

## University

# Law student to monitor elections

By Joe Kidd  
Emerald Reporter

When Nicaraguans go to the polls later this month, hundreds of foreigners will be present to monitor the process — including a University law student who was chosen to participate on a National Lawyers Guild delegation.

Nicholas van Aelstyn will travel to Nicaragua today with the Guild's 16-member delegation to join dozens of other groups in monitoring what will be one of the most closely watched elections in years.

The perception of fairness during the Feb. 25 election is very important to the future of Nicaragua's relationship with the U.S. in light of the U.S. government's tumultuous history of involvement with the Central American country, van Aelstyn said.

The Contra war and a U.S.-backed economic embargo have edged Nicaragua into its long-standing economic crisis, but these factors may be eased if the U.S. administration sees the elections as fair, van Aelstyn said.

"We could see a normalization between the two countries if the election process goes well," he said.

The United States embargoed trade and increased support for the Contra rebels after the 1984 Nicaraguan elections, which U.S. officials believed were rigged. The U.S. was the only country among international observers to maintain that the voting process in 1984 was



Nicholas van Aelstyn

fraudulent.

In this year's elections, the main political groups are the Sandinista Party, led by President Daniel Ortega, and the opposition alliance, a body of 12 parties backing presidential candidate Violeta Barrios de Chamorro.

The Guild's delegation will arrive in Nicaragua eight days before election day to monitor the last week of campaigning, van Aelstyn said.

After a full day of training from United Nations' personnel, the group will split into pairs to monitor voting booths on election day.

In order to verify that the election laws agreed upon by the government and the opposition groups are enforced, the delegation will look for free and equal access to the media, freedom of assembly and will make sure the balloting is secret, van Aelstyn said.

"We want to make sure there won't be any clear plastic voting boxes like there have been in other Central American countries," he said.

Nicaraguans will vote for officials on presidential, national assembly and municipal levels.

Protests will be held in the U.S. if there are uncertainties about the fairness of the election process, van Aelstyn said, citing the long-time conflict between the two governments and the fact that the United States has sent millions of dollars to support the opposition candidate.

As for the objectivity of the Guild's delegation, Paul Ramshaw, a member of the group and co-chair of the Guild's Central American Task Force, said the delegation may have trouble from being perceived as a leftist group.

"Many people see the National Lawyers Guild as a progressive or leftist group because it was formed as an alternative to the American Bar Association," Ramshaw said in a telephone interview from his Washington-based law office.

"Our job is not to supply an objective view because many people wouldn't see us as an objective source," he said. "What we hope to do is persuade the American Congress and the public to believe the United Nations' and the Organization of American States' delegations."

The United Nations' delegation will hold a press conference to relate its findings in Nicaragua the day following the elections.

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