

A visit to Nicaragua and Honduras: Two sides of the Latin American runway
Report back on the Nicaragua Network/School of the Americas Watch Delegation to Nicaragua
by Lisa Sullivan September 9, 2012

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I begin this article from the runway at Tegucigalpa's Toncantin airport, infamous for its treacherous landings, as well as a recent coup and killing. This runway is actually a pretty fitting symbol of the visit that I am now concluding, a visit to two neighboring countries with two opposing realities -Nicaragua and Honduras. It's also a fitting symbol for all of Latin America today: the choices faced by them in the South, and the obstacles posed by us in the North.

One side of the narrow runway is jam-packed with US fast food outlets, literally spilling their gaudy signs onto the asphalt where planes queue up. The other side is a clear and stunning view of emerald green mountains covered with a patchwork of distant farms, evoking a sense of possibility, purpose, connectedness. Sitting here smack in the middle of both sides, I begin to reflect on the journey that I am concluding, a visit to both sides of the tracks, er..... runway.

Nicaragua was my first destination. There is, perhaps, no other country that evokes more *carino* in the Latin America solidarity community than Nicaragua. Tens of thousands of *sandalistas* visited there after the youthful Sandinistas overthrew the brutal Somoza regime in 1979: to pick coffee, build schools, give vaccinations, then later serve as physical deterrents to US-funded *contra* attacks.

Eleven years after the revolution's triumph, a war-torn nation, spurred on by massive US funds, voted the Sandinistas out of power. There followed 16 years of ruthless neo- liberal policies , plunging the nation even deeper into poverty. During those years Nicaragua climbed to the bottom of the economic rung, with only Haiti beating it out as poorest nation of the Western Hemisphere. (In recent years, however, Honduras has replaced Nicaragua in that unenviable spot).

I was last in Nicaragua in early 2008, just months after the Sandinistas had returned to power. The fragility of that electoral victory and the splintered condition of the party and the nation was visible. Then –and now - we had come to ask Nicaraguan officials to withdraw their troops from the School of the Americas. No Nicaraguan troops had attended the SOA under the Sandinistas, but soon after pro-Washington regimes took their place, Nicaraguan were back in their classrooms.

In 2008 our small SOAW delegation had a long conversation with President Daniel Ortega, who was only months in the presidency at the time. He spoke about the impact of the SOA on his nation, of their training of the feared National Guard, Somoza's henchmen. He affirmed that this school did not represent the interests of the people of Nicaragua nor any of the people of Latin America. But he also acknowledged his nation's fragile position. After sixteen years of absolute economic dependency on the US, and with wounds of a US-funded war still raw, the timing was just not right in 2008 to announce Nicaragua's withdrawal from the SOA. Now, four years later, we decided to come back, to see if the time was ripe. This time SOA Watch teamed up with Nicaragua Network to organize a delegation to learn more about the "threat of a good example" that Nicaragua is becoming. Twenty committed people from around the US and the UK took part.

From the moment we stepped into Nicaragua, it was clear that a lot had changed in four years. President Ortega was in a more solid position, having been recently re-elected by a resounding majority. Positive change was palpable at every turn: new roads, new roofs, new water systems, new schools. Even the massive Managua dump had been converted to a state-of-the-art recycling center with new homes and

schools for former trash scavengers who are now employees of the new center. Former banana workers suffering diseases caused by exposure to the chemical nemagon, sported spanking new homes and gardens, right across the street from the National Assembly.

The positive spirit of people reflected this reality, especially that of women and youth. Thousands of micro loans are being given to small groups of women whose only collateral is one another. We listened to women share how their homemade popsicle business and corn grinder service had expanded with the loans, granting them a sense of independence and dignity.

Pregnant cows and pigs are being given to women at the lowest economic strata. From afar this might seem minor, but up close, it's huge. Take Dona Martha, whose pregnant cow and pregnant pig went on to have 3 calves and 5 piglets respectively. Because of that, she and her family now have a new roof and new wooden planks on their small house, as well as a new outhouse and electrical hook up. Every inch of her tiny yard is producing something to eat. Squash climb up the branches of lemon trees that in turn shade lettuce and carrots, growing prolifically in the heat. The quality of her life and that of her family is dramatically better.

We met with young people from the Sandinista Youth brigade who talked about their local recycling program and weekend trips to remote communities to plant trees. Susan Lagos shared how this has improved the quality of the town of Ciudad Dario where she lives. She used to avoid a particular area of town where restless teens swarmed about aimlessly. Now, many of these young people joined weekend rescue efforts and environmental brigades. Not only is the town safer, she told us, but kids have shared with Susan a new sense of meaning in their lives.

The Sandinista government says these new programs respond to their three underlying values: *Christianity, socialism and solidarity*. These three words are not frequently used in the same sentence by most folks in the US, but they are found side by side on signs throughout the country and on the tongues of those who explained to us their new model of the society.

The value of *solidarity* rang clearly in the voice of President Ortega who agreed to meet with our delegation on the last night. The key agenda item was our request that Nicaragua withdraw their troops from the SOA. President Ortega reminded us of the fragile situation of his tiny nation as he had four years ago. In recent years, however, the ALBA block of Latin American and Caribbean nations had offered Nicaragua the economic solidarity some degree of independence from the US. Still, the US still controlled a large amount of funds for Nicaragua, and they were reluctant to anger their giant neighbor.

Nine days of having witnessed so many positive changes in Nicaragua made us sympathetic to the complexities of what we were requesting. All the other countries that had withdrawn from the SOA were more distant from the US (physically and relationally) and had far more natural resources, giving them a degree of relative independence. Only two months previous, President Correa announced that Ecuador would join Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, and Venezuela in withdrawing troops from the SOA Nicaragua would be the first Central American country to do so.

President Ortega explained that he had taken our 2008 meeting very seriously. He had subsequently reduced Nicaragua's numbers at the school from 78 in 2008 to only five last year and none so far this year. The time had now come, he told us to stop completely. "The SOA is an ethical and moral anathema. All of the countries of Latin America have been victims of its graduates. The SOA is a symbol of death, a symbol of terror. We have been gradually reducing our numbers of troops at the SOA, sending only five last year and none this year. We have now entered a new phase and we will NOT continue to send troops to the SOA. This is the least that we can do. We have been its victims."

We were jubilant. Nicaragua had brought the effort to close the SOA a giant step forward. Six countries had now said NO - and two in the past 2 months. This affirmed the importance of working together - North and South, to close this school. Over 300 people from the North have put their own lives on the line for this cause, going to jail to protest this school. Tens of thousands of others had traveled to Georgia to show their solidarity with the efforts. Thousands around the country have lobbied their members of congress to sign on legislation, leading to 52 co-sponsors. With pressure from many fronts, the walls of the SOA are cracking.



President Daniel Ortega told the SOA Watch delegation he would send no more Nicaraguans to train at the School of the Americas.

After the meeting with President Ortega and receiving the good news, we arrived at our guest house close to midnight. I was scheduled leave at 4 am by bus to Honduras No time to shift gears.

But boy, did those gears shift themselves! By the next afternoon I was in Tegucigalpa, meeting with the Project of International Accompaniment in Honduras (PROAH) team of international observers, accompanying people who have received threats against their lives. Dozens of teachers, journalists, farmers and students have been murdered in the past three years for the crime of denouncing the 2009 coup organized by graduates of the SOA. Honduras has gained the unenviable title of murder capital of the world.

Within hours, I was giving a talk at a panel on militarization. I painted a picture of optimism of citizen power and progressive governments standing up to US militarization, still fresh with the victory in Nicaragua. My Honduran co-panelist began her talk by saying, *here, things are different*. She spoke of the continued murders and threats, and the increased US interference. A recent shift in the high command of the Honduran military came on orders from the US ambassador. Honduras had become a landmine of danger since the coup, and now it was losing its grip on very sovereignty.

After the conference I was introduced to a young boy holding his refreshment cup with a very bandaged hand. He was one of the victims shot by US DEA forces in the Moskitia this past May as his passenger boat docked . The boy received the impact of a high powered automatic weapon fired by the US DEA forces from the helicopter without waring. They ripped a 4 inch hole in his hand. His best friend was killed in the helicopters attack, as well as 2 pregnant women.

After the conference, I looked around the COFADEH office, amd noticed that the paint had continued to fade and peel since my last visit. The only new things were more and more photos of disappeared and murdered victims. I realized how presumptuous it was for me to bounce into the room with a smile on my face. But I also remembered sitting in that same room in May 2009, writing about the hope I had

experienced those days as Hondurans prepared to go to the polls to say yes to the possibility of a constitutional assembly. At that moment, the country was ecstatic. Hope, change, all through a peaceful democratic process, seemed just around the corner for Honduras. And then came the coup, on the morning of the election, organized to halt a process for peaceful, profound democratic change in a deeply poor nation.

As my plane makes its way through turquoise skies, I can still see a maze of patchwork farms below. I'm not sure if I'm still in Honduran air space, or if we have passed into Nicaragua. From up above, the land looks so similar; from below, so very different. Kind of like those two sides of the runway from where we left. As I write these words, emotions stir within me: sadness, mostly anger. What right is it to steal the dreams of a people who are so poor? How much poorer and how much more wounded do we want them to be? There was so much hope here in May of 2009. With every dead journalist and every dead resistance leader and every dead LIBRE Party candidate, that hope sinks farther and farther. The hope was ripped away in the middle of the night, behind the barrel of guns aimed at a president who dared to roll up his sleeves to work with the poor, at a nation that dared to dream. The orders came from graduates of the school from which Nicaragua had just withdrawn: the SOA.

I'm landing now, arriving at the nation's capital, taxiing on a this runway filled with blue lights, an a sense of order. No fast food joints spilling into it, no stunning emerald mountains flowing away from it. I think back to both sides of that precarious runway of Toncatin and wonder. Which side will Latin America choose? Which side will we let them choose?