

Just news

Inside Nicaragua

Ben Linder Brigader Susan Leo talks about life and death in a nation torn by civil war

BY KAMILA AL-NAJJAR

"Imagine it's 1977 and you are a 17-year-old Nicaraguan. Last year you watched helplessly as your little sister became repeatedly ill with diarrhea. Your parents saw her losing strength but there was no one to help. In all of rural Nicaragua there were only five clinics with beds. The first few times, your sister pulled through. But by then she was so weak that when measles hit, you watched her die after four painful days. The year before, your brother died right after birth; your mother and father have lost five of their children.

"The seven people in your family share a single-room shack, divided by a thin partition. The floor is dirt, there is no electric light, no toilet, no clean drinking water. You are outraged when you hear Somoza boast to some American reporters that 'Nicaragua has no housing problem because of its wonderful climate.'

"You hardly know anyone who can read or write, except the priest, but he's from Spain. You would like to learn but there is no school."

— *What Difference Could a Revolution Make: Food and farming in the new Nicaragua*, by Joseph Collins, Frances Moore Lappé and Nick Allen

Even years later, nine years after the overthrow of Somoza, some of the conditions have improved greatly, but now your country is fighting another battle against the United States-backed Contras.

Some of the poor conditions still exist, according to Susan Leo, who returned from Corinto, Nicaragua, with the Ben Linder Construction Brigade on February 9.

"The number-one killer in Nicaragua is diarrhea. Kids die from diarreah dehydration. The standards of hygiene are really low. Someone defecates in the field, and the flies hit it and then come over and sit on the tortillas, which you eat and that's it," explains Leo.

"The number-two killer is malnutrition, number three is tuberculosis, but the most direct cause of death is the war," says Leo.

Making living conditions worse are electricity and water shortages due to the war with the Contras.

"Along with the fact that the electricity goes off on a regular basis at night to conserve energy, the power plants are falling apart. If it's not Contra activity blowing up a tower, it's probably mechanical failures. The problem with many other industries in Nicaragua is that everything is made with U.S. parts. When Somoza built these things, in order to keep a good face with the world, he built them as cheaply as possible, to keep as much money as possible. So things are always falling apart, and it is very difficult to get replacement parts," explains Leo.

"Sometimes there is no water. In Managua the fresh water is not enough to meet the demand. In the past, prior to the revolution,



some neighborhoods never had water and others did. After the revolution everyone got water," she says.

Looking on the brighter side of the situation in Nicaragua, the illiteracy rate has decreased considerably since the 1979 removal of the Somoza dictatorship.

"People want to go to school to learn how to read and write," says Leo. "In Corinto they have three sessions of school, morning, noon and night, in order to accommodate all of the people who want to attend.

"The other big improvement is in health care. In the year and a half after the revolution, the Sandinistas obliterated polio and malaria and made great strides in all areas of health care. But there is still concern that if the war is not over soon polio is going to make a comeback," says Leo.

Leo also found that Nicaragua lacked one conflict that the United States has an abundance of: racism.

"One of the most exciting things about Nicaragua is that there is virtually no racism in that country. I asked Nicaraguans, and they said, 'No, you Americans have racism and problems with racists, that's all crazy.'

Another important problem that Nicaragua does not have to contend with yet is AIDS.

"There are 21 known cases of people who are HIV positive in Nicaragua, but none are Nicaraguan. The Sandinista government is very interested in working with a gay organization to educate people," says Leo.

Leo said the construction brigade was a success. After nine full days of hard work, the 15-person crew was able to re-wire, re-screen, re-paint, re-roof, and add new windows and fans to a 100-foot-long, 40-foot-wide hospital that was built in 1940 by the U.S. Navy.

Applications are being taken for the second Ben Linder Construction Brigade expedition. Approximately 10 people will go in June to work on painting, electrical and plumbing projects. People of color, women, lesbians and gays are encouraged to apply. For more information, contact the Portland-Corinto Sister City Project at 233-5181.



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