

TALKING SENSE

to seize a portion of Nicaraguan territory, declare it "liberated" and then call for recognition from governments unfriendly to the Sandinista revolution, the "Miskito question" is inevitably part of the larger struggle going on in Nicaragua.

The Sandinistas publicly admit some errors and insensitivity to the indigenous people. By some reports they have made progress with the Miskitos, while there continue to be other reports of human rights violations.

CIA exploitation of these conflicts has made it more difficult to establish a peaceful atmosphere in which the Miskitos and the Sandinistas might negotiate for a full recognition of indigenous rights. Ending CIA overt and covert operations in Central America would be an important step toward such negotiation; even without outside interference the problem will not be easily resolved.

Aren't the Sandinistas attacking the churches? Didn't they organize mobs to insult the Pope?

The churches find themselves divided over the revolution. Many grassroots pastoral workers see participation in the revolution as a practical consequence of their faith, and many lay church members agree. CEPAD, the umbrella organization of Protestant churches, works well with the Sandinista government in development projects. Most (but not all) of the Catholic bishops oppose the Sandinista government, fearful that it will become a classic Marxist regime. Archbishop Obando is the leading public figure opposing the government.

This situation offers many opportunities for anti-Sandinista groups, who would be simply rejected if they openly expressed their intention of rolling back revolutionary programs. Religious language and symbols can serve as a code for counter-revolutionary groups.

The Pope's visit took place in this atmosphere of division. When, during his mass in Managua, he said nothing about the accomplishments of the revolution nor about the attacks from outside, and showed no sympathy for the sorrow of families mourning the loss of seventeen young people killed on the border a few days before, the people became impatient and, as is their custom, began to chant slogans ("We Want Peace!"). The Pope became visibly angry and shouted back "Silence!" three times. All evidence is that the encounter was spontaneous. It is unusual for Catholics to challenge the Pope but not unprecedented: on his 1979 visit to the U.S. Pope John Paul II was publicly challenged by American nuns on the role of women in the church.

ABOUT NICARAGUA

If what you say is true, why are there anti-Sandinista guerrillas?

Since 1979 some former Somoza National Guardsmen have been based in camps in Honduras. The anti-Sandinista groups have found some sympathizers and collaborators in the border regions but their main support comes from the Honduran army and U.S. financing.

There is no revolt within Nicaragua. The upper and middle classes are dissatisfied at the loss of their power. On the other hand, some of the poor are dissatisfied at what they see as the slowness of the revolution; for example, the Sandinistas have restrained peasant organizations from simply taking land. Nevertheless, a private poll in early 1983 showed that 90% of the people were willing to allow their children to participate in the militia battallions formed to fight invading forces.

The anti-Sandinista groups do not agree on what they propose for Nicaragua. Those operating out of Honduras intend to reverse the Sandinista revolution (e.g. land reform), while Eden Pastora, operating out of Costa Rica, claims his main objection to the Sandinistas is the Cuban influence in Nicaragua. Pastora is often touted as a "hero" of the anti-Somoza struggle but his popularity is no doubt overestimated in the United States: Benedict Arnold, the very symbol of "treason" in American history, was for a time among the most popular of leaders during the war for Independence.

By themselves, the anti-Sandinista groups cannot overthrow the Sandinista revolution and they do not have the support in Nicaragua that would enable them to do so. Most Nicaraguans see them not as "freedom fighters" but as part of an externally organized attack on their country.

