

Month in Review

August 26 – September 28, 2009

Anniversaries

Twelve thousand soldiers from all of the branches of the armed forces (infantry, naval and air) participated in the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Nicaraguan Army, known at the time as the Sandinista Popular Army. The head of the Army, General Omar Hallesleven, a former Sandinista guerrilla fighter, was decorated by the National Assembly with the Pedro Joaquin Chamorro National Order of Liberty in recognition of his defense of democracy and public liberties. President Ortega gave him the Defense of National Sovereignty Gold Medal.

In his speech, Halleslevens emphasized the efforts of the armed forces to become more professional, to respond to the needs of the population at times of natural disasters, and to take a leading role at the regional level in the fight against organized crime and international drug trafficking.

In his 50 minute speech, Ortega demanded that the Army of Honduras “respond to the interests of the people” of Honduras and “reverse the military coup d’état” that overthrew President Manuel Zelaya in June. He said that US President Barack Obama says he wants respectful relationships with the Latin American countries “and how we would like to see those words made reality, but we know that it is not easy for him to put that into practice.” Ortega denounced the agreement signed by Colombian President Alvaro Uribe with the United States “to turn over his territory [seven military bases] for use by the US.”

He emphasized that conflict in Colombia can only be resolved by dialogue.

The Nicaraguan National Police celebrated the 30th anniversary of its founding with a rally and parade on Sept. 5. National Police Commissioner Aminta Granera said, “We are a modern police force, professional, apolitical and non-partisan... in strict accordance with the constitution.” She added, “Our identity and our institutionality tell us what we are and what we are not and, above all, what we can never permit ourselves to become.... We can never become a reincarnation of the Guardia [National Guard of Somoza],” which she described as a force that was “hated and repudiated by society.”

Humberto Ortega, former head of the

Sandinista Army and President Ortega’s brother, noted that Granera has been criticized for not using force to stop violence of groups supporting the government said, “In reality, it’s not so easy to find where the line is and it’s harder when the type of political gatherings in the streets are highly polarized such as we have in the country now. I think that while the Army and the Police show maturity, the political class with their leaders have to work to make our parties and institutions function in a mature manner.”

Politics

Eighty-eight young people from 14 departments graduated from a four month long training funded by US taxpayer money through the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), a core group of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The NED was founded during the Reagan administration with the express purpose of taking over some of the CIA’s role in manipulating foreign electoral processes.



The Nicaraguan Police celebrated its 30th anniversary. Left to right: Tomas Borge, Pres. Daniel Ortega and Chief Aminta Granera.

During the closing ceremonies of the “Capacity Building Program for Young Political Leaders.” the young people demanded Liberal unity, modernization of the political parties, greater leadership roles for young people, and for party leaders to set aside their personal interests. The young people came from the Independent Liberal Party (PLI), the Let’s Go with Eduardo Movement (MVCE), the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), the Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC), and the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN). “We youth are working for unity [against the governing Sandinista Party], now we just hope that those leading our parties and our legal representatives will look to make it concrete. It is their part that is missing in making all the pieces fall into place,” said Jacinto León, of the PLI-MVCE of Boaco. The FSLN did not participate in this NED program because the NED has consistently worked to manipulate Nicaragua’s political system against it.

President Ortega met in mid-September with Director of Oxfam-Great Britain, Barbara Stocking, and afterward said, “We have had some political problems with some organizations; you know which they are; we don’t need to hide them. But currently we do not have problems; we only wanted information.” The Nicaraguan Prosecutor’s Office had last year subpoenaed the financial documents of Oxfam, the Center for Research and Communications (CINCO) and the Autonomous Women’s Movement in an investigation last year of improper use of funds. The organizations were cleared of wrongdoing in February.

Ortega said he recognized that non-governmental organizations fill gaps in social assistance coverage in poor areas of the country. Stocking thanked Ortega for clearing up the problem that her organization had had with the government. Ortega thanked Oxfam for its support for programs in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) where the group carries out most of its work. Stocking said that Oxfam-GB would continue to work in Nicaragua’s agricultural sector and considered positive the government’s Zero Hunger Program.



Elections for regional councils will be held on Nicaragua’s Caribbean Coast on March 7, 2010.

Elections

Four alliances and three parties have registered to participate in the elections for the regional councils (45 members each) of Nicaragua’s Caribbean Coast in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) and the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS). The elections are scheduled for March 7, 2010. The alliances (which include a total of 14 parties) are headed by the Sandinista Party (FSLN), the Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC), the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN), and the Alliance for the Republic (APRE). The only parties with significant support on the Caribbean Coast are the FSLN, YATAMA, and the PLC. The FSLN/YATAMA alliance currently controls the RAAN and the PLC controls the RAAS.

The Caribbean Coast has 250,000 eligible voters. The population is composed of a number of ethnic groups, including Miskitos, mestizos, Creoles, Ramas, Mayangnas, and Garifunas.

According to Jose Benito Bravo, also known as “Comandante Mack,” the Nicaraguan Resistance Party (PRN), composed of former contras, will run in alliance with the Sandinista Party “because we want poor people, the least favored, to have the opportunity to have a better Nicaragua in which our children receive education in peace and harmony.”

Meanwhile, the Miskito Council of Elders, which has declared independence in April and formed the Government of the Communitarian Nation of Moskitia announced that they will not accept the regional elections. They presented a document at the offices of the Sandinista Party in Managua which explained that their system of government goes back before the “forced” annexation by Nicaragua “to a kingdom

that lasted from 1630 to 1840 and then under a British protectorate until 1894.” Miskito participation in the March vote will be an indicator of how much support there is for the independence movement.

Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) President Roberto Rivas has said that there will be observers for the elections. But, he added, “We will not permit groups that have participated openly in partisan political activity because one thing is political participation in the broad sense and another thing altogether is participation in a particular movement or group.” He said that the government, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has invited the European Union to send observers.

Economy

The International Monetary Fund announced on Sept. 16 that it has reached a preliminary accord with the Nicaraguan government that could lead to the release of US\$35 million in October “to support the country’s plan for growth and the fight against poverty.” On August 28, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) released US\$150.7 million in Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) to the Central Bank of Nicaragua as part of the multilateral financial support approved by the industrialized G-20 nations to help poorer countries strengthen their international currency reserves. The Sept. 16 communiqué noted that the agreement is “still subject to the consideration and approval by the management and board of the IMF, on an economic program for 2009-2010 that protects the balance of payments and assures the stability of the public finances of Nicaragua.” If Nicaragua commits itself to continuing its “current prudent economic and fiscal policies” and achieves a broadening of its tax base, “the board of directors of the IMF could consider completed the second and third revisions of the PRGF [Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility] agreement at the end of October,” stated the IMF note.

Meanwhile, budget and tax reform talks continued. Walmaro Gutierrez, chair of the Economic Committee of the National Assembly, said that the budget modifications that are being considered would cut expenses by US\$30.65 million and would affect only the government bureaucracy. He said that expenditures in education, health care and social programs would not be affected. With reference to pending tax reform, he said that consultations with all economic, political and social sectors were coming to an end and the results of those consultations would be presented to the Assembly soon. “It’s not possible for the wealthiest economic sectors of this country, who have paid so little, to continue in this manner,” he said.

However, with only 38 Sandinista party votes of the 47 votes needed for passage and only the six vote ALN bench not yet publicly opposed to the revisions, it is uncertain that the National Assembly will be able to pass a bill this year. Failure will jeopardize IMF funding.

Hard on the good news that Nicaragua’s first harvest of the agricultural cycle produced a record bounty came news that the El Niño weather phenomenon is seriously threatening important agricultural zones in Western Nicaragua. Alvaro Fiallos, president of the Union of Small and Medium Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG) said that they have an adequate supply of fertilizer and the land has been plowed but, “not a drop of water has fallen and I think that indicates the dry season has returned early.” The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAGFOR) stated that it has installed monitors throughout the country to determine the impact of El Niño.



National Assembly Economy Committee meets to hear proposals to solve the micro-finance crisis. Photo: La Prensa.

Debtor protests in seven municipalities have caused concern on the part of financial institutions that lend money to small farmers and business people in the country. The president of the Association of Microfinance Institutions (ASOMIF), Julio Flores, said that his organization is making great efforts to guarantee the flow of funds into Nicaragua in spite of the uncertainty caused by the Movement of Farmers, Merchants and Micro Businesspeople of the North, better known as the No Pago [Won’t Pay] Movement.

Since the movement of large capital into micro lending, microfinance has moved well beyond the Grameen Bank model of US\$50-100 loans to women in

solidarity groups to a model in which mid-sized farms and businesses take out loans of thousands of dollars, using their land or business as collateral and often paying what the “No Pay” movement terms usurious interest rates. Twenty-five such international financial institutions expressed their concern about instability in the country’s microfinance market. Douglas Young of Micro Vest said that the demand of the “No Pay” Movement that interest rates be reduced to 8% was “impossible” claiming that the international financial organizations obtain funds at rates higher than 8% and they then must cover the costs of evaluating each credit applicant.

Meanwhile, Omar Vilchez, leader of the “No Pay” Movement, noted that farmers have lost properties worth US\$50,000 because of an initial debt of US\$5,000. Sandinista Deputy Walmaro Gutierrez, mentioned one farmer who received a loan of US\$13,000, made a payment of US\$5,000 but, because the payment was late, had a surcharge applied to his account of US\$12,500. Liberal Deputy Freddy Torres agreed that the denunciations of the debtors against the companies had to be investigated because “they cannot continue to bleed them like this!”

Human Rights

Human Rights Ombudsman Omar Cabezas promised to struggle for respect for the human and labor rights of gays and to end discrimination against them during the 2nd Central American Sexual Diversity Conference last week. Leaders of the LGBT community discussed their problems during the three day conference while seeking consensus demands to present to the governments of the region.

Although in Nicaragua there have been advances in legal recognition and decriminalization of sexual differences, the reality is that the consciousness of individuals in society must be changed, attendees said. Marvin Mayorga Norori, a member of the Initiative for Human Rights for Sexual Diversity asked church hierarchies “who automatically call us sinners” to respect the secular State and “not interfere in the decisions that affect us.”



Olivier De Schetter, U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food said that his statements were misrepresented in El Nuevo Diario.

Social Services & Poverty Reduction

Olivier De Schetter, U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, who was visiting Nicaragua, said that El Niño will bring severe drought, the effects of which will be seen between January and March of 2010. He stated, “I believe that Nicaragua finds itself in an extremely difficult situation; not as bad as that of Guatemala or Haiti but close to the situation of those countries and there is no time to lose.” De Schutter said he was impressed with the government programs in the area of food security, especially with Zero Hunger, but said that “they should be carried out in a more transparent manner and be as inclusive as possible.” He suggested that the programs be “institutionalized” under the new law on food security in order to avoid accusations of political favoritism.

Following coverage of his statement which El Nuevo Diario characterized as very critical of the Ortega government, De Schetter wrote to the newspaper saying that he was misquoted. He wrote:

Sir:

“I was saddened to read in your edition of Sept. 12, 2009, a declaration that you attributed to me saying that the government of Nicaragua was using social assistance for clientelistic political ends. The headline about the presentation of my preliminary conclusions was ‘Social Aid Manipulated.’ In this case, it was not the social assistance that was manipulated but rather the information.

“I ask you to print this letter on the front page of your next edition along with the complete text of my press release, which was much more balanced than was indicated by your article.

“The time has come for the different political bands of this country to stop distrusting each other. My mission seeks to contribute to the promotion of this confidence, while your publication achieved exactly the opposite.

Sincerely, Olivier De Schutter

United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food”

El Nuevo Diario did not publish the letter or the press release. To read the article in El Nuevo Diario to which De Schutter refers, go to <http://impreso.elnuevodiario.com.ni/2009/09/12/nacionales/109461>]

Schutter recognized Nicaragua for legal, institutional, and programmatic advances in the area of nutrition. He praised Nicaragua for reducing infant malnutrition by 6%, although he noted that one in five children are still affected.