

TALKING SENSE

Hasn't the press been suppressed?

In the United States *La Prensa* has often been portrayed as an "independent" paper, bravely resisting Sandinista harassment and censorship. This paper was a major factor in the anti-Somoza struggle. However when it began to take an anti-Sandinista line soon after Somoza's downfall, the bulk of its employees quit *La Prensa* and joined one of its owners in setting up *El Nuevo Diario*. *La Prensa* became the voice of the anti-Sandinista elites.

In dealing with *La Prensa* the Sandinista government has tried to maintain a balance between safeguarding free expression and making sure that the revolution itself is not endangered. Nevertheless, its actions became increasingly severe as attacks on the revolution grew. *La Prensa* was closed briefly several times, and pre-censorship was imposed in 1982. Many Nicaraguans agreed that these measures were justified; others no doubt think that even under adverse conditions the revolution itself would be better served by maintaining freedom of expression.

Most critics of these actions ignore the fact that there is no press freedom in Guatemala (where 50 journalists have been killed) or in El Salvador (where journalists have also been murdered and only right wing pro-government papers can be published).

Aren't there serious human rights violations?

International human rights commissions of both the Organization of American States and the United Nations have given Nicaragua generally high marks on human rights. The death penalty was abolished in 1979. (By contrast the governments of El Salvador and Guatemala, both supported by the United States, have been responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians, many of them tortured first).

Regarding Nicaragua, human rights organizations have expressed concern about what they regard as arbitrary arrest and detention of people for political reasons, and about the general treatment of the Miskito Indians.

Yes, what about the Miskitos?

There are serious problems between the Sandinista government and the Miskitos. These are rooted in history, but they have been aggravated by Sandinista errors and exploited by the CIA.

ABOUT NICARAGUA

Indigenous people (Miskitos, Sumos and Ramas) and the English-speaking blacks living on the Atlantic coastal plain make up about 4% of the Nicaraguan population. Their history has been quite separate from that of the rest of the country: e.g., they were colonized by Great Britain. They had few contacts with the rest of Nicaragua and were mistrustful of the "Spaniards," as they call those from the Pacific side. The Atlantic side was largely untouched by the anti-Somoza struggle.

When the Sandinistas arrived in 1979, they inherited the existing mistrust of the "Spaniards," and their own insensitivity to the particular experience of the people increased that mistrust. In addition, the Miskitos were seeking autonomy in government, land rights and the rights to natural resources on their lands.

Tensions increased and events came to a head in February 1981 when the top leaders of the MISURASATA (the name means "Miskitos, Sumos,

*Human rights commissions . . . have
given Nicaragua generally high marks . . .*

Ramas, Sandinistas, together") were arrested by the Sandinista authorities. They were soon released but Steadman Fagoth, the indigenous representative on the Council of State, went to Honduras where he joined ex-Somoza guardsmen in counter-revolutionary activities. Eventually most of the other MISURASATA leaders also left Nicaragua and some became linked to anti-Sandinista groups.

In February 1982, in response to increasing attacks from Honduras, the Sandinistas decided to transfer inland the people living along the Honduran border. As they did so they destroyed villages to prevent their being used by counter-revolutionary groups' forces. Even those Miskitos who had experienced the cross-border attacks and agreed the transfer was necessary were saddened and angry. An estimated 18,000 Miskitos have left Nicaragua for Honduras (out of a total Nicaraguan Miskito population of 80,000). Two thousand have been trained as combatants and are fighting the Sandinistas. Since the CIA-organized and -financed *contras* would like