island of Ometepe.

Nicaragua is host to numerous “brigadas medicas”, most of them faith-based who bring medical care and supplies as part of an evangelical mission. In the past many of these groups operated with little or no approval from or monitoring by the government of Nicaragua and usually without coordination with the local health care system which admittedly has often been minimal. For various reasons, some probably political and some due to disastrous medical outcomes, the Ortega government's MINSa (Ministry of Health) has tightened regulation of these groups substantially. Groups which haven't

registered properly with MINSa have had thousands of dollars of medication confiscated at the airport. Otherwise however monitoring is minimal to absent.

Since these groups could not function without the consent of local people, education of the communities involved would be a good starting point in creating better partnerships of safe, sustainable medical care. Educational efforts could be coordinated between health care professionals in Nicaragua, local community leaders and community health promoters. Foreign groups which



Dr. Fleming (second from left) in front of the Atraves school in the Camilo Ortega neighborhood in Managua. On his right is school principal Leticia Rosa.

continued to operate in an unauthorized fashion, especially those groups which engage in potentially harmful practices (such as leaving behind prescription medications with untrained individuals) could be identified and reported to authorities at MINSa. Education efforts could also be aimed at the medical brigades themselves so that the leaders of these groups learn about the importance of working with the medical systems in Nicaragua which are already established as well as those being developed. This is the essence of solidarity and an important goal of organizations such as Nicaragua Network, Atraves and Natural Medical Doctors International.

Given this background, the goal of this trip was not to provide direct medical care but rather to begin to develop a long term relationship with one or more communities aimed at identifying health needs as well as resources and supporting whatever infrastructure already existed in the communities. We made three stops at locations previously arranged with partner groups already operating in Nicaragua: the barrio of Camilo Ortega on the outskirts of Managua where the non-profit organization Atraves runs the only

elementary school and is building a health clinic; Pueblo Nuevo, north of the city of Estelí, where FEDICAMP (Federation for the Integrated Development of Rural Farmers) operates; and Ometepe where Dr Parker lives and works. Given the diversity of these settings, it's not surprising that needs and resources vary. However, throughout the country several problems emerged as universal:

1) access to adequate nutrition and potable water; 2) domestic violence and abuse; 3) inadequate availability of medical care or non-sustainable care; and 4) in most areas almost no resources for care of mentally ill persons, an issue of particular concern to me, having practiced psychiatry for the last 20 years.

I am pleased that each community has invited us to return and continue accompanying them on the road of solidarity. A cooperative partnership is well under way in Camilo Ortega, thanks to the dedicated work of Atraves, Inc., where Engineers

Without Borders is building a medical clinic this spring. Trips are being planned for medical professionals from the U.S. to come and assist local physicians with care in this poor barrio populated largely by squatters who moved there after losing their homes in mudslides and other natural disasters). For more information go to www.atraves.org.

In Pueblo Nuevo, despite having a small hospital in town, there are other needs. There are numerous rural communities surrounding Pueblo Nuevo with minimal to absent medical care. Also, due to lack of local jobs, one or both parents has to pursue employment in a neighboring country leaving the children behind with less supervision, for several months out of the year. This puts these families at greater risk of domestic abuse. And despite the abundant tropical rain forest in which grow a variety of food plants with essential nutrients, many people in the area either lack access to them or are unaware of their vital importance to health.

One potent example occurred as we prepared to leave Pueblo Nuevo on our way to Ometepe: I encountered an elderly

See Healthy Communities, p. 9.

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from Central America, they were demoted or fired. Bonner eventually received an apology, but the New York Times bias never changed.

So yes, there is no question that the Nicaragua Network has its own bias. Our bias is in favor of democratic socialism (not to be confused with social democracy) and a preferential option for the poor. We don't hide it, and we make no apologies. While the government of President Daniel Ortega may fall short in the area of democratic socialism, it is our judgment that it is demonstrating a proven preferential option for the poor. We view the mission of the Nicaragua Network to be to stop the US government from once again denying Nicaraguans the opportunity to achieve greater economic and social justice. The most fundamental mission of the Nicaragua Network is to stop our government from intervening in Nicaragua's internal affairs.

As evidence of the Ortega government's preferential option for the poor, I would cite as an example that it will have eliminated illiteracy by July 2009 and the majority of municipalities have already been declared free of illiteracy. That is due, in part, to the fact that the first action of the new government was to eliminate school fees. This bold action enabled more than 100,000 additional children to attend school. During the neoliberal years, many parents weren't able to send their kids to school because of school fee policies dictated by the IMF and World Bank. For adult literacy the Sandinista government has implemented the Cuban literacy program "Yes, I Can!" and even extended it to the Miskito and Mayagna (Sumo) indigenous languages.

That is just one example. The free health clinics are once again staffed and stocked with medicine so that patients receive medicine, rather than prescriptions they couldn't afford to fill under the right-wing governments of 1990-2007. Cooperation with Cuba and Venezuela has given several thousand people back their sight after cataract surgery, and free operations in the hospitals have saved uncounted lives. The Sandinista government has also resurrected the small and medium farming sector, the historic backbone of Nicaragua's economy, which wasn't even in the National Development Plan Ortega inherited from his predecessor Enrique Bolaños.

The Zero Hunger program has provided 32,709 poor families with animals, seeds, fertilizer, etc. so they could become food self-sufficient and sell their surplus. Zero Usury has provided low interest loans to small farmers and merchants so they can earn a livelihood and feed their families. Houses for the People is putting roofs over the heads of families that previously lived in shacks built of anything they could find. Project Love is working to eliminate the tragedy of child labor. The subsidized food distribution centers are all that stand



Lots are marked off for the construction of affordable housing as part of Houses for the People. Photo: El Nuevo Diario.

between some families and malnutrition. The Sandinista government is taking steps to feed, clothe and house its people despite skyrocketing food costs and the greatest crisis in capitalism in 80 years. I think these programs mean something; and what they mean for the lives of real people is more important than the howls and outrage among the political class in Nicaragua and abroad.

Do we think the Ortega government is perfect? No, and even a casual reading of the information and analysis we have produced over the nearly two years of his presidency will demonstrate that fact. We continue to criticize Sandinista support for criminalizing therapeutic abortion. We have criticized violent excesses of Sandinista supporters during the recent electoral process. And we have cautioned that the effort to monitor foreign funding of nongovernmental organizations not be used as an excuse to persecute women's rights groups.

But, do we think the Ortega government is better than another right-wing, neoliberal government beholden to US masters? Absolutely. Just imagine how much worse the people of Nicaragua would be suffering in the current economic crisis if US-favored Eduardo Montealegre had become president in January 2007 instead of Daniel Ortega. How much

worse off in the current economic crisis would poor Nicaraguans be in the absence of the anti-poverty programs of the current Sandinista government? The answer should be self evident.

I personally find it hard to get excited about the claims by the right-wing of fraud in the recent municipal elections. I think the claims are much greater than the reality. Of course, the US advisers and funders of the right-wing parties know all about stealing elections. Maybe they assume that all elections are as crooked

as the ones in Florida and Ohio. My analysis is that the FSLN received more votes than the opposition. The biggest stink was made about the mayoral election in Managua, but an independent poll right before the election showed FSLN candidate Alexis Arguello with a 5 point lead, and that's what he won by. Frankly, I think the supporters of Ivy League trained oligarch Eduardo Montealegre just can't believe that a barrio born former

boxer beat him. I'm delighted, and I can't imagine why any U.S. solidarity activist would want to see Montealegre, the corrupt banking buddy of the Bush regime, as mayor of Nicaragua's capital city.

The FSLN played by the European-US "liberal democracy" rules in 1984, 1990, 1996, 2001, and 2006. In 1984 the US forced the major opposition candidate out of the race, when it was obvious he would lose, so they could claim the election was not legitimate. In 1990, the US spent more per voter on the Nicaraguan election than Democrats and Republicans combined spent per voter on the 1988 US presidential election.

In 1996 the election was blatantly stolen by the Constitutional Liberal Party with US technological assistance as well as funding. Jimmy Carter and Oscar Arias told Ortega he had to accept the fraudulent results to prevent a civil war. He did, just as he accepted the 1990 returns resulting in the first peaceful turnover of power from one political party to another in Nicaragua's history. The result of the 1990 election doomed Nicaraguans to 17 years of hunger, poverty, and the loss of nearly everything they had gained from ousting the Somoza dictatorship.

Is it any wonder if some in the FSLN might have been determined not to suffer

See Open Letter, p. 6.

Open Letter, from p. 5.

losses in this year's municipal election, or that certain international election observers, who had certified previous fraudulent elections as "free and fair," were not invited to observe this one? (There were other certified international observers, however, and the political parties had poll watchers just like in US elections.) I find it hard to fault the logic even if I don't approve of all the methods. And if the fraud was as blatant as the charges claim, why won't the Constitutional Liberal Party present its "evidence" to the Supreme Electoral Commission where they hold an equal number of seats as the Sandinistas? Sure, some of the media events were impressive and disturbing, but that's not the same as following the constitutionally mandated mechanisms for proving fraud.

The FSLN won the majority of municipalities in the previous election and, by all account; most of the Sandinista mayors did a good job. With the additional boost of the Ortega government's anti-poverty programs over the last two years, I don't find it surprising at all that they made further gains this year. The surprise would be if they hadn't.

One of the tried and true tactics of the so-called democracy building programs of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and US Agency for International Development (USAID) is to manipulate polls, quick counts, and the corporate media to cast doubts on the legitimacy of elections. Look at the Ukraine election of 2003, where they succeeded, and the Venezuelan recount vote of 2004, where they failed, to see similarities to the reactions to the Nicaraguan municipal elections of 2008.

What does surprise me is that some people in the US continue to fail to recognize the treachery of our government and credulously read and listen to the US corporate media. How many times must it be proven that the US government and corporate media lack any commitment to democracy when the outcome doesn't conform with their perceived "interests" before some people learn to read the propaganda?

So the Nicaragua Network will continue to expose and oppose US intervention in Nicaragua and elsewhere. We will continue to support governments that show a preferential option for the poor. And we'll continue to oppose right-wing neoliberalism wherever it rears its ugly head. We'll

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which were in a state of semi destruction. So we have also been involved in the task of rebuilding classrooms across the country.

Parallel to all that we are carrying out the National Literacy Campaign. Two years ago the illiteracy rate in Nicaragua was 30%. Today we have reduced that to just 7%. That is the lowest illiteracy rate ever in Nicaraguan history. The last time anything was done to try to reduce illiteracy was during the Popular



Around one million children receive a school meal consisting of rice, beans, cereal, tortilla, etc. every day. Photo: cubaencuentro.com

Sandinista Revolution when the illiteracy rate was reduced from 53% to 12.9%.

Around one million children receive a school meal consisting of rice, beans, cereal, tortilla, etc. every day. And in around 1,000 schools across the country school vegetable gardens are being developed which not only permit pupils to learn how to cultivate food but also allow school meals to be complemented with freshly grown produce. Also, during 2008 we distributed around 400,000 backpacks

continue to fight disinformation by putting out true information about the Sandinista government's anti-poverty programs, and we'll continue to criticize its excesses of authoritarianism.

We won't get the balance right in each and every case, but I firmly believe that if you examine the body of our work from the perspective of our historical mission, on the whole we are right where we should be. We welcome constructive criticism when solidarity activists believe we are off the mark and we always welcome dialogue.

and 200,000 school uniforms and pairs of shoes to children and adolescents from severely impoverished rural families.

TcS: While it is true that the government increased the amount of money designated to the Ministry of Education this year, the institution's budget still seems very small considering the nation's educational needs. How do you and your team deal with this problem?

Miguel de Castilla: Yes, effectively, one of the characteristics of Nicaragua's poverty is the country's small budget. However, we have been lucky enough to receive a good quantity of foreign aid from governments and organizations keen to contribute to education and children's welfare in Nicaragua. For example the Dutch, Danish and Canadian governments are all important contributors. The same is true of the US government which collaborates with the

Ministry of Education through its Agency for International Development (USAID). Additionally organizations like UNICEF, FENAP (the UN population fund), and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization all contribute to the Education Ministry's fundamental activities.

We are designated a very small amount of the Nicaraguan budget, but with that very small amount and with the Nicaraguan people's goodwill - especially the teachers' goodwill because Nicaraguan teachers are not well paid - we are able to do amazing things and we are able to carry forward this country's education system

Another example is the program "Constructors of the Future" as part of which young Nicaraguans work voluntarily building new schools. The Literacy Campaign is made possible by thousands of young people who teach voluntarily.

TcS: Considering all of this, would you say that teachers and other public education system workers can expect a significant pay rise in the coming years?

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New Education, from 6.

Miguel de Castilla: Well, the budget for teachers' salaries is growing. Each year, in line with the General Education Law, the budget has to grow. In 2007 the monthly salary for primary school teachers grew by US\$25, and for secondary school teachers the monthly salary grew by US\$35. These pay raises were repeated in 2008. At the moment, similar pay raises are being negotiated for 2009.

We would like to bring in significant pay raises, spectacular pay raises. [But] as long as it is not possible to increase the budget significantly, and with all the current complications at an international level with the financial crisis, etc, I am not optimistic about the possibility of a significant pay raise for our teachers.

TcS: To what extent do the government's relations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) affect decisions concerning teachers' salaries?

Miguel de Castilla: Well, our government analyzes and agrees upon not just teachers' salaries but all public sector workers' salaries with the IMF. So if up until now the teachers' annual pay raise has been around US\$25, then I do not think there will be problems [between the government and the IMF] if in the future similar raises are implemented.

TcS: I would like to go back to talk about the reforms that have been made to the national curriculum. What do the reforms consist of? And with what educational and social objectives have they been implemented?

Miguel de Castilla: The reforms are multiple. They form part of an integral process of change. Much new educational content emerged during the Great National Curriculum Consultation. For example, economics, sociology and philosophy had been eliminated from the secondary school curriculum in Nicaragua. Today those subjects are being reincorporated.

The secondary school curriculum is being completely transformed to include a strong technical emphasis. By doing this we aim to provide students with more than just a ticket to get into university. We want to also be able to provide those students who are unable to go to university with the option of obtaining skilled work after leaving school.

There are ideas that underlie the whole curriculum like culture of peace, gender equality, defense of the environment, etc.

These are themes that did not used to form part of the curriculum and now they do.

And I can assure you that several, if not all, of the transformations that are taking place within the Nicaraguan education system today are uniquely Nicaraguan. They have not been copied from a foreign educational manual or



De Castilla says that the ideas that underlie the new curriculum are peace, gender equality, and defense of the environment. Photo: lajornadanet.com

thought up by a foreign consultant. Nicaragua's cultural accumulation in the field of education is vast. And we have made use of this historical accumulation during the construction of the new model for Nicaraguan education. There are ten national education commissions which involve representatives from universities, social movements and NGOs who cooperate with the Ministry of Education without charge and who help to develop all the different aspects of the new education.

TcS: Changing the subject, I want to talk about something that took place a few years ago, during the government of Enrique Bolaños, when the Ministry of Education felt obliged to abandon the new curriculum that had been prepared about reproductive health and sexuality. It was assumed that the decision to abandon the new curriculum was the result of pressure from the Catholic Church Hierarchy. I understand that as part of the transformation of the national curriculum during the last two years reforms have been made to the contents surrounding these issues. What is the Ministry of Education's current policy about the teaching of reproductive health and sexuality?

Miguel de Castilla: With the support of UNICEF we printed 500 copies of the [new] manual so as to use it in a pilot project with students of the final year of secondary school. We wanted to hear

opinions about the manual from teachers, parents and students. Obviously our criteria on these issues are not similar to those on which previous manuals were based. Sexual and reproductive health are amply discussed in this new manual, as is the importance of using contraceptives to prevent AIDS.

The subject of AIDS is very, very important for the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education is organizing a national event surrounding the issue of AIDS during the first week of December in which numerous different schools will take part. Reproductive and sexual health are issues that actively involve us because we know about the problems

of sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS, teenage pregnancies. So we know that young people need a lot of sex education in order for our youth to practice their sexuality responsibly.

TcS: In terms of adult education the government has been seen to prioritize the literacy campaign using the method *Yo Sí Puedo* (Yes, I Can). Are other forms of adult education also being prioritized?

Miguel de Castilla: Yes. Coincidentally, Leonela Reyes who created the *Yo, Sí Puedo* method is in Nicaragua at the moment. Today Reyes' method is used across the world - it is used in almost all Latin American countries and also in countries like Angola. Doctor Reyes is currently in Nicaragua helping us to translate the *Yo, Sí Puedo* workbooks into the languages of the Miskitos and the Mayangnas in the north Caribbean region of Nicaragua.

TcS: What options are there for those who finish the literacy course and want to continue their studies?

Miguel de Castilla: We do not stop after the literacy campaign. We hope to declare Nicaragua free of illiteracy next July. But after that the method continues. The follow up method is called *Yo, Sí Puedo Seguir* (Yes, I can continue). Our aim is that by 2015 the entire previously illiterate adult population is not just able to read and write but is also studying towards completing their sixth grade of

New Education, from p. 7.

primary school. That is the Nicaraguan aim. We hope that by 2015 the entire adult population is studying to complete sixth grade and we also hope to have stamped out the origin of illiteracy which is a lack of primary education.

The way to eliminate illiteracy in a country is not through literacy campaigns. That is a mechanism which has to be used when the illness is already installed. The way to eliminate illiteracy is by creating universal access to primary education. So we are at the front of the struggle to eliminate illiteracy in Nicaragua with the hope that this is the last literacy campaign in the country's history.

TcS: The majority of organizations dedicated to development in impoverished countries around the world have concluded that one of the most effective ways of achieving integrated development is through education for women. Do you agree?

Miguel de Castilla: That is crucial for us. Apart from the National Literacy Campaign, the government promotes programs like Zero Usury and Zero Hunger (or the Food Production Bond), which exclusively benefit women. We understand that if we teach a woman to read and write we are doing more than just resolving the severe problem of her own illiteracy. Through her we are contributing to the solution of other problems in Nicaraguan homes. By teaching women to read and write we are nipping illiteracy in the bud.

So the Ministry of Education considers the importance of women's inclusion within our plans of attention to be crucial. Fifty per cent of registrations in Nicaragua from preschool to secondary education, and even university, are of female students. The proportion of female to male students is always around about 49% to 51%, or 50.5% to 49.5%. That tendency was established during the Sandinista Revolution in the 1980s and has been maintained.

TcS: My questions end there, Minister. I would like to thank you for meeting with me and also to congratulate you and your colleagues for the recent announcement by the Organization of the Americas for Educational Excellence of its plan to award this year's Acknowledgment of Educational Excellence to the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education.

Solentiname, from p. 3.

do without them!

Cultural folklore -- "Creating the future and honoring the past" The study of folklore and the meanings of our own customs give us better insight into the society in which we live. In a rapidly changing world, traditional culture



The Solentiname Solidarity Alliance needs volunteers to help keep its computer network working.

and folklore play an essential role in preserving the identity and diversity of the society. Art and Culture is an integral part of Solentiname, and crucial to the developing tourism system. But, there

is more, folklore enables us to share our common heritage: youth learning and experiencing their historical birthright; adults in the community experiencing the pride of their past; and tourists sharing the common bond of humanity. Everyone truly benefits as cultural heritage is shared.

We encourage visitors to travel to Solentiname to learn more about the area, country and its people, in a manner which does not replicate the usual "tourist gaze" approach of travel. We encourage visitors to get involved, to learn about the local culture and people, to volunteer, even just for a day in the community to reaffirm our shared membership in one human family. We organize both Independent Travel as well as fully guided trips.

Visit www.solentiname.org, a community web site for more information regarding travel and tourism, sales of art prints, to donate funds for projects, and to explore volunteer opportunities.

How You Can Help!

Visit www.solentiname.org, a community web site for more information and background about projects and local needs.

**Buy high quality art reprints of Solentiname art. A royalty is paid to the artist and profits support Alianza projects. Original paintings as well as balsa art carvings are available on the web site as well.*

***Organize a service trip to Solentiname with your friends, or from your school. We can assist with all of the details.*

***Volunteer, volunteer, and volunteer again. It might just be the most transforming experience of your life. We hear from volunteers that, yes they volunteered in the community; it was the change in their own lives that effected them the most. Presently we have special needs for: ESL teachers, community and youth organizers, agricultural interns, technical computer geeks to repair computers and keep our network in order.*

***Send us a note with your special skills and interests; we have always been able to make a good fit between a willing, talented volunteer and the community.*

***Donate funds for projects and University Scholarships*

***We have received about half of the \$3000.00 we need to buy solar panels to power the computer lab.*

***We expect that we will have applications from 3 more students who need scholarships to go to University. Scholarships range from \$500.00 per year to \$1200.00 annually depending on their family resources and where they are going to University. We anticipate an application from a young woman who wants to study medicine in Leon Nicaragua.*

***Organize a sister school relationship between a school in your hometown and a school in Solentiname.*

Alianza para Solidaridad de Solentiname

www.solentiname.org

ssa@solentiname.org

Healthy Communities, from p. 4.

woman selling fresh pineapple and was shocked to learn that despite the minimal cost of 12 cordobas (roughly 70 cents), many of local people rarely had such fruit in their diets, which also means these diets would be deficient in, among other things, vitamin C which is essential for many biochemical processes including those involved with wound healing and immunity. It doesn't make sense to try to bring in medications or even medical services if the people don't have adequate nutrition. Rising food costs are a major factor here especially when one considers that the average daily income is US\$2 per day but certainly habit and lack of education can be factors in some cases. We also need to be aware of the negative impact of U.S. policy such as "free trade" agreements which favor corporate, chemically based agriculture. Coming to Nicaragua allows one not only to see the effects of these policies first hand, but to get involved in inspiring alternatives such as the ones being implemented by FEDICAMP, an organization which is helping over 450 families in northern Nicaragua as well as helping the land itself by planting millions of trees which stem erosion and provide food and lumber.

Since returning from our trip in September, developments in Nicaragua, the U.S. and around the world have brought some of these problems into sharper focus. The economic recession in the U.S. has had a rapid, mostly toxic effect on the worldwide economy. At this crucial time we have much to learn from the Nicaraguan people who in some ways may be less acutely affected by these changes. This was eloquently stated by Elvin Castellon, technical director of FEDICAMP, in the November 2008 newsletter published by Quest for Peace, an organization which, like Nicaragua Network, has been supporting the work of FEDICAMP:

"Today the people of the U.S. and Europe are clamoring in the face of food and economic crisis. The countries of the third world experience permanent crisis. We are people of solidarity. We help each other to survive and this is why we don't feel so much pressure.... The rich countries see us as people without capacity to contribute to development because of our lack of formal education. They devalue our culture. But wisdom does not come from books and theories, rather from

the soul." He then invites us to reflect deeply on the injustice which exists in the world and begin working together to heal the earth. FEDICAMP is doing this through reforestation, the building of wood efficient stoves and cisterns for storing water and saving of seeds for food production rather than depending on the corporate system which wants to control access to seeds, food and water.



Deidre Lentz, a nurse from Iowa, also on the trip, has fun with some children. Photo: Jim Fleming

We need to do similar work in our own communities because we all share the land, air and water and cannot isolate ourselves. But experiencing directly the wisdom which radiates through eyes and hearts of our Nicaraguan friends and the equally beautiful wisdom of the land there certainly help us appreciate this shared reality more. And something about the energy of that country makes it not only the land of volcanoes but the land of poets as well. For all of his shortcomings, Daniel Ortega "nailed it" back when he was first president of Nicaragua when he said:

"Everyone in Nicaragua is a poet until proven otherwise."

So in closing, I would like to share a poem that first came to me well into our trip as we rode one of the *lanchas* (boats)

to Ometepe. I hope it captures some of the joy I felt that day.

VIAJE NUMERO CINCO

Six days in country and my mind has finally caught up with my body Sandino has been staring at me all day Piercing eyes under that hat

on the t-shirt I bought three years ago
in Masaya
facing inward
testing my intentions
His constant gaze has finally purified my heart and allowed me back in my body, I am finally here:
arms stretched straight
on the rail of the lancha
wedding ring on the left hand
hope ring on the right
the waters of Colciboca, glistening like my mind, rush past, below
And Concepcion, mi madre, clearing her cloud guards reveals her awesome majesty: magnificent!

Gracias a Sandino!

Gracias a Dios!

Viva Nicaragua!

Other sources:

Of interest for health care professionals wishing to assist with medical care in developing countries are books by The Hesperian Foundation. In particular the classic "Where There is No Doctor--- A Village Health Care Manual". Both English and Spanish versions are available as a free download at: www.hesperian.org

A more detailed description of these issues along with related problems and proposed solutions is available in the report on my trip that was required by MINSA. For this or for anyone wishing to be involved in supporting sustainable development in Pueblo Nuevo, please send an e-mail request to Dr. Fleming at jflemingmd@yahoo.com

Ask President-Elect Obama and Congress for a new Latin America policy!

With a new administration installed in Washington, DC, it is time for progressive activists to demand a new foreign policy toward Latin American and the Caribbean.

The Latin America Solidarity Coalition (LASC), of which the Nicaragua Network is an active member has prepared talking points for use by local activists to educate their communities and influence opinion makers and elected officials. LASC sent the document to the President Elect.

Download the talking points for a new U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America at www.nicanet.org and send them to your Representative and Senators with a note from you!

The News from Nicaragua

Elections

In final returns certified by the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) the Sandinista Party (FSLN) won 105 of 146 municipal races, including Managua--where FSLN candidate Alexis Argüello defeated Eduardo Montealegre of the Constitutional Liberal Party Alliance (PLC)--and nine other departmental capitals. The campaign and the days following the election were marred by violence.

CSE President Roberto Rivas said that Montealegre, who was challenging the results, should present his claims of fraud to the CSE under the rules established in the electoral law. Montealegre presented evidence to the CSE from only two of 2,200 precincts. But he spoke to the media and other groups claiming that there were 640 precincts where the vote tally had not been published. In those precincts, he said, the PLC obtained 80,007 votes while the FSLN received 48,227. If those votes were included in the totals, the PLC Alliance wins, he alleged, with 216,238 to the Sandinista total of 198,671. Opposition groups have continued to conduct a media campaign against the outcome, calling variously for a national recount and annulment of the election.

The CSE reported Sandinista victories in Ciudad Sandino, Tipitapa, Boaco, Jinotepe, Diriamba, Chinandega, Chichigalpa, El Viejo, Somotillo, Rivas, San Juan del Sur, Esteli, Condega, San Juan de Limay, Leon, Nagarote, Telica, Somoto, Palacagüina, Telpaneca, Yalagüina, Masatepe, Niquinohomo, Matagalpa, Ciudad Dario, San Ramon, Esquipulas, Muy Muy, Ocotal, Jalapa, Kukra Hill, Corn Island, and San Carlos among others.

The PLC won in Corinto, Juigalpa, Santo Tomas, La Trinidad, Jinotega, El Cua, San Rafael del Norte, Wilwili, Masaya, Matiguas, Rio Blanco, Ciudad Antigua, Bluefields, Bocana de Paiwas, El Rama, Muelle de los Bueyes, El Castillo and others.

Electoral officials from several Latin American countries representing the Committee of Latin American Electoral Experts (CEELA), the Quito Protocol, and the Tikal Protocol, composed of presidents of electoral tribunals from South America, Central America and the Caribbean, served as observers. They said, "We have not

found any incident, in the places where we observed, that could constitute fraud and we agree that if any political party has an allegation of fraud, it has the obligation to prove it before the appropriate authorities."

The CSE accredited no national observer groups for these elections, saying that their fairness would be guaranteed by electoral officials and poll watchers from the competing political parties. Several



Eduardo Montealegre, PLC Alliance candidate for mayor of Managua who lost to FSLN candidate Alexis Argüello, alleged fraud in the Nov. 9 elections. Photo: La Prensa

groups, including Ethics and Transparency and the Institute for Development and Democracy (IPADE) had applied to observe the elections. Other international observers such as the Carter Center and Organization of America States were not invited to observe.

Claims of fraud, with evidence that irregularities did occur in some places, included late poll openings, early closings, expulsion of PLC poll watchers, discrimination in the acceptance of damaged voter identification, some ballots found in a Leon dump, tally sheets forwarded to the CSE that were allegedly different than those signed by poll watchers, and returns released by the CSE that did not match tally sheets sent in. The CSE recounted tally sheets from Managua's 2,200 precincts confirming Argüello's victory, but refused a national recount of all 11,808 precincts as demanded by the opposition. Two of the three PLC magistrates on the seven member CSE board were expelled from their party for certifying the vote. One

PLC magistrate had not participated in the certification.

Ten days of sporadic violence followed the election as Sandinistas and Liberals confronted each other with firearms, sticks, and rocks in Managua and a few other cities. Although there were multiple injuries, there were no deaths. Opposing party journalists seemed to be particularly targeted by supporters of each side.

National Police Commissioner Aminta

Granera said that the Police evaluated its response at each incident. "Above all," she said, "we have focused on protecting lives."

The divisions between those who had left the FSLN and those who remain deepened during the election with the Sandinista Renovation Movement officially calling on people to vote for the right-wing PLC candidates. MRS National Assembly Delegate Monica

Baltadono, whose Sandinista Rescue Movement is part of the MRS, refused to join the MRS call to vote for the right wing, and instead urged voters to cast null ballots.

Leon leaders of the Sandinista Rescue Movement (MRS), which had joined the MRS for the 2006 elections, asked followers to vote for Manuel Calderon, the Sandinista (FSLN) candidate for mayor of that city, rejecting Monica Baltadano's call for voters to cast null ballots. In Esteli, local MRS leaders returned to the ranks of the FSLN in what they called "a 'no' to Somocismo." They said that they rejected the decision of Dora Maria Tellez, Victor Hugo Tinoco and Edmundo Jarquin to ally the party with the Liberal Alliance "without consultation with the base."

In the first week of December the political parties kicked off their campaigns for mayors and city councils in eight municipalities of the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) that had felt the full force of Hurricane Felix in Sept.

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News, from p. 10.

2007. Those elections will be on Jan. 18, 2009.

Politics

On Dec. 15, National Assembly President Rene Nuñez closed the legislative year with dozens of bills pending because opposition parties had paralyzed the legislature most of the time since August. Opposition parties were not able to bring together the 47 votes needed to pass a constitutionally questionable bill to annul Nov. 9 municipal elections, but neither was the governing Sandinista Party able to achieve 47 votes to move forward on other legislation.

On Dec. 10, representatives from the Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC), the Nicaraguan Democratic Bench (BDN) and the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) met to create a joint strategy to annul the elections. Losing Managua candidate Montealegre said that the opposition will continue to denounce the electoral fraud that he claimed took place on Nov. 9 and will continue to call for the elections to be annulled.

On Dec. 10, Nuñez' final attempt to achieve a quorum failed. He stated that "enormous damage" was being caused by the inability to get legislative approval to borrow \$20 million from the World Bank for rural potable water projects and for another loan of US\$20 million from the Inter-American Development Bank for small and medium size businesses as well as numerous other measures.

On Dec. 5, a technical mission from the International Monetary Fund had urged the branches of the Nicaraguan government to create the political conditions necessary for the passage of several bills the IMF is requiring before it will release US\$25 million in loans. IMF officials said that the Nicaraguan budget needed to be fully funded which requires that all foreign assistance pledges be honored, but much of that foreign aid is held up at present due to the political situation.

M & R Consultants released a new poll on Dec. 15 which showed 57.9% opposed to nullifying the November municipal elections with only 34.5% supporting such a move. While 63.5% oppose changing the constitution to allow for reelection of a sitting president, current President Daniel Ortega has a 48.9% approval rating against a 45.3 disapproval rating demonstrating the political polarization of the country.

Only 27.6% of those interviewed

approved the performance of the National Assembly, while 32.1% disapproved. The Supreme Electoral Council, which in the past had polled at 40% approval, dropped slightly to 36.5% with 41% disapproving of its work. On the question about who was the best person to be the leader of the opposition, failed presidential and



Aminta Granera, National Police chief, gave high priority to protecting citizens' lives during current unrest. She had the highest approval ratings in the country in the recent M&R poll. Photo: La Prensa

Managua mayoral candidate Eduardo Montealegre got the highest rating with 34% demonstrating the continued deep divisions within the Nicaraguan right wing. The national poll was taken between Nov. 29 and Dec. 4 by means of random face to face interviews with 1,600 people at their homes. The margin of error was 2.5%.

International

International reaction to the elections has ranged from the Bush Administration's 90 day suspension of Millennium Challenge Corporation funds and some European countries evaluating their aid to Nicaragua, to support or silence from Latin American and Caribbean leaders.

After meeting on Nov. 11 with Montealegre, several foreign diplomats called on the Nicaraguan government to "make an effort toward transparency to dissipate criticisms." Montealegre visited the US and French embassies, France being the current head of the European Union. US Ambassador Robert Callahan said that his government was "concerned" about the post-election situation in Nicaragua and had received many reports of irregularities. He and the French Embassy called for an internationally observed recount.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in a statement on Nov. 13 criticized

what he called the "interventionist conduct of the current U.S. government through its ambassador in Nicaragua, Robert J. Callahan." Chavez called on "the governments and people of Latin America to demand that the United States respect the sovereignty of the people of Nicaragua."

In the OAS, resolutions by Nicaragua to censure OAS Secretary General Jose Insulza for his election criticisms, and a resolution by the US to condemn Nicaragua's elections were both defeated.

Despite letters signed by 10,000 people from diverse sectors of the Nicaraguan population and hundreds of emails from US solidarity, the Bush administration on December 11 suspended Millennium Challenge Account funds to Nicaragua for 90 days after a meeting of the board of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). The aid has been used primarily for infrastructure and agricultural support in the Departments of Leon and Chinandega.

The MCC suspension statement implies that projects already approved will continue, but \$64 million not yet appropriated will be held up for review. Sources reported that meetings held by Foreign Minister Samuel Santos in Washington with members of Congress, Bush administration officials, and President-elect Barack Obama's transition team were responsible for achieving the "time out" rather than a cancellation of the program based on allegations of fraud in the November municipal elections.

Cesar Zamora, president of the Nicaraguan American Chamber of Commerce (AMCHAM) characterized the decision as "better than it might have been for Nicaragua because the other option was cancellation of the program."

At a meeting with incoming Sandinista mayors and council members, President Daniel Ortega was defiant. "Don't worry," he said, "this deficit will be covered by Venezuela, according to what officials of that government told me as well as President Hugo Chavez himself."

Non-Governmental Organizations

Oxfam-Great Britain was cleared of all charges by the Ministry of Government on Nov. 24, following an investigation into several grants to Nicaraguan non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Clare Moberly, Oxfam-GB representative in Managua, said that the work of Oxfam in Nicaragua since 1963 has always

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News, from p. 11.

been to support the development of the country. The Ortega government had launched an investigation of foreign funding of NGOs, a favored technique of the US government and European allies to manipulate elections and sow civil unrest in countries with leftist governments. Unfortunately, the Ortega government is using this legitimate investigation to harass women's organizations that are working to return the 100 year old right of women to therapeutic abortion which was criminalized in 2006 with FSLN support in the National Assembly.

Numerous activists in the women's and human rights movements have reported threats to their lives and health, and that of their family members, as well as break-ins where valuables were left behind and computers and papers were taken. Gonzalo Carrion, Legal Area Director of CENIDH, cited a break-in at the home of Marlen Chow, where the only item stolen was her lap top computer, as just another in a string of incidents of harassment suffered by leaders in the Autonomous Women's Movement (MAM), the Network of Women against Violence, the Institute for Development and Democracy (IPADE), the Civil Coordinator and CENIDH itself.

On Nov. 5, Patricia Orozco, who belongs to a group working for the reinstatement of therapeutic abortion, reported that she had received telephone calls which were at first offensive, of a sexual nature, but that then began to threaten her and her family. "Damn bitch, we are going to shut you up!" was the last message that she found on her cell phone.

Vilma Nuñez, President of CENIDH, says that she has been told of serious plans against her life. Gonzalo Carrion of CENIDH said that members of the Sandinista Party have told him that his personal activities are being investigated and that he should be very careful because he "speaks too much and too strongly."

Dora Zeledon, long-time president of the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Nicaraguan Women's Association (AMNLAE) resigned on Oct. 24 and turned over the Erlinda Lopez National House of the Woman to First Lady Rosario Murillo and members of the recently formed Sandinista Women's Movement. On Oct. 22, Murillo made a surprise appearance at an AMNLAE national council meeting. According to sources, Murillo demanded that AMNLAE follow the line of the FSLN and defend the administration of

Daniel Ortega "or turn over its property, because AMNLAE belongs to the Sandinista Front." And, in spite of the fact that the majority of the national council supported Zeledon, Murillo was able to impose her selection of Isabel Arauz to replace Zeledon. AMNLAE had refused to support the Ortega government's opposition to sex education, therapeutic abortion, and other issues.

Poverty Reduction/Economy

The 2009 Nicaraguan budget of US\$1.7 billion, which is being held hostage by



In mid-December the indigenous Mayagna community of Awas Tingni was given title to its ancestral lands in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region municipalities of Bonanza, Rosita and Waspan bringing Nicaragua into compliance with a 2001 ruling of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Photo: Alistar International

the opposition parties, increases poverty reduction spending by almost 20%. The budget prioritizes health care, including health centers, hospitals, medical equipment and medicines. It also increases spending for education, infrastructure, energy, water and sewers. For the first time citizens will be able to see which projects are budgeted and carried out in which department and city.

US Ambassador Callahan announced on Nov. 4 that the United States Department of Labor was making a donation of US\$5 million to the project promoted by Nicaraguan First Lady Rosario Murillo known as Project Love which works to eradicate child labor through an integral community-based approach. Callahan said that the donation was for a period of three years and would be used for, among other things, the construction of schools on coffee plantations. Callahan said that he was "very impressed" by this government program which brings together ministries and institutions which are in charge of a variety of programs. Official figures show that about 53,643 children between 10 and 14 years of age (out of a total of 681,548 children in that age group) work in Nicaragua in violation of the Labor Code. Maria Jesus Conde, representative of the United Nations Children's Fund

(UNICEF) in Nicaragua, praised Project Love, saying that it coincides one hundred per cent with the goals of UNICEF in the area of children's human rights.

While the price of gasoline and diesel continues to fall, the cost of the "basic basket" of products needed for a family to survive continues to rise. Retailers expect it to rise even higher by Christmas. In Bilwi, capital of the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN), the fishing industry is facing one of its worst moments in history because of an international drop in the price of fish, the lack of buyers in the North American market, and bad weather in the Caribbean over the last several months.

The cost of the "basic basket" of 53 food, housing, and clothing products, needed for a family of six to survive for a month, rose by US\$48.12 in the first ten months of 2008 to US\$442.04. The Ortega government's National Institute for Development Information (INEDE) which prepared the report, called the cost "impossible and unpayable" since even though the minimum wage has been raised twice this year for a total of 33%, it is still only US\$96.30 per month.

The Ortega government will open subsidized food outlets in the 13 municipalities of Chinandega according to Indalecio Pastora, FSLN departmental political secretary. The outlets will be run by Nicaraguan Basic Food Company (Enabás). Each outlet will sell, at subsidized prices, beans, cereal grains, sugar, rice, salt, and vegetable oil, as a way to relieve working families of the current high food prices. A departmental committee will oversee the operation. Beneficiaries will include demobilized soldiers from both the Sandinistas and contras, according to Pastora.

The coffee harvest season began in the face of low coffee prices on the world market due primarily to the crisis in international financial markets. According to a report on prices by the National Coffee Council (Conacafe), the price for coffee futures has been affected by the weak dollar and high oil prices, and according to producers, a flood of low-quality Vietnamese coffee. World coffee demand has fallen 3.4% according to the World Coffee Organization. Nicaragua is expected to produce 1.6 million hundredweights of exportable coffee this year, a drop of 300,000 hundredweights from last year.