

Box 57-1

Schools were closed in every village I went to and had been for months, sometimes years.

The medical and educational achievement in rural areas so often publicized by the Sandinista government are conspicuously absent from the Miskito area I travelled through. And I travelled through a large area.

### Denial of Religious Freedom

Only in those villages now under the protection of Miskito warriors are religious services being held. For some villages I visited, that protection had only recently been secured. And even in this large zone many villages cannot hold church services because their religious leaders are in jail or are in exile in Honduras or Costa Rica.

During the Sandinista military occupations of villages, churches have commonly been used as jails, to detain men and women accused or suspected of counterrevolutionary activities. Churches have also been used to house the Sandinista soldiers. Bibles and hymn books have been destroyed. Villagers accuse the Sandinista soldiers of defecating and urinating in the churches. There are many credible reports of these activities. I heard reports of churches that had been burned elsewhere in Indian communities, but in the areas I visited I saw no churches that had been destroyed.

The Miskitos are a very religious people, and they have suffered greatly from the denial of their freedom of religion. In almost all of my discussions with hundreds of Miskito men and women, this was a principal grievance they reported to me.

### Continuing Forced Relocations of Village Populations

While I was in the Miskito communities I heard reports that villagers northwest of Puerto Cabezas had been relocated to the area around Sisim. The villages mentioned to me include Auya Pini, Santa Marta, Kwakwil, Boomsirpi, and Sangnilaya. The Commission should investigate to see if these reports are true.

Recently, reports from inside Nicaragua have also been received that the communities of Dakban, Karata and Wawa (all in a 10 to 20 mile radius of Puerto Cabezas) have been relocated.

I was not able to independently verify these recent relocations of village populations.

Miskito leaders inside Nicaragua claim to have knowledge of a Sandinista government plan to relocate villagers from the coastal communities of Wawa south to Tasbapauni to some still unknown resettlement site. This information is said to come from sources within the government. It appears that these sources have proved reliable in the past, including the recent past, and there is strong indication that Wawa has already been relocated. If confirmed, this information shows a government policy to relocate Indian villages south of Puerto Cabezas, villages which are over a hundred kilometers from the Honduran border.

In response to this policy many thousands of Indians have already fled Nicaragua to Honduras and Costa Rica. This flight is still continuing. While I was recently in Costa Rica the entire Miskito village of Set Net arrived and asked for protection from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

Others have stayed within the country and have struggled to survive under these harsh conditions or have actively joined in armed resistance. There has been terror and serious trauma in many villages yet the result has not been submission to Sandinista authority. Rather, the killings, torture, violence, rapes, looting and denial of basic needs appear from all available evidence to have served to further unite the Indian communities in their opposition to the Sandinista government. The influence of the Indian warriors and the territory over which they have strong military control is growing.

The story of what has happened to the Miskito Indians in eastern Nicaragua (and to the Sumo and Rama) that has so long been hidden by denials or by excuses that shift blame to outside influences will come out. There is simply too much evidence, too many people have been affected, and too many lives have been lost. From their violations of the human rights of Indian peoples, the Sandinistas have created a people in rebellion, Indian peoples united against them. United because of what has happened to them at the hands of the Sandinistas.

This is but a brief summary of some of my findings. More elaboration and documentation will be provided in articles that I am beginning to prepare for publication.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to present this information. □

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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#### Education:

- 1965 B.A., highest honors (Geography) UCLA
- 1968 M.A. (Geography) University of Wisconsin
- 1970 Ph.D. (Geography) University of Wisconsin

#### Books:

- Between Land and Water: The Subsistence Ecology of the Miskito Indians, Eastern Nicaragua.* 1973
- Memorias de Arcofite Tortuga (Memories of Turtles Reef).* 1977
- Caribbean Edge: The Coming of Modern Times to Isolated People and Wildlife.* 1979
- Currently writing on a book about the cultural and natural history of Torres Strait, Australia



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### THE MISKITO INDIANS OF NICARAGUA

BERNARD NIETSCHMANN

STATEMENT BEFORE THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES INTER-AMERICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS, ON THE SITUATION OF THE INDIANS IN NICARAGUA, PRESENTED BY BERNARD NIETSCHMANN, OCTOBER 3, 1983

I want to thank the Commission for the opportunity to testify today.

I am a professor of geography at the University of California, Berkeley. My research and teaching specialties are indigenous peoples, resource use, customary land and sea rights, and tropical resources. I have done research on these subjects in various parts of the world including Nicaragua, Polynesia, Micronesia, and Australia.

Between 1968 and 1976 I spent 2½ years in eastern Nicaragua in Miskito villages. I lived for varying lengths of time in several villages and visited communities from Bluefields north to Old Cape and from the lower Rio Coco up to as far west as Raiti.

I was supportive of the overthrow of the Somoza regime and the establishment of the new government and looked forward to a new and beneficial government policy toward the East Coast Indian peoples.

In 1980 I went to Nicaragua at the invitation of the Sandinista government to advise on and promote the possibility of establishing a national marine park off northeastern Nicaragua that would serve to protect various marine species and habitats and to provide sustainable resources for coastal Miskito communities who would manage and oversee many aspects of the proposed park.

I kept up frequent mail contact with Miskitos in various villages over the years even though my research took me to other parts of the world. In 1981 the mail from these correspondents suddenly ceased and I received no replies to my letters.

After two years of silence I heard again from some of my old acquaintances who called and wrote from Costa Rica. They were refugees and told me they had had to flee from their villages to seek safety in Costa Rica. They feared for their lives in Nicaragua. Some of these people were men of more than 60 years of age, others were women who came with children.

I went to Costa Rica at the first opportunity to see these people and to learn what had happened to them and in their villages since I'd last visited the East Coast of Nicaragua.

#### Examination of the Information

I have just returned after spending 2½ months in Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua. I carried out

research using standard systematic techniques of formal interviews, informal discussions, cross-checking, corroboration and obtaining multiple confirmations to establish the validity and reliability of the information—the same techniques that I would use to obtain and verify information that forms the basis of research results presented in scholarly books and articles. A tape recording, film and photographic record was made.

I visited old acquaintances some of whom I've known for 15 years and who are now in refugee camps, or are unregistered refugees, or are in exile. Their stories appeared to be consistent and were confirmed by others I met who were scattered about in Costa Rica and Honduras. And their stories were alarming.

Miskito villages in eastern Nicaragua had long been closed by the Sandinista government to independent outside observers. I had the opportunity to go inside Nicaragua with the invitation from the Miskito, Sumo and Rama Nations to visit their territory. I was in a Miskito area in eastern Nicaragua for several weeks. I traveled from village to village, staying for varying lengths of time depending on security considerations. I talked to hundreds of people, lived with them, ate what they were barely managing to live on, experienced the conditions, met many people I'd known from my previous visits years ago, listened and asked questions, and carried out research on what had happened to them during the years since the 1979 Sandinista Revolution.

Because much of the information I obtained might jeopardize individuals and entire communities, I trust you will understand why I cannot provide specific names, places and dates. Nor can I reveal exact details that would give clues to the location of these people and villages because of possible punitive retaliation from the Sandinista military—something that the villagers fear and that I respect and agree with.

I wish to share with you what I found out from the perspective of the Miskito villagers living inside Nicaragua. My interest is to acquaint you with their experiences and their human rights situation. I am not interested in nor have I taken part in the rhetoric that has confused examination of the Miskito situation.

#### Human Rights Violations

It is with sadness that I report widespread, systematic and arbitrary human rights violations in Miskito Indian communities. These violations by the Sandinista government include arbitrary killings, arrests and interrogations; rapes; torture; continuing forced relocations of village popula-

tions; destruction of villages; restriction and prohibition of freedom of travel; prohibition of village food production; restriction and denial of access to basic and necessary store foods; the complete absence of any medicine, health care or educational services in many Indian villages; the denial of religious freedom; and the looting of households and sacking of villages.

### Arbitrary Killings

In several villages I talked to people who had witnessed the arbitrary killing of Miskito civilians by Sandinista military forces. Many of these killings occurred during one of several Sandinista military invasions and occupations of Indian villages. Some of the villagers were arbitrarily shot when the government soldiers first invaded the villages; others were killed during the weeks of occupation, confinement, torture and interrogation. For example, it was reported to me by several different firsthand sources that one man was nailed through his hands and ankles to a wall and told he would remain there until he either confessed to being a "contra" or died. He died. His widow, dressed in black, and others in that traumatized village are filled with grief and anger over this and other atrocities committed during their forced confinement under a reign of terror by several hundred Sandinista soldiers. Other Miskitos were killed by forcing their heads under water to extract confessions of "counterrevolutionary" activities. Two older men—60 and 63 years of age—were threatened with death unless they confessed to involvement with "contras." They too were finally killed in the course of these same events.

Throughout my notes and tape recording are descriptions of such killings in village after village in the Atlantic Coast Indian region. Descriptions were given to me by wives, daughters, mothers, and other relatives and villagers. The occurrence of arbitrary killings of Miskito civilians appears to be widespread. A pattern is readily seen. Miskito men and women are accused of being contras, tortured or threatened with death unless they confess, killed, and then reported as having been contras, if, indeed, there is any report at all.

### Arbitrary Arrests

Many Miskito civilians appear to have been arbitrarily arrested, interrogated and jailed. As with the killings, many of these frequently occur during Sandinista military operations against particular Indian villages. Military occupation of a village is carried out apparently in retaliation after an attack by Miskito warriors either on a distant Sandinista position or on a Sandinista patrol in the region. All of the information I have received leads me to conclude that the Sandinista military has not been able to locate the many basecamps of the Miskito warriors who are operating permanently far inside the Miskito region of eastern Nicaragua.

I must stress that these are *not* Indian combatants who must slip across and retreat back across Nicaragua's borders with neighboring states. These Indian combatants or warriors, as they prefer to be called, are Indian men and women who are operation permanently from camps which are hundreds of kilometers from the borders. Their camps are too well hidden to be easily detected and they have generally avoided going into villages so as not to endanger the civilian population. Unable to effectively attack and destroy the warriors, the Sandinistas have attacked the villages and have taken punitive measures against the only Miskitos they can catch—the villagers. Some of these civilians, non-combatants, are accused of being "contras" and then arbitrarily killed, arrested, tortured.

A recent example of this seemingly frequent violation was the officially announced release of some forty prisoners detained for eleven months after the court found no legal grounds for charges of counterrevolutionary activities. Some of those released are from a community where seven villagers were summarily killed at the time of their arrest. If these released villagers are innocent, were those killed innocent too?

### Torture

Civilian Miskitos have been tortured in villages and according to reports which I consider to be very reliable, in jails. I received confirming reports and descriptions from reliable witnesses who saw beatings done by Sandinista military in many villages. I also talked to and photographed people who had been tortured. I was shown scars from what they said were bayonet wounds (a man of 60 years), fingernails pulled out (a man of 48 years), deep scars under fingernails from nails driven in (a man of 52 years). Several men reported that they had been held under water for long periods to extract confessions. Another man had been tied by his feet and hung upside down and beaten repeatedly with sticks. His body still showed evidence of bruises and his shoulders were deformed.

### Rapes

Rape by Sandinista soldiers of Miskito girls and women has been common. In one village, for example, six women between the ages of 15 and 42 were raped by the occupying Sandinista soldiers. Two were gang raped. In each community that has experienced a Sandinista military invasion and occupation, women have been raped. Some were held down by soldiers, some were restrained with a bayonet under their neck and then raped. From what the villagers have observed and experienced, Sandinista soldiers are apparently given great freedom to do as they please when they invade an Indian village.

### Looting, Sacking of Villages, Confiscation of Property

One of the many things I noticed as being markedly different in Miskito communities was the absence of anything of value. Households had no radios, some had no dishes; more formal clothes usually worn to church on Sundays were absent. This was not the result of the people's poverty or the lack of clothes in stores—although these conditions prevail and are worsening—but are due to the theft of property by Sandinista soldiers. Radios, clothes, gold bracelets, necklaces, and rings had been stripped from the Indian villagers and looted from their houses. Again and again people reported to me that this happened to them when the Sandinistas occupied their villages. Furthermore, the soldiers killed their pigs, cows and chickens for food but did not pay for them.

In several villages, all canoes and diesel-powered boats have been confiscated and taken away. No compensation has been paid. Confiscation of fishing boats and livestock has also meant confiscation of the means of subsistence and livelihood.

### Prohibition of Village Food Production

The Miskitos used to produce the majority of their basic food needs; in some communities 70% or more of all they consumed was obtained from their small farms, from fishing in the rivers, lagoons and at sea, and from hunting in the forests and lowland swamps. During the late 1960s and 1970s when I lived in Miskito villages people produced food in sufficient quantities and hunger was very uncommon. At present, hunger is a considerable problem. This is because the Miskitos have been forbidden to go far from their villages to plant. This restriction of freedom of movement is evidently a response to the Sandinistas' fear that the villagers would make contact with Miskito warriors in the bush. The villagers are not permitted to fish because of similar restrictions and the lack of canoes in many villages. They also are not permitted to go hunting because all hunting arms—such as 22 rifles and shotguns—have been confiscated.

In order to limit the availability of food for the Miskito warriors, the Sandinista military has limited and prohibited the production of food by Miskito civilians. To affect one group, another group is made to go hungry.

Locally produced food was in critically short supply in some villages I visited. In other villages in areas protected more securely by Miskito warriors, villagers were beginning to fish again and to plant a few crops even though it was not the most appropriate season to do so.

In those villages where Sandinista occupations have occurred, livestock is conspicuously absent. In one village I visited there was no livestock—no pigs, horses, cows, or even chickens. The villagers said the Sandinistas had machine-gunned all, including 90 cows.

### Restriction and Denial of Basic and Necessary Store Foods

In every Miskito village food such as rice, beans, sugar, flour, coffee, salt, and so on has been rationed through a strict system imposed by the Sandinista officials that limited each family to a quota for 15-day periods. For example, in one village this meant that a family of 7 or 8 received 4 pounds of rice every 15 days. The rice would actually last three or four days. The restricted quantity of food imposed a control on the villagers and, it appears, was also meant to limit any food above minimal survival needs so that none would be given to Miskito warriors.

Continuing and growing military actions by Miskito warriors over the past year suggests that restricting civilians' food in order to limit the Miskito warriors' food supply has not worked.

Recently the Sandinistas have cut off all supplies of food they used to send to the villages in a large part of the Indian region. Staple foods such as rice, beans, flour, sugar, and so on, are no longer being supplied. None of these items had been received for many weeks in several villages I toured. People were living primarily on green coconuts and the oil and pulp they sucked from hone palm seeds. These foods do not provide even minimal nutritional requirements.

No food is being sent into villages and the people have not produced food from local sources because of preexisting prohibitions. Many are slowly starving.

### Medicine, Health Care, Education

Western medicine and health care was completely absent from every village that I went to. There was no medicine. None. According to villagers the lack of medicine and access to health care has been going on for one and two years. As a result, severe health and medical problems are common. Malaria is rampant, dysentery and intestinal parasites are common, and tuberculosis is widespread. All of these medical problems could be greatly reduced with well known and relatively inexpensive medicines. But these medicines are not available in many Indian villages, and villagers who have managed to walk to distant towns where there are doctors are forbidden to bring back medicine for other villagers. A Miskito villager who becomes ill must be well enough to walk to a doctor if he is to have any hope of securing medical help. Otherwise, he must go without or use only traditional plant medicines obtained from the forests. These traditional medicines sometimes work but are not effective against many medical problems and diseases.

If the Sandinista government policy is to deny the villagers medicine in order to prevent Miskito warriors from having access to it, their strategy is not working. I have reliable information that it is the Miskito warriors who give medicine to the villagers.