

Patriotism motivates Nicaraguan militia

Defense groups take many forms



By Debbie Howlett
Of the Emerald

Emerald editor Debbie Howlett recently returned from an 11-day trip to Nicaragua. This is the fourth in

a series of five reports.

The road to Jalapa, a small Nicaraguan town about 150 miles from Managua, is rough and winding. Nestled at the foot of a small mountain range, Jalapa seems a lot like most Nicaraguan farming communities, peaceful and quiet.

The serenity is deceiving. There have been reports of battles in and near this town that sits about 15 miles from the Honduras border. Some of the fighting has been reported to have occurred as recently as Sept. 15, just two days after the delegation of women from Oregon traveled there.

But the women did not see a war torn Jalapa. Most were surprised at the lack of visible evidence that fighting occurs in the region.

Most Nicaraguans consider do not consider Jalapa to be the front, they consider Esteli, a town 50 miles closer to Managua, the front for contra activities.

ARMED ESCORTS

Everyone who ventures farther north, into Jalapa and Ocotal, another town bordering Honduras farther to the west, must have an armed escort. In Esteli the women from Oregon are met by a group of four militia soldiers who will accompany them to Jalapa. Two of the women elect to stay in Esteli, rather than taking a risk farther into the war zone. In Ocotal, two more armed guards are met for the trip to Jalapa.

The contras fighting near the Honduras-Nicaragua border are called "somocistas," a faction of about 10,000 National Guardsmen from the regime of President Anastasio Somoza. The somocistas, who attack mostly during the evening and night, receive aid from the United States, and are



Photo by Debbie Howlett

There are over one million armed Nicaraguans involved in the defense of their country.

given refuge by Honduras.

The women who make the trip to Jalapa are told that to guarantee their safety, they must be on the road, traveling back to Esteli before three that afternoon. A visit with farmers and a civilian defense group stretches past 3 p.m., to 4:30. When the women are finally on the road back to Esteli the sun is slowly sinking behind the mountains.

But signs of guerilla action are never seen. The only military personnel the group encounters is a convoy of 10 huge trucks loaded with militia soldiers. But the convoy is headed away from the border, back toward Esteli.

ONE MILLION ARMED NICARAGUANS

The military structure in Nicaragua is

unlike most other countries. Over 1 million armed Nicaraguans are involved, one way or another, in the defense of Nicaragua.

About 80 percent of those 1 million people are members of Committees for Sandinista Defense. These civilian groups, called "neighborhood watch" groups by the Sandinistas, are organized by the barrios in which they live.

The groups patrol the barrios during the night to protect the neighborhoods from "undesirables." They are armed with government issued automatic weapons but are not considered connected to the EPS, the official Sandinista army. Members of the CDS also distribute ration coupons to residents of the neighborhood.

There is no real criteria for becoming a member of a CDS group, and although the Sandinistas require that CDS members be at least 16 years old, many of those who carry weapons look much younger.

The potential for abuse by members of the CDS seems unlimited. The citizens who support the Sandinistas argue that although the potential is there, abuses do not occur. Nicaraguans opposed to the Sandinista government say that many abuses do occur.

According to a Managua resident, who refused to give her name for fear of retribution, the CDS may withhold ration cards or even physically harass people they feel to be less patriotic than other residents in the

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Minister says Nicaragua wants to be on its own

By Debbie Howlett
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Nora Astorga, Nicaragua's vice minister for foreign affairs, made her mark with the Sandinistas when she lured Vega Perez, a general in then President Anastasio Somoza's National Guard, into her bedroom, got him undressed, and had him murdered by three of her comrades.

In a biography compiled by Margaret Randall, Astorga relates the events leading to Perez' death.

"The plan was for me to get him over to my house on March 8 (1978)...I was to disarm him without arousing his suspicion, get him in a defenseless position, then grab him and give the signal — a code word — for the comrades to spring into action," writes Astorga.

The plan worked smoothly. Less than 90 minutes after entering Astorga's home, Perez was dead. Astorga went into hiding in the rural mountain areas after Perez' execution, and resurfaced after the Somoza government was overthrown. She was immediately appointed general minister of finance.

Astorga characterizes Vega, whom the Sandinistas called "Dog," as a "murderer" and a "brutalizer of women." Vega, one of Somoza's top level military leaders, was responsible for the murder of "many people," according to Astorga.

RISING TO THE TOP

Astorga has risen to the top levels of Sandinista government for many reasons. She is open and frank, and considered to be very competent. Before her appointment as vice minister, Astorga served as chief prosecutor of war criminals. Her office prosecuted more than 6,000 "somocistas," most of whom were either deported or given minimal, by Sandinista standards, jail sentences.

Astorga describes her family as "petit bourgeoisie" cattle ranchers. She was educated in a Catholic High School, attended nearly two years of college in the United States and then finished school, receiving a degree in law, at the Managua Catholic University.

She first became involved with the FSLN in 1969 running an underground "safehouse."

Astorga says she meets with as many as

four delegations of North Americans among them Senators and Congressmen, a week and that one of her primary goals is "warmer relations with the Ambassador of the United States." She says she believes that everyone who comes to visit her is a "potential friend" of the Sandinistas. However, some North Americans have refused to visit with her.

Special U.S. envoy Richard Stone refused to meet with Astorga during his visit. Astorga says Stone was insulted by meeting with such a low level official, and possibly because Astorga is a woman.

FOREIGN POLICY

A great deal of attention is given to the U.S. foreign policy in Central America, but little is given to the other side of foreign relations, Astorga says.

In meeting with the delegation of Oregon women, Astorga asserts that the Sandinistas have tried to maintain friendly relations with the United States, but that the United States wants relations on U.S. terms.

"We're a legal government. We didn't ask for war from the U.S. — they're trying to overthrow us with anything they can," Astorga says.

"We don't have military pacts with any country... we really want to be our own nation."

— Nora Astorga

"The U.S. has never been able to understand Latin America," Astorga says. "The U.S. is always on the wrong side."

Nicaragua's international relations are not all as bad as those with the U.S. The Sandinistas receive aid from Western Europe as well as the Soviet Union and Cuba.

But Astorga says that aid from western socialist, and eastern communist countries does not mean that Nicaragua will take a turn toward communist rule.

"We don't have military pacts with any country... we really want to be our own nation," Astorga says. "We didn't struggle just to change. We are crazy enough to want to be independent."

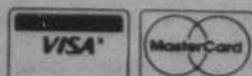
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