

*Peace and Autonomy
on the
Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua*

**"COMANDANTE EDUARDO PANTIN"
pri laka latuan kakaira ba
¡RAYASA!**



Pri laka ba ta krikan YULO tawan kara

*A Report of the LASA Task Force on
Human Rights and Academic Freedom*

*by Martin Diskin, Thomas Bossert,
Salomón Nahmad S. and Stéfano Varese*

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Cover illustration: A poster frequently displayed in Miskito houses during the summer of 1985. The men are signatories to a cease-fire agreement signed in May 1985 between guerrilla fighters of MISURA and representatives of the Sandanista government. The text can be translated: "Comandante Eduardo Pantín" [5th from left in photo], who loved peace, is still with us! Peace began in the community of Yulo.

Peace and Autonomy on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: A Report of the LASA Task Force on Human Rights and Academic Freedom

by

Martin Diskin, Thomas Bossert, Salomón Nahmad S.,
and Stéfano Varese

I. Introduction

The remote and relatively quiet, sparsely populated Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua was suddenly drawn into world attention in December 1981, when the Nicaraguan government moved thousands of indigenous people, mainly Miskitos, from their villages on the Río Coco, the border with Honduras. At that time, many Indians fled to refugee camps in Honduras. Some joined guerrilla groups that then returned to fight in Nicaragua. This forced relocation was followed by charges from the U.S. government and others of massive human rights violations, even genocide. Subsequent studies by impartial human rights groups—the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and Americas Watch—have shown that the more extreme claims were exaggerations, although serious human rights abuses did occur. These organizations criticized the Sandinistas and made a series of recommendations, most of which have now been implemented. The Nicaraguan government responded that the abusers were usually punished, were not part of a general policy or pattern, and, while the resettlements inflicted hardship on the population, they were done in response to a perceived threat to national integrity.

The resettlement marked a radical escalation of a conflict that had been brewing in the region. This conflict grew into a three-year period of warfare between the Sandinista government and two indigenous groups, MISURA and MISURASATA. From time to time, both received support from the U.S. government's "covert" war on Nicaragua.

In late 1984, some movement began toward a settlement of this conflict that led to a set of negotiations between MISURASATA and the government. At the

outset of these negotiations, in December 1984, the government named a national autonomy commission for the Atlantic Coast. Later, in May 1985, partly as a product of the negotiations, steps were taken to negotiate and maintain a cease fire with Indian insurgents. During this period of relative peace, the government also began a process to assist a return to the Río Coco for those people who had been relocated from there earlier.

For the Task Force on Human Rights and Academic Freedom of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), these processes promised to be interesting, not only as a model for settlement of military conflict and its associated human rights problems in Nicaragua, but also as a case of the rights of indigenous peoples in a nation state. The negotiations between the insurgents and the government and the process toward some form of regional autonomy represent a culmination of historical conflicts that countries in the Americas have faced and continue to face.

Self-Determination of Indigenous and Ethnic Minorities

In the Americas, the consolidation of national states through independence from the metropolitan colonial powers all reinforced a sense of nationhood that disregarded

the cultural particularity of the first Americans. These new nations assumed a sense of hegemony over all inhabitants in what became defined as "national territory." In some cases—like that of Chile, Mexico, Brazil, and Paraguay—the military subjugation of indigenous groups is part of the official history of state formation. State boundaries and state sovereignty are principles recognized by other states. The rights of subnational ethnic groups, be they tribal or otherwise, must now be negotiated in this asymmetric atmosphere.

In the second half of the twentieth century, indigenous and ethnic groups have begun to voice their responses to these historical injustices. Regional, national, and international groups have formed and there is now greater awareness of the condition of the Indians of the Americas. Where indigenous and ethnic groups have formed organizations to defend their interests, some legal guarantees have been obtained. In many cases, though, legal guarantees have proved untrustworthy, as in the case of the many broken treaties with Indians in the U.S. Often the legislative solution to indigenous problems simply seals the fate of a group already severely persecuted, such as the Mapuches of Chile. Sometimes, indigenous groups achieve de facto autonomy because of their remoteness from the central government and their determination to defend themselves, as in the case of the Kuna of Panama. But the usual state of affairs is one in which the state has the upper hand and shows no sign of relinquishing its advantage.

A question for indigenous people that is of particular relevance to the autonomy process in Nicaragua is self-determination. While there is no universally accepted definition of autonomy or self-determination, the demand for autonomy and the debates that accompany it usually signal a moment of tension between the state and the ethnic groups. It has erupted in many multi-ethnic nations and the results hardly ever benefit indigenous peoples.

This issue has come to the fore among international indigenous-rights organizations. The World Council of Indigenous People (WCOIP), a nongovernmental organization with U.N. affiliation, asserts the strongest claim of indigenous rights. It states that "every indigenous people has the right to self-determination. By virtue of this right they may freely determine their political, economic, social, religious, and cultural development according to the principles established in this declaration." This right means that "each nation-state within which indigenous peoples are located must recognize the population, territory, and the institutions proper to each people." More specifically, the WCOIP claims for indigenous people "inalienable rights to traditional lands and to natural resources." The rights listed above reflect recent Indian activism and organization. However, these principles are not yet formally recognized by governments. For the WCOIP the desired status for groups such as the Atlantic Coast indigenous people is that of "nation." This term,

preferred by MISURASATA, the original representative group, is defined by the WCOIP and includes the "capacity to initiate relations with other states."¹

In this report, autonomy refers to a specific, legal relationship with the Nicaraguan government, beyond ordinary citizenship, that recognizes the unique characteristics of the Miskito, Sumo, Rama, Creole, Garifona, and Mestizo populations of the Atlantic Coast. In the Nicaraguan case, the most serious autonomy problems have arisen over economic and political rights, specifically claims concerning land and local natural resources, and political power, that is, the right to unique types of representation in governing bodies with clearly defined powers and jurisdiction. Over time a general agreement has emerged concerning the "cultural" issues, i.e., respect for traditions, use of indigenous languages, and religious practice.

This historic, regional conflict must be viewed in the context of revolutionary changes in all of Nicaragua, as well as the resistance, both internal and external, to these changes. So, when MISURASATA raised these economic, political, and cultural challenges, framed as questions of "nationhood" and "sovereignty," the Nicaraguan government saw them as separatist in nature. Although all participants in the dialogue have also said that autonomy could be accomplished while recognizing the sovereignty of the Sandinista state, the fundamental tension remains.

Exacerbating this tension is the constant pressure from U.S. - financed *contra* insurgents, and a threat of external invasion. The role of the United States, and its geo-political perspective on the area, must figure in any analysis of events.

The Study Team

Research was conducted in August 1985 by three members of the LASA Task Force on Human Rights and Academic Freedom and one invited member. The Task Force members are Martin Diskin, anthropologist from M.I.T. (chairman), Thomas Bossert, political scientist, from Sara Lawrence College, and Stéfano Varese, anthropologist and director of Popular Culture Agency of the Secretary of Public Education, Oaxaca, Mexico. We were joined by Salomón Nahmad, anthropologist, and former director of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (Mexican Indian Institute). Diskin's expenses were covered by a grant from

1. "Declaración de principios del CMPI (World Council of Indigenous Peoples)," presented by the MISURASATA delegation at the Bogotá negotiation session, Dec. 9, 1984. See also, "Borrador de las declaraciones de principios para la defensa de las naciones y pueblos indígenas de hemisferio occidental," from a 1977 Conference of Nongovernmental Organizations on Discrimination against Indigenous Populations, Geneva. Reprinted in the final report of the study "Discriminación contra poblaciones indígenas de relator especial de la Comisión sobre la Prevención de la Discriminación y Protección de Minorías," E/Cn.4/Sub.2/476/Anadido 5/Anexo IV.

the M.I.T. Provost's Research Fund; Bossert received a Ford Foundation individual research grant; and Varese and Nahmad both were funded by CADAL (Centro Antropológico de Documentación de América Latina, Mexico City). A follow-up trip was made by Diskin in January 1986.

In Nicaragua, we were generously assisted by Laura Enríquez a member of the Task Force on Scholarly Relations with Nicaragua, who has resided in Nicaragua for the past two and a half years. Two of us (Diskin and Bossert) had previously visited the Atlantic Coast and had been following events there and in Nicaragua in general. Diskin and Bossert had contacts who facilitated access to documents and interviews. Varese and Nahmad represented a wealth of study and practical experience in situations in Peru and Mexico concerning indigenous people and the state.

In Nicaragua, our work was facilitated by the Centro de Investigación y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica (CIDCA), a semiautonomous government agency. Its director, Galio Gurdian, kindly assisted our access to documents and people connected to the autonomy process. We made our own arrangements, utilized our own contacts, and paid for all our transportation and other expenses. Only considerations of timing and schedules constrained our travel and interviews. We feel confident that we were able to observe an adequate variety of situations and speak to people with a wide diversity of views.

The group visited Managua and the two major regions of the Atlantic Coast: Zelaya Norte (and surrounding communities), where most Miskito and Sumo communities are; and Zelaya Sur (Bluefields), the major concentration of the Creole community [see map]. We interviewed a wide range of participants in the autonomy process: civilian and military government representatives; independent Miskito, Sumo, and Creole leaders, Moravian church officials; and many community members. We also conducted interviews with members of organizations openly in conflict with the Sandinista government (MISURASATA and ASLA) and with some of their North American advisors at the Indian Law Resource Center in Washington and at Cultural Survival in Cambridge, Massachusetts. To assess the official United States view of this matter, we interviewed a political officer at the U.S. embassy in Managua (see appended list of interviewees).

The report that follows first presents a brief history of the complex nature of ethnic-state relations on the Atlantic Coast, highlighting the roles of the Nicaraguan state and foreign actors as well as the internal distinctiveness of the different indigenous and ethnic groups (Section II). Section III discusses the impact of the revolution and the events leading to the relocation of the indigenous population to resettlement camps. In Section IV we review the emergence of the insurgency and the changes in Nicaraguan

government policies. Section V deals with the Nicaraguan autonomy proposal and the beginning of negotiations with opponents of the government as a reply to the specific conflicts of the previous five years. In the two following sections we examine first (section VI) the internal process, i.e., the autonomy *consulta*, noncombatant indigenous groups, and the current military situation. Then, in section VII we discuss the "return to the river," including some observations in "snapshot" form from our trip through Zelaya Norte. Zelaya Sur is discussed in section VIII. In the concluding section (IX), we offer an evaluation of the present moment and some guidelines for the future.

II. A Brief History of the Atlantic Coast

The Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, separated from the Pacific side of the country by significant geographic barriers, has been shaped by its own special cultural, economic, and political forces. Constituting more than half the national territory, with only about 10 percent of the national population, the coast is a place of cultural diversity that has looked toward the Caribbean and the English-speaking world more than toward the national seat of government and the Hispanic heritage of the Pacific side. Relations between these two Nicaraguas have always suffered from a lack of mutual comprehension. A brief examination of this history will help show its distinctiveness as well as the origin of some of the present problems.

Much of the history of the Atlantic Coast may be seen as an effort, first by competing colonial powers, then by foreign commercial interests, and, finally, by the Nicaraguan state, to exercise control over the people who live there. Usually, these efforts were unsuccessful. Before the Spanish Conquest, the Pacific side of Nicaragua was the southern frontier of Mesoamerica, a region of powerful civilizations that extended from Central Mexico to Nicaragua. These civilizations, organized into states, were eventually conquered by the Spanish through a combination of military and political means, often aided by the combined effects of extreme cruelty and the introduction of new diseases. Once the indigenous leadership was removed, the Spanish administration could capitalize on the still existing state structures. These structures were then used to channel tributes and labor to Spanish rather than indigenous purposes.

The Atlantic Coast, a region extending from contemporary Belize to Panama, was a very different physical and cultural environment from that of the Pacific part of the region and presented different problems to the Spanish conquerors. Reflecting influences from Caribbean and Andean culture, its population lived in a more dispersed fashion. Using the resources of the humid tropical forests, the river banks, and the maritime resources of the coastal littoral, the population lived by farming, fishing,

MAPA DE NICARAGUA

ESCALA

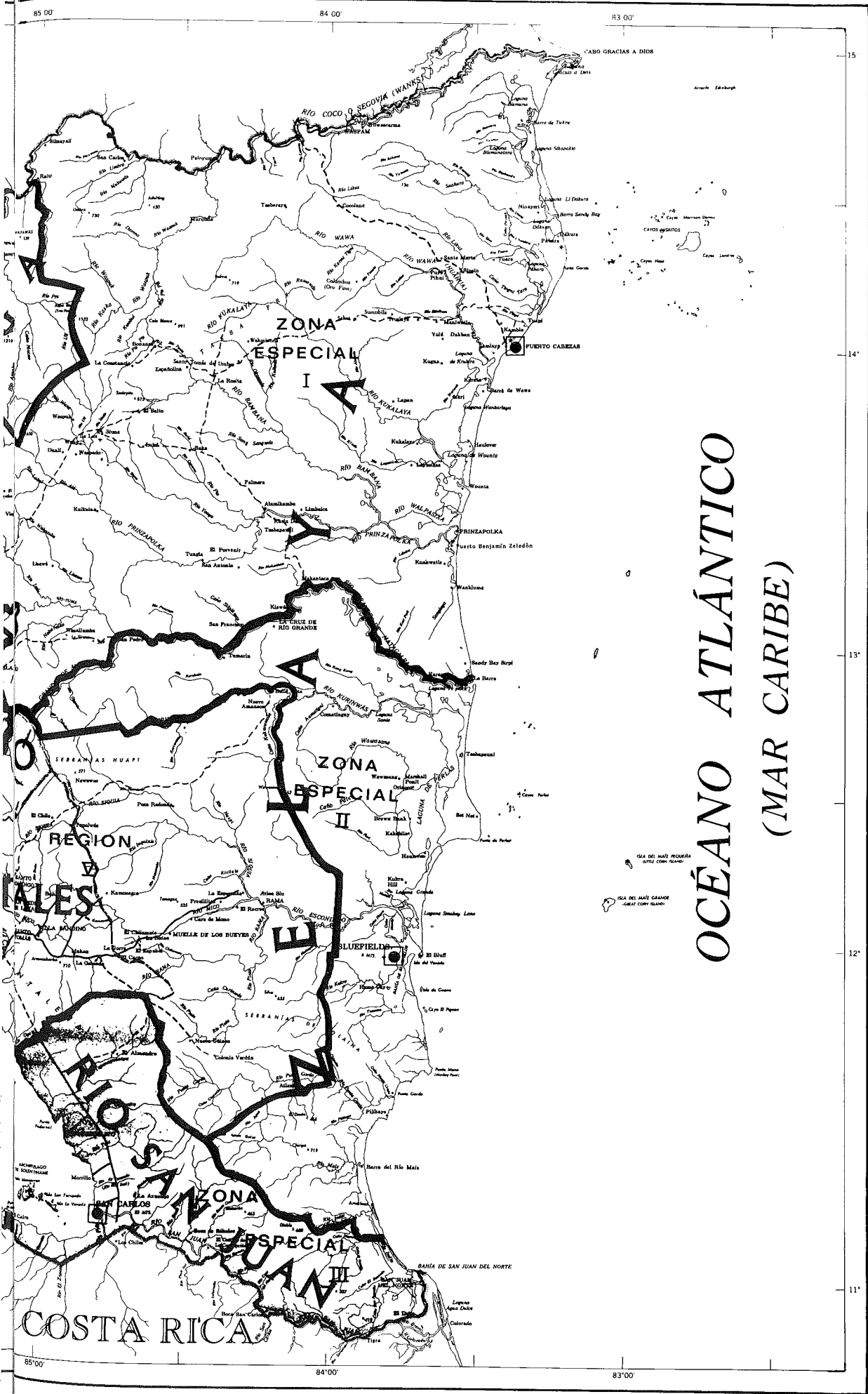


SÍMBOLOS CONVENCIONALES

CAPITAL DE LA REPUBLICA		CARRERA TIEMPO SECO	
CABECERA DEPARTAMENTAL		CARRERA EN CONSTRUCCION	
CABECERA MUNICIPAL		FERROCARRIL	
PUEBLOS		LIMITE INTERNACIONAL	
RUTA INTERNACIONAL		LIMITE DEPARTAMENTAL	
CARRERA PAVIMENTADA DE DOS O MÁS VÍAS		LIMITE REGIONAL Y ZONAL	
CARRERA REVESTIDA		CAMPO DE ATERRIAJE	
CARRERA DE TIERRA DE TODO TIEMPO		FARO	
		MINA	
		SEDE GOBIERNAMENTAL REGIONAL O ZONAL	



Este mapa ha sido elaborado bajo la dirección y responsabilidad del Dr. EDUARDO PEREZ-VALLE, tomando como base el publicado por el Instituto Geográfico Nacional en julio de 1981, a escala de 1:1.000.000. Queda hecho el depósito legal y prohibida su reproducción total o parcial.



OCEANO ATLANTICO
(MAR CARIBE)

COSTA RICA

and hunting. Unlike the hierarchical societies of Mesoamerica, their political organization never reached the level of large states or chiefdoms and most of the residents were not subject to any form of indigenous central control. Further, the hot, rainy climate and the virtual impenetrability of the region overland proved to be an insurmountable obstacle to the Spanish method of dominating the highland communities of Mesoamerica. As a result, the Spanish conquerors had no real interest in assimilating this region into their imperial plan.

It was because of emergent British expansionism in the Caribbean that the Atlantic Coast acquired strategic importance. During the long period from the early seventeenth through the late nineteenth centuries, piracy was created that persist to the present.² British buccaneers, raiding the Caribbean coasts of the Spanish Main, directly challenged Spanish hegemony, and the Atlantic Coast became a boundary zone between the British sphere of influence in the Caribbean, with Jamaica as its seat, and the Spanish interests, whose centers were in Guatemala City and Mexico City. The British, however, like the Spanish, were not interested in colonizing the Atlantic Coast so much as establishing a presence there through coastal trading contacts.

The first people the British met were the Miskitos, who lived mainly on the coastal littoral and who were adept in maritime activities. Quickly, a mutually convenient relationship was established. British privateers could count on refitting and provisioning themselves with fresh water, meat, fruit, and crews. In exchange, they provided the Miskitos with muskets and other trade goods. Thus, the British were able to extend their effective maritime control in the Caribbean while the Miskitos began to dominate the other groups in the area, principally the Sumos.

What is now the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua was largely the home territory of the Sumo people at the moment of European contact.³ But the alliance with the British permitted the Miskitos (then called Sambo-Miskitu) to expand at the expense of the Sumos. The Miskitos became the brokers in the commerce of Sumo slaves. Through their superior force of arms, they also became the military conquerors of their neighbors in the region.

In the seventeenth century escaped and shipwrecked African slaves freely intermixed with the indigenous inhabitants of the coast. Through subsequent migration from English-speaking islands, the group now known as Creoles achieved significance, particularly in the southern part of the coast, in and around Bluefields, which became the administrative center of the coast.

Spanish-British commercial competition created other changes. Materials from the region, such as precious woods for shipbuilding and dyestuffs, were acquiring foreign demand. The local populations slowly began to reorient their productive activities in response to this demand. Culturally, the region experienced influences different from the Spanish-dominated zone. Initially, at least, Catholicism did not penetrate to any significant degree. Nor was the Spanish language implanted as it was in the rest of Mesoamerica. Spanish patterns of rural administration with its attendant bureaucracy never developed either. The Atlantic Coast remained a frontier region through most of its history.

In the nineteenth century, external influences continued to shape the region. Since the 1840s, when the first German-speaking Moravian missionaries entered, the Moravian church, a small Protestant sect, quickly became the most significant religion on the coast. The Moravian presence created changes in patterns of dress and community organization. Moravian schools and seminaries were established to create and train an indigenous Moravian clergy composed of Miskitos and Creoles. As a result, today virtually every Miskito village has its resident pastor. The Moravian Church has few levels of hierarchy and functions in a rather decentralized way. It supports village unity and stresses family integrity, hard work, and self-reliance. Moravian services often take on the aspect of community assemblies where public problems are aired. While the Moravian Church established an early and continuing dominance, the Catholic and Anglican churches have also become important institutions.

Spanish-British commercial and military competition was generally harmful to the people of the Coast. First, since the primary goal of each was to extend its overseas empire rather than to colonize, there was never a concern for the welfare of the indigenous population. Second, it set up a tension for the coastal populations that pitted them against the Pacific-based "Spaniards" that has left a legacy of suspicion and lack of understanding that continues to fuel the present problem.

In the early nineteenth century, an American presence arrived on the scene. Expanding United States interests looked toward Central America as a fertile area for investment. The period after independence from Spain was chaotic with weak, short-lived governments, and failed efforts at national consolidation. The expanding industrial capacity of the United States, fueled by notions of U.S.

2. Troy S. Floyd, *The Anglo-Spanish Struggle for Mosquitia* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1967); Mary S. Helms, *Asang: Adaptations to Culture Contact in a Miskito Community* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1971); Bernard Nietschmann, *Between Land and Water: The Subsistence Ecology of the Miskito Indians, Eastern Nicaragua* (New York and London: Seminar Press, 1973); Centro de Investigaciones y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica, *Demografía costeña: notas sobre la historia demográfica y población actual de los grupos étnicos de la costa atlántica nicaragüense* (Managua: CIDCA, 1982).

3. Jaime Incer, "Toponímias indígenas de Nicaragua," reprinted in *La Prensa Literaria*, August 10, 1985, Managua, pp. 1, 5-7.

power embedded in the Monroe Doctrine and the idea of "manifest destiny," made this the epoch of a series of flamboyant actions that established the United States as the dominant economic power in Central America. Soon a wave of adventurers and investors discovered that what could not be accomplished through outright bribery and force and their own mercenary forces would in time be supported by the economic and military power of the United States, eventually punctuated by the frequent invasions of the Marines.

As U.S. influence grew in the region, the British prepared their withdrawal with a series of treaties and agreements. The 1860 Treaty of Managua granted Nicaragua sovereignty over all its territory, including the Atlantic Coast. It also recognized the Rey Mosco, a Miskito monarch created by the British, and stated that he was to be under the sovereignty of Nicaragua. In 1894, the "reincorporation" of the Mosquitia (the Atlantic Coast) was finally completed. At this time the Atlantic Coast became a department (state) of Nicaragua, called Zelaya, after the liberal president of the time. In 1905 the British relinquished their last claims to the Coast with the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty. This treaty abrogated the provisions concerning recognition of the Miskito monarchy and granted certain concessions on behalf of the Miskito people such as respect for Indian land titles, special tax exemptions, and grazing rights.⁴

These diplomatic arrangements, over a sixty-year period, gave priority to the international competition for influence rather than the well-being of the coastal people. For example, at about 1850 a particularly thorny question was the Anglo-United States competition for a trans-Isthmian route between the Caribbean and the Pacific. In this context of tension the issues of Nicaraguan and Miskito relations emerged. As Nicaragua was acquiring recognition of its territorial sovereignty, the British affirmed the independence of the Mosquitia and its king as a way of denying rights to the competing interests of the United States. Significantly (in view of the present conflicts), the U.S. State Department, in 1895, challenged the British view.

It will be observed that from the beginning of the conflicts, which at times were serious, this Government [the U.S.] has steadily recognized the paramount sovereignty of Nicaragua over the entire reservation [Atlantic Coast], yielding to no pretensions inconsistent with that sovereignty. . . .

At no time during the last forty or fifty years has the so-called native Indian government in the strip been real. On the contrary, it has been an alien government administered according to alien

methods. Although Americans and American interests have for some time predominated in the strip, this government, while intervening in proper cases for their protection, has consistently disavowed any right of its own or of its citizens to govern or participate in its political affairs. Whatever right of self-government the Indians enjoyed under the treaty concluded between Great Britain and Nicaragua was to be exercised by themselves and not by aliens in their name. That treaty contemplated the eventual surrender by the Indians of their right to govern themselves and other inhabitants of the strip, and their 'incorporation into the Republic of Nicaragua on the same footing as other citizens of the Republic.'

Concerning coastal self-determination, in 1856 the U.S. had the following opinion:

The President can not himself admit as true, and therefore, can not under any possible circumstances, advise the Republic of Nicaragua to admit that the Mosquito Indians are a state or a government any more than a band of Maroons in the island of Jamaica are a state or government.⁵

The period of United States domination began somewhat before the departure of the English and continued until shortly before the 1979 Sandinista triumph. British commercial interests were still represented as were those of Europeans and Japanese. Atlantic Coast production responded to foreign demand. The Bragman's Bluff Lumber Company cut and exported mahogany. The tropical pine forests were denuded, clear-cut for their resin by the Nicaraguan Long Leaf Pine Lumber Company (NIPCO) and the Atlantic Chemical Company (ATCHEMCO) among others. Clear-cutting of the tropical pine forests was the rule and these forests were not replaced by replanting. Pine resin extraction continues today and a modest reforestation program is being implemented to ensure the continuation of this industry.

The Neptune Gold Mine Company and the Rosario and Light Mine Company extracted gold and silver to be refined elsewhere. United Fruit cultivated bananas until a plant disease made production unprofitable. And in a particularly poignant episode, the ocean turtles that the Miskito were so skilled in obtaining became increasingly

4. Lioba Rossbach and Volker Wunderlich, "Derechos indígenas y estado nacional en Nicaragua: La convención mosquita de 1894," *Encuentro*, Nos. 24-25, Managua, pp.29-54.

5. The first two quotes are from the Report of the Secretary of State (W.Q. Gresham) to President Grover Cleveland, January 2, 1895, p. 3. In Senate Executive Documents, 3rd session, 53rd Congress, 1894-95, Vol. 1, Executive Document #20. The third quote is from Secretary of State W. L. Marcy's report on the Bay Islands and Mosquito Territory, Senate Executive Document #74, 58th Congress, 2nd session, July 26, 1856. We gratefully acknowledge Dr. Phillippe Bourgeois for the above references.

destined to satisfy a European demand for turtle oil and shell. The Green and Hawksbill turtles are now almost extinct as a result. Further, as the Miskito fishermen became more deeply embroiled in cash production, their diet suffered.⁶

As in previous waves of foreign economic attention, the wealth provided by the region left no lasting traces in infrastructure or welfare. The technology, management, and knowledge were all imported and the profits exported. Along with the memories of the company commissaries where Scotch whiskey could be bought, lie the rusted hulks of heavy machinery manufactured in Ohio and Pennsylvania. What did last, however, was the orientation toward markets in the U.S. rather than with the other coast of Nicaragua.

The central government permitted this long period of resource exploitation for several reasons. During this time, Nicaraguan sovereignty was systematically challenged by United States force all over the country. Numerous invasions and occupations by U.S. Marines led, in 1932, to the installation of the Somoza dynasty, which lasted until 1979. Indeed, the thin pretexts that were used to justify U.S. invasions served to legitimize U.S. interests on the coast and in other parts of the country. The Somoza regime was "understanding" of U.S. interests on the Atlantic Coast so long as there was no direct economic conflict with the several family businesses that included the fishing fleet of Bluefields.

The question of the autonomy of the Miskito or other ethnic groups was moot during this time. Many people on the coast remember it as a time of noninterference; some even view it as the "golden age" in which foreign companies brought luxury goods for those who had access to friends in management or to the commissaries. It was certainly not a golden age for the miners, however, many of whom were Indians who worked under abominable conditions until disease or accidental death ended their careers. Nor was it so for the banana workers who were left unemployed with the sudden termination of banana production. For many Miskitos in their Río Coco subsistence communities, the presence of commercial lumbering operations nearby meant sporadic though growing participation in a wage economy that undermined self-sufficiency.⁷ It was accompanied by the developing system of merchant intermediaries whereby people had to sell their crops cheaply and buy necessities at high cost.

Increased commercial opportunity during the two decades prior to the Sandinista victory attracted more "Españoles" to the coast and with them an enlarged presence of the National Guard, especially in the vicinity of the mines. This migration of mestizos, i.e., non-Indian,

Spanish-speaking peasants, was the result of the expansion of cotton and cattle production on the Pacific side, which drove many peasants off their land.

For the Creole population of southern Zelaya (Bluefields) there was a considerable amount of freedom to trade freely beyond the national limits. With a fishing industry that sold to Honduras, Costa Rica, Colombia, and the United States directly, usually for dollars, Bluefields was in effect a free port. Much of the population there had international experience through migrant relatives, many in the United States, or through work as seamen. The inshore low-technology fishermen as well as the offshore lobstermen could find international markets with little or no regulation.

On the Atlantic Coast during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s this sporadic economic development occurred in the absence of state attention. The Atlantic Coast was more isolated from the more brutal aspects of the Somoza regime, but it was part of an international commercial system that continued its status as an enclave economy, subject to a boom and bust cycle. The splendid isolation of the Atlantic Coast was an example of malign neglect, especially during the long "bust" period since the 1950s. Its isolation made it an ideal place from which to launch troops for the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961.

Even under Somoza, though, some movement toward indigenous organization was allowed. During the 1970s an indigenous organization, ALPROMISU, was created to represent the Miskito and Sumo people. A small organization based in a few towns, ALPROMISU had a modest potential to raise largely economic and social demands. In the Somocista environment it could hardly engage in more energetic lobbying. It did make it clear, though, that the people of the Atlantic Coast felt they could make legitimate claims on the Nicaraguan state. Issues such as schooling, health, and economic demands were on the agenda.

Up to the time of the Sandinista Revolution, the coast had remained relatively isolated from the rest of national territory. The influences that penetrated the region were generally exploitative business enterprises that created little domestic economic structure and were permitted to operate virtually at their own discretion. Politically, the coast depended on Managua but economically its fate was determined outside of the country. When the Sandinistas came to power in July 1979, however, it quickly became clear that coastal people had many aspirations and plans for their region and were waiting for the opportune moment to voice them.

6. Nietschmann, *Between Land and Water*, p. 7.

7. *Ibid.*; Helms, *Asang*.

III. Revolution Comes to the Atlantic Coast

On the Pacific side of Nicaragua, the Sandinista triumph brought a general wave of optimism along with the notion that revolution meant turning the social system of privilege on its head. Under the new "logic of the majority," benefits were to go to the most dispossessed groups first. The rural poor of the Pacific side were obvious recipients of this revolutionary logic. Compensation for past exploitation meant that the Sandinista state would channel resources such as land, health services, literacy, and education to those who had never had them. The notion that spreading Sandinismo to the entire nation was an absolute good seemed obvious to the broad base of supporters of the Sandinista government.

The coastal population, with its long history of social and economic distance from the Nicaraguan state, did not embrace this new logic. The insurrection that toppled Somoza, so costly in human terms on the Pacific side, was not felt the same way on the coast. There had been no major fighting on the coast and few of the revolutionary organizations had established any presence there prior to the 1979 triumph. Coastal natives who joined the insurrection fought on the Pacific Coast. The lack of an insurrectionary experience meant that the emerging Sandinista state had not established the support and confidence of the people in the region.⁸

To overcome the historic and insurrectionary isolation of the coast, the Sandinista government dedicated itself to "incorporate" the coast into the new national development process. One of the top commanders of the FSLN (Sandinist Front for National Liberation), William Ramírez, himself a coastal native, took charge of this process. This effort was intended both to overcome the perceived neglect of the Somoza era as well as to build a base of support for the revolution in an area that had not experienced the insurrection.

In November 1979, in an effort to initiate this new policy, FSLN leader Daniel Ortega attended a meeting in Puerco Cabezas, the principal community of northern Zelaya. At that meeting it became clear that, while some government presence was welcome, the Miskito leadership of ALPROMISU was not willing to become assimilated into the emerging Sandinista mass organizations such as the ATC (Farm Workers Association). Instead, they asked for their own indigenous organization to represent the people of the coast. On the spot, MISURASATA (Miskito, Sumo, Rama, Sandinista, Working Together) was formed. MISURASATA was declared a "mass organization" of

similar status to the ATC and given representation on the Council of State, at the time a deliberative, but not the sole legislative, national body.

While three indigenous groups were mentioned in the name of the organization, the leadership continued to be overwhelmingly Miskito. In northern Zelaya the Miskitos were clearly the most politically sophisticated and energetic in defense of community interests. The Sumo, Rama, and Garifona communities were quite small with about 8,000, 800, and 1,500 people respectively, and had few politically experienced leaders. Steadman Fagoth, Brooklyn Rivera, Hazel Lau, all Miskitos, were the emergent leaders of MISURATA. They were simultaneously active in the literacy crusade. Indeed, it was one of their political goals that literacy instruction be given in Miskito and English as well as Spanish. Many of the present activists, pro- or anti-government, began as members of MISURASATA and as literacy workers.

The Creoles of Bluefields had community goals that were somewhat different than those of the indigenous communities and never became a significant voice in MISURASATA, choosing instead to pursue their interests in other forms. In addition, there was no organized group that represented the large and growing mestizo community. They lived scattered throughout the region as small farmers, miners, merchants, and bureaucrats and represent 65 percent (172,046) of the coastal population.⁹

With Miskito dominance of the mass organization, it is no wonder that the impression gained by most outside observers was that the Miskitos were the only important group in the region. But, while speaking on behalf of all coastal people, the Miskito could not represent all the divergent ethnic interests of the coast. The Sandinistas, burdened as they were with their Pacific-oriented view, had difficulty understanding this multiethnic panorama. Nor did they really appreciate the basic historical coastal agenda composed of demands for land rights and cultural considerations.

The Sandinistas seemed of two minds concerning the coastal situation. On the one hand, there was a certain suspicion and resentment because of low coastal participation in the anti-Somoza insurrection. Some feared that the absence of an insurrection of the Atlantic Coast meant the population was open to counter-revolutionary sentiment. On the other hand, there was almost missionary fervor in the commitment that the Sandinista policies of revolutionary reorganization would generate agreement even without the insurrectionary experience. This was coupled with a willingness to serve the coastal population but with the Sandinista tools developed for the Pacific "majorities." The first of these efforts was the National Literacy Crusade.

8. Phillipe Bourgois and Jorge Grunberg, "La mosquitia y la revolución: informe de una investigación rural en la costa atlántica norte (1980)," (Managua: Instituto Nicaragüense de Reforma Agraria, 1980); Philip A. Dennis, "The Costeños and the Revolution in Nicaragua," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 23:3 (August 1981): 271-296.

9. CIDCA, 1982, *Demografía costeña*, p. 45.

In 1980, when the literacy campaign got under way on the coast, MISURASATA insisted that it be done in Miskito and English. Although it also represented the Sumo and Rama people, MISURASATA made no major effort to include these languages in the campaign. The Literacy Crusade provided a context of heightened communication between the newly emerged indigenous leadership and the communities, resulting in MISURASATA's quickly acquiring strength. Indigenous demands were formed and pressed on the new government. Among these demands were road construction (especially the completion of an all-weather road between Managua and Puerto Cabezas), health centers, basic grain storage centers, agricultural assistance in the development of crops suitable for the zone such as cacao, the continuation of the literacy campaign in native language, and bilingual education for children. These demands were similar to those of the mass organizations of the Pacific side and were consistent with Sandinista development goals and policy for the whole nation.

The government formed a new agency, INNICA, to respond to and coordinate the heightened level of communication with the coast. Its major leaders were Sandinistas from the Pacific side, and there were offices in Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields. In 1982, CIDCA (Centro de Investigación y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica) was created to engage in research on the coast and to generate the information necessary to help the government make decisions.

MISURASATA pressed for special treatment based on an emerging sense of indigenous rights. The most prominent and problematic of these rights was the recognition of indigenous land ownership. This demand—often expressed in terms of "self-determination," "sovereignty," and "nationhood"—seemed to challenge the programs and objectives of the Sandinista government. Against a background of the growing CIA-supported *contra* forces just across the border in Honduras, the government worried that MISURASATA could become the vehicle for a separatist movement, or worse, the base for antigovernment insurgency.

The Land Issue

Up to 1979, most of the indigenous coastal people had exercised de facto control over the lands they used for subsistence activities. Ocean and riverine resources were freely used by all and forest products were generally used as needed for house and canoe construction. Access to forests, however, was limited periodically, first by the foreign lumber companies and later by Somoza's forestry agency. Subsistence agriculture involved an alternation between cultivation and fallow cycles. Any community member could have the use of any unused plot. A plot was considered used even if it was not under cultivation at the time; that is, the cultivator could maintain the right to use

the land after its fallow period ended. Land was not titled in the conventional sense but was available to any community member. The low population density and the abundance of land meant little conflict over land rights among community members or between communities. Even with a steady migration of mestizo peasants toward the Atlantic Coast, there seemed to be land enough for everyone.

But once MISURASATA was formed and recognized, it supported the absolute recognition of coastal land rights as the single most important problem to be resolved. In late 1980 the government agreed that MISURASATA should undertake the necessary background study to produce the nineteenth-century land titles on which its land claims were based. These titles were referred to in the treaties at the time of "reincorporation." An American indigenist organization, Cultural Survival, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, gave a grant of \$8,000 to MISURASATA for this study.

The resulting document did not present evidence of land titles as expected. Rather, it asserted the broadest possible claims for indigenous rights to a significant portion of Nicaragua's national territory. Several controversial arguments were put forward. First, and most contentious, is the statement that "the right of indigenous nations over the territory of their communities is preferential to the territorial rights of states" (pp.1-2). Similar to the claim made by the World Council of Indigenous Peoples, this assertion is a direct challenge to nation-state sovereignty and is not recognized by any existing state. The size of the indigenous territory was to be determined by the concept of "millenarian possession" in which residence on the land since time immemorial was sufficient to affirm present ownership. Furthermore, these rights extended indigenous control to "the surface and subsoil, full rights to internal and coastal waters, and the rights to adapt them, and exclusive coastal economic zones. Thus, we indigenous people may freely use the wealth and natural sources of the land. In no case may a people be deprived of its means of self-sufficiency" (p.6). Of the various treaties signed between the Nicaraguan government and other powers (British, American), none was seen as legitimately abridging these rights. The study goes on to assert land rights over 76.8 percent of the territory of the Atlantic Coast, or *one-third of the total territory of Nicaragua*.¹⁰

In August 1981, the government issued its own conception of indigenous rights. Article 6 of its "Declaration of Principles" states that "the natural resources of our territory are the property of the Nicaraguan people. The Revolutionary State, representative of the

10. MISURASATA, "La tenencia de la tierra de las comunidades indígenas y criollas de la costa atlántica." With supplement, "Propuesta de la tenencia de la tierra de las comunidades indígenas y criollas de la costa atlántica," no place, ms. 1981.

popular will, is the only entity empowered to establish a rational and efficient system of utilization of said resources. The Revolutionary State recognizes the right of the indigenous people to receive a portion of the benefits to be derived from the exploitation of forest resources of the region. These benefits must be invested in programs of community and municipal development in accordance with national plans."

Article 5, dealing with land rights, said: "The Popular Sandinista Revolution will not only guarantee but also legalize the ownership of lands on which the people of the communities of the Atlantic Coast have traditionally lived and worked, organized either as communes or as cooperatives. Land titles will be granted to each community."¹¹

In these two articles, the state made it explicit that it would not relinquish its historical right to decide these questions of tenure and resource use and that it would treat indigenous communities the same as many other Nicaraguan communities. The implication was that the state had exclusive right to decide such questions and that there would be no unique status for indigenous groups. This was in effect a rejection of MISURASATA'S claim both to those rights as well as to its assertion of the sole power to decide them.

External Threat and Early Conflict

It was, however, U.S. policy that strongly influenced Sandinista fears of the special land demands. U.S. support for the now acknowledged "covert war" had already begun in late 1981 with CIA funding and Argentine advisors.¹²

The bulk of the training camps for the *contras* were on the Honduran border near many indigenous communities. The *contras*, led by Somocista National Guardsmen, were preparing to infiltrate into Nicaragua and already had a well-developed propaganda apparatus on the Honduran side, the "15th of September" radio station. In this context, demands for land that amounted to most of the coast were viewed by the Sandinistas as a possible threat to national integrity.

From early 1981 the situation rapidly worsened as both sides contributed toward the heightening of the tension. In February 1981, shortly before the land study was to be presented, the Sandinistas arrested many Indian leaders for allegedly hostile activities. Most were held for a short time, but these arrests created suspicions among the indigenous groups that the Sandinistas would never accept a real Indian voice in national affairs.

The most inflammatory case of arrests occurred in February 1981 in Prinzapolka.¹³ Several Sandinista soldiers attempted to arrest a MISURASATA leader during the closing ceremony of the literacy campaign in a Moravian church. Instead of waiting for the ceremony to end, they entered, armed, to complete the arrest. A shootout ensued in which four Miskitos and four soldiers died. That event created a tone for Indian-government relations that has not yet been dissipated.

During this period the most dynamic leader of MISURASATA, Steadman Fagoth Muller, became an ardent critic of the government. He was jailed in February, 1981, and released in May on condition that he go abroad to study in a socialist country. He immediately left the country for Honduras and at once associated himself with the *contras'* radio station "15th of September." From there he broadcast virulent attacks on the government and called for armed resistance to the Sandinistas. Using support from the *contras*, he was able to build a guerrilla force in Honduras that began attacking Miskito communities across the border in Nicaragua. The Sandinista response was to produce information showing that Fagoth had been an undercover agent for the Somoza regime during his university days.

While on the one hand Fagoth was active in a propaganda attack on the Sandinistas, testifying in Congress, lobbying in the U.S., and speaking frequently on the "15th of September" radio station from Honduras, he was also involved in frequent military actions, many of them classified as violations of human rights and the rules of war.¹⁴

From mid-1981 through the end of the year, the situation heated up so rapidly that all hope was lost for resolution through dialogue. Near the end of the year the Sandinistas announced the discovery of a plot called "Red Christmas" designed to kill Sandinista workers on the coast and incite a general uprising. Citing the plot as evidence of imminent external threat to national integrity, the Sandinistas began a large-scale evacuation of villages on the upper Coco and the systematic destruction of houses and livestock there to deny support to the attacking forces. The evacuees, approximately 8,500, were taken to a new location, sixty kilometers to the south, called Tasba Pri ("Free Land"). This forced relocation saw people moving to Puerto Cabezas as well. Later, another center was opened in Sangilaya, north of Puerto Cabezas, that received resettled people from the surrounding communities. Some people, including many Sumos, were resettled in camps in

11. "Declaración de principios de la revolución popular sandinista sobre las comunidades indígenas de la costa atlántica," Managua, 11 de Agosto, 1981.

12. *Washington Post*, Feb. 14, 1982.

13. Center for Research and Documentation of the Atlantic Coast (CIDCA), *Trabil Nani: Historical Background and Current Situation on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua (Managua and New York, 1984.)*

14. Americas Watch, *Violations of the Rules of War by Both Sides in Nicaragua, 1981-1985* (New York: Americas Watch, March 1985.)

the department of Jinotega. In addition, perhaps 15,000 people crossed the border into Honduras to live in refugee camps, in guerrilla camps, or in already existing communities.¹⁵

Human Rights Accusations

This time of resettlement and turmoil is what the government now calls the period of "errors." There has been official recognition of wrongdoing as well as published accounts of human rights abuses on the coast.¹⁶ Squeezed between a growing Indian militancy and a quickly eroding security position on the coast, the Sandinista solution was to try to establish greater control through the imposition of central power.

Some of the charges levied against the Sandinistas at that time go as far as to describe a war of extermination with massive human rights violations. Accusations focus on several incidents prior to the forced removals to Tasba Pri, the relocation itself, conditions in Tasba Pri, and finally, on the conduct of the Sandinistas in their military engagements with Indian guerrillas and with the civilian population.

Official Washington depicted the Atlantic Coast situation as a holocaust. In an address to the American people on May 9, 1984, President Reagan said of the Miskitos that "thousands have been slaughtered," that "they have been starved and abused," and that Tasba Pri and other relocation sites are "detention camps." In 1982 Secretary of State Alexander Haig waved a photograph of burning bodies as evidence of mass slaughter of Miskitos. It became particularly embarrassing to him with the revelation that the photograph had been originally published in *Le Figaro* during the insurrection showing victims of the slaughter of Somoza. The Reagan administration has continued a barrage of propaganda assertions that claim that Miskitos have been subject to genocide.¹⁷

The harshest charges were made by Dr. Bernard Nietschmann, a professor of geography from the University of California at Berkeley, in testimony before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the OAS in October 1983. There he stated that in Miskito communities, the Sandinista government engaged in "arbitrary killings, arrests and interrogations; rapes; torture; continued forced relocations of village populations; destruction of villages; restriction and prohibition of freedom and 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."¹⁸

During this entire period though, the only responsible investigations of these charges were done by the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and Americas Watch. The IACHR report of November 29, 1983, considered a complaint lodged by MISURASATA that included charges of detentions, trials, imprisonments, disappearances, relocation, and several specific incidents involving Miskitos.¹⁹

The IACHR investigated complaints put forward by MISURASATA concerning the events in San Carlos and Leimus in December 1981, the forced relocations, and illegal detentions. It found that "forces in opposition to the Nicaraguan government crossed the Coco River from Honduras and occupied the town of San Carlos, on the bank of that river in December 1981, where they ambushed, mutilated and killed six Nicaraguan soldiers" (p. 129). The IACHR also found that Nicaraguan army forces "illegally killed a considerable number of Miskitos in Leimus in retaliation for the killings in San Carlos" (Ibid.). Americas Watch charges that 14 to 17 civilian prisoners were murdered in Leimus in December 1981, and seven Miskito youngsters were killed by government troops in Walpa Siksa. The government has punished those responsible for these crimes.²⁰

The IACHR expressed concern at irregularities and abuses of Miskitos concerning conditions of detention, lack of charges, and disappearances. With regard to the relocation it noted that, "despite the fact that the relocation and resettlement of the Miskitos in Tasba Pri was carried out in an atmosphere of fear and severe conflict, the Commission [IACHR] is not in a position to state that there was loss of life during the relocation, with which the government had been initially accused" (Ibid.). The IACHR noted that "Hundreds of Miskitos have been arbitrarily detained without any formalities" and that trials of those arrested in late 1981 and early 1982 were "initially carried out without regard to the universally applicable norms of due process" (p. 130). It also recognized that as a result of the amnesty declared on December 1, 1983, almost all of the detained Miskitos were freed. The

15. Americas Watch, *The Miskitos in Nicaragua, 1981-1984* (New York: Americas Watch, Nov. 1984.)

16. CIDCA, *Trabil Nani*, pp. 15, 35, 47-55. See also interview with Tomás Borge, August 24, 1985, *Nuevo Amanecer Cultural* by Gregorio Selser, esp. p. 5, Managua.

17. *Le Canard Enchaîné*, Paris, Feb. 24, 1982, exposed Haig's misuse of a photo published in *Le Figaro*, Feb. 23, 1982. The original photo was made three years previously, during the Somoza regime.

18. 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." Cf. note 19.

19. Organization of American States, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights of a Segment of the Nicaraguan Population of Miskito Origin* (Washington: General Secretariat, OAS, May 16, 1984) [original in Spanish, November 29, 1983].

20. Americas Watch, *Violations of the Rules*, p. 39.

IACHR received complaints of the disappearance of "nearly 70 Miskitos." While calling it a serious problem, it noted that some of those people may have fled to Honduras, some had been released and may have changed their names, making it difficult to account for them (Ibid.).

The OAS report recommends a pardon or amnesty for Miskitos; payment of compensation for economic losses; return to the Río Coco when the emergency ends; repatriation of Miskitos in Honduras; negotiations of fundamental issues such as respect for indigenous culture; and freedom of political participation. It supports the "study of a solution to the problem of the Indians' ancestral lands that would take into account both the aspirations of the Indians and the economic interests and territorial unity of the Republic" (p. 133).

It recognizes further, that while most of the Indians' claims are just and valid, indeed agreed to by the government, international law "does not include the right to self-determination or political autonomy" (p. 129).

In a separate and ongoing series of reports on human rights and the Miskitos, Americas Watch "made a special effort to inquire about the allegation of massacres, illegal detentions and torture of Miskitos during and preceding the relocation process. We found no evidence of widespread disappearances and . . . no specific information on the alleged torture and killing of Miskitos during the relocations." Americas Watch also found that while the relocation was consistent with prerogatives of countries under military threat, the relocation process itself should have been carried out with more notification, better transportation, and clearer compensation for losses of property.²¹

As the military conflict grew following the relocation, human rights observers investigated the charges of violations of the laws of war. Americas Watch judged both the Leimus incident in 1981 and one in Walpa Siksa in 1982 to be documented violations of the rules of war. Nevertheless, they concluded that there had been "a sharp decline in violations of the rules of war by the Nicaraguan government following 1982, though we have recorded abuses that took place as recently as a year ago (i.e. 1984)."²²

As the conflict took on a more military tone, Indian insurgents violated human rights and the rules of war, as noted in the report cited above. On December 9, 1984, 19 unarmed members of the government security forces were murdered. Their bodies were found with their hands tied (p.42). Examples of summary execution of prisoners, torture, kidnapping of civilians, and armed attacks on

civilian populations are attributed to combined MISURA-MISURASATA forces (pp. 43-50). Steadman Fagoth personally took credit for leading an attack on Sumubila, one of the Tasba Pri centers, on April 14, 1984. The MISURA forces, led by Fagoth fired rockets indiscriminately against houses and killed six civilians, including two children and one elderly woman. The only physician who serves the area along with his hospital administrator were kidnapped as well as 39 residents, 10 of whom returned later (pp. 50-51).

While our task force was in no position to make an independent study of the many charges and countercharges of human rights violations, we found no credible and responsible evidence to question the conclusions of the IAHRC and Americas Watch. The relocation was a regrettable policy that even the Sandinistas now call an error. It was, however, consistent with the rights of states to defend their national integrity and was carried out with minimal violations of the human rights of the Miskitos. It occurred in a context of violence during which the Sandinistas committed human rights violations. Most of these have been punished and there has been a marked reduction of them since that time, certainly fewer than the systematic violations committed by the *contras* and always less than the levels regularly reported by the governments of Guatemala against its indigenous population or by the government of El Salvador against its civilian population. Even during the worst moments of the Nicaraguan human rights record, in 1982, Americas Watch could say that "human rights are afforded far greater respect in Nicaragua than in the nearby states of El Salvador and Guatemala. As stated in our May [1982] report, the Nicaraguan government does not engage in a practice of torturing, murdering or abducting its citizens, practices that prevailed under the regime of Anastasio Somoza Debayle."²³ There was certainly no policy of massive abuse or genocide.

IV. Changes in Sandinista Policy

The 1982-1984 period was a time of deepening military conflict with the strengthening insurgency of organized Miskito forces in the region. Since the insurgent Miskito made no secret of their links with the U.S.-sponsored *contras* and the advice and support of the CIA, the government regarded them as equal to the other *contra* enemies of the state and treated them accordingly. Against this background of increasing conflict and distrust from the local population, the government was faced with the challenge of implementing the revolution and overcoming its first failure there. This caused serious policy reconsiderations and taught the Sandinistas valuable lessons.

21. Americas Watch, *The Miskitos in Nicaragua*, pp. 30-31.

22. Americas Watch, *Violations of the Rules*, pp. 4-5.

23. Americas Watch, *Human Rights in Nicaragua: November 1982 Update* (New York: Americas Watch, November, 1982).

Through its efforts to gain local support after the relocation, the government acquired new understanding of the nature of ethnic minorities. Over these three years two important things occurred. First, the Tasba Pri effort saw the government invest heavily to promote development in a conventional sense. While it never succeeded as a model of development, Tasba Pri was nevertheless a qualified success. The bumper rice crops produced with the introduction of government-provided supplies and technical assistance, new health programs, and new schools were seen by the people as benefits that, while not compensating for the uprooting, at least made the camps viable and productive communities that brought some obvious benefits to the inhabitants. Houses were made of materials superior to the traditional river homes, but they were placed uncomfortably close to each other. When the Sandinistas tried to offer greater security by issuing house titles, the result was threatening rather than reassuring. It implied distinctions among neighbors and a concept of ownership that were not part of traditional community life.

The other dynamic during this time was the armed opposition to the government. The Miskito insurgency that developed was qualitatively different than the *contra* war waged on the Pacific side. The *contras* were unable to gain shelter and support from the local population on the Pacific side. But the Miskito insurgents—in classic guerrilla fashion—were like "fish in water." The sparseness and dispersal of the population and the lack of strong infrastructure made it harder for the government to control territory, allowing the insurgents freer mobility and an ability sporadically to control towns and villages as well as to attack certain targets along the roads. The guerrillas were also able to destroy some productive installations, such as the sawmill at Sukapin, as well as health clinics. Government efforts to put down the insurgency, however, often reaped more distrust than military gain for the Sandinistas although, as we have noted, Americas Watch found few human rights abuses during that period. The imposition of government control over the communities simply raised government costs for supplying them with the food they were not growing. Government restrictions on the movement of villagers to their fields also engendered greater hostility.

The failure of the resettlement camps to gain active Miskito support for the Sandinistas, the partial success of the Indian guerrillas, and the growing perception that the U.S. government might be preparing an invasion, led to a rethinking of Sandinista policy.²⁴ This meant choosing between the existing policy which emphasized central political control along with military suppression of the insurgency, and an alternative, more political, solution

which might remove the causes of local discontent—in particular the entire relocation—and negotiate military agreements to restore internal peace. This latter alternative would permit a return to a kind of normality while a negotiated solution was worked out. Militarily, it would enable the government to use its troops to engage the *contras* directly on the Pacific side of the country. An early harbinger of this change in policy was the general amnesty of December 1983.

On the other side, the insurgents were experiencing internal conflicts and uncertainties about continuing the war. After Steadman Fagoth left Nicaragua for Honduras in 1981, he was soon followed by other MISURASATA leaders, including Brooklyn Rivera, and a flood of refugees who rejected resettlement or, in some cases, were coerced to cross the border. Recruiting from the refugees, the exiled leadership, with CIA funding and support, began building an insurgent fighting force called MISURA that was separate from, but allied to the central *contra* force, the Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense (FDN), headed by Somoza national guard officers.

In late 1982, however, a leadership conflict between Fagoth and Rivera led Rivera to leave Honduras for Costa Rica, where he allied himself with the ARDE (Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática) of Edén Pastora.²⁵ Rivera kept the name of MISURASATA. Conflicts within MISURA continued because of the harsh and violent leadership of Fagoth, who was accused of killing those who disagreed with him and forcibly recruiting Miskitos to join him in Honduras. In 1984, Fagoth was expelled from Honduras for interference in the internal affairs of the country. His repeated public statements about his activities ran counter to the official Honduran position that denied that there were anti-Sandinista forces using Honduras as a sanctuary. The final straw was his threat to kill 23 Sandinista army prisoners, and for that he was expelled.

The U.S. role in assisting the *contra* war is now well known. What began as a "covert" war is now recognized as a U.S.-funded effort to overthrow the Sandinista government. The CIA has had a specific role in funding, supplying, and training all insurgent forces, including those of MISURA and MISURASATA.²⁶ Consistent with their efforts to unite all opposition military forces, the U.S. has sought to strengthen the ties between the Miskito insurgents and the FDN. While Fagoth seemed quite willing to work closely with the FDN, other leaders, such as Brooklyn Rivera, resisted these efforts. The FDN had no policy that would respond to Miskito demands concerning land rights or autonomy and were unwilling to incorporate indigenous

25. Theodore Macdonald, Jr., "Miskito Refugees in Costa Rica," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 8:3 (Fall 1984):59-60.

26. Christopher Dickey, *With the Contras: A Reporter in the Wilds of Nicaragua* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986).

24. Evidence for the beginnings of the change in Sandinista thinking comes from interviews with various government officials and local observers.

leaders into their command structure. The FDN, dominated by mestizos and ex-national guards, were seen by some Miskito leaders (Fagoth and MISURA) as more sympathetic to their cause than the Sandinistas. But the evolving position of MISURASATA has recognized the FDN's lack of comprehension of indigenous problems, and MISURASATA has expressed a preference to negotiate with the Sandinistas.²⁷

U.S. influence receded when Congress refused to appropriate \$14 million for the *contras* in April 1984. The lack of CIA funding probably reduced the effectiveness, unity, and morale of the Miskito insurgents.²⁸ It was reported to us that the insurgent forces became increasingly dependent on logistical support from local communities, since supplies from Honduras and Costa Rica had declined. MISURASATA representatives also complained that the CIA was withholding support because it was not satisfied that the indigenous fighters took the overthrow of the Sandinista government as their highest priority. Thus, by mid-1984, the disorganization within the insurgent groups, the evidence of systematic atrocities committed by the *contras*, the precipitous decline in CIA funding, all suggested a context in which some Miskitos were willing to consider negotiations with the Sandinista government.

At the same time there were people on both sides ready to cooperate in changing the nature of the conflict. For the Sandinistas, the fear of an invasion, the recognition of failure to gain Miskito allegiance after the relocation to Tasba Pri, the stalemate and continuing hardship caused by the guerrilla action on the coast, had all amounted to a powerful lesson. They were now willing, as a result, to try an alternative approach, a political solution that would represent a greater awareness of the indigenous situation and demands. It was also an attempt at a viable alternative to a centralized military policy. For their part, some Miskito insurgents, lacking material support, internally divided, with little comprehension from other *contra* groups, were also open to a new alternative: negotiations with the Sandinistas.

V. Negotiations and Autonomy

In a speech at the U.N. in September 1984, Pres. Daniel Ortega extended a clear invitation to Brooklyn Rivera to enter a dialogue with the government. With help from Sen. Edward Kennedy's office, Rivera's response was positive and after receiving assurances that included the presence of observers, guarantees of freedom of movement, and personal security, Rivera returned to Nicaragua in late October and stayed for 10 days. During that time, he had a chance to travel on the Atlantic Coast and publicly address

audiences, mostly in the Miskito areas. He was generally well received and appears to have taken the trip as an indication of good faith by the Sandinistas.

The trip culminated in a series of high-level meetings in early November 1984, in Managua. Although no statement was issued at that time, it appeared that some basis for future negotiations were established then. On November 22, Rivera left for Honduras to speak to the Miskitos in the southeast part of the country. Rivera hoped to learn from them if there was willingness to reach a negotiated solution under his leadership. He was prevented from entering Honduras, however, and he and his party were detained at the airport in Tegucigalpa, interrogated, arrested, and finally expelled from the country. What could have meant the beginning of a solution was aborted abruptly, undercutting Rivera's claim that he spoke for the majority of the insurgents and refugees. Competition between Rivera's MISURASATA and Fagoth's MISURA reached high levels of tension at this point. Rivera's move toward negotiations was resisted by the MISURA leadership, which succeeded in attracting some of Rivera's military and political support and condemning him for his "sellout." The Honduran government participated in this conflict by preventing Rivera from going to the Honduran camps to speak to the Miskitos there.

Despite these setbacks, Rivera did partially succeed in his efforts to represent the whole insurgent movement. In December 1984, a fresh round of talks began between the Nicaraguan government and a Rivera-led MISURASATA delegation. Several MISURA members were also present, as well as observers from Canada, Colombia, France, Holland, Mexico, Sweden, and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. The government delegation was led by vice-minister of the interior Luis Carrión and included several Miskitos and representatives of other coastal ethnic groups.

At the first meeting, on December 8, 1984, in Bogotá, Colombia, the government position was expressed in the form of a draft treaty. It reiterated its "recognition that the ethnic groups of the Atlantic Coast must enjoy special rights of autonomy that guarantee their ethnic identity and that must be consigned in the laws of the republic with constitutional rank."²⁹ All the significant issues—land, resources, education, cultural respect, health, housing, transport and communication—were to be open for negotiations to define mutual rights and responsibilities. In addition, the government proposed a three-month suspension of hostilities, the repatriation of refugees, and called on MISURASATA to repudiate "non-Nicaraguan forces."

On December 5, a few days before the Bogotá meetings began, the government named a national commission to

27. Interview with Armstrong Wiggins, MISURASATA, Washington.

28. "CIA Said to Broker Accords on Dividing Anti-Sandinista Aid," *Washington Post*, August 28, 1985.

29. Nicaraguan Government Draft Agreement, Bogotá, December 8, 1984.

work on an autonomy statute. By so doing it made plain its intention that the international meetings constituted a parallel process to the one taking place within the country. By relating the other substantive topics, especially land tenure and political rights, to the autonomy statute and to a cease-fire, it also described a comprehensive package for the resolution of the coastal problem. Both the draft agreement and the internal autonomy process initiated by the government represented a considerable shift in policy toward the Atlantic Coast. Especially compared to the 1981 "Declaration of Principles" (discussed in the "Early Conflict" section), these efforts showed more openness to discuss autonomy and negotiate land rights.

The MISURASATA document submitted at the December 1984 meeting reiterated earlier demands for sovereignty. It calls for the government to recognize "the Miskito, Sumo, and Rama populations as sovereign indigenous peoples. . .with the natural right to freely determine their own political, economic, social and cultural development in accord with their values and traditions." It further calls for the demilitarization of the region, indemnification of communities for damages suffered, formal recognition of MISURASATA, and a cease-fire, which is to follow the withdrawal of Sandinista troops from almost all communities on the coast. The Sandinista army was to be replaced by MISURASATA troops, who were to be in the communities as "the only military force there." To oversee compliance, MISURASATA asked for a tripartite commission consisting of two government delegates, two from MISURASATA, and three delegates from the guarantor nations present.³⁰

These international negotiations proceeded with a second session in Bogotá in January 1985, a third in Mexico City in April, and a fourth in Bogotá in May. The only substantive agreement actually put into practice was in April when both parties agreed "not [to] initiate offensive actions." This cease-fire was further supported by agreements concerning the relaxation of restrictions on population movements, identification, and supplying the communities with medicine and food. Although there were at least two serious incidents during May—a MISURASATA attack on Bluefields, and a confrontation in Alamikamba between the Sandinista army and MISURASATA troops—neither side cited them as reason to break the accords at the time. During the May Bogotá meeting, however, relations chilled considerably and ended with a MISURASATA walkout. Both sides blamed the other. At that meeting, the government presented a list of MISURASATA violations of the April accord, including incidents that appear to have occurred prior to the accord. It demanded a recognition of these events and a statement assuring that they would not recur. MISURASATA felt that the open mention of this was a provocation and was

not willing to offer assurances. They perceived this as a hardening of the Sandinista position and Rivera walked out, claiming that talk was not possible at that time. Both sides called it a suspension and stated that the negotiations could be resumed at any moment.³¹ As of this writing (February 1986), there has not been a resumption of talks.

Since Rivera's visit to Nicaragua in October 1984, there have been significant international developments. As 1985 began, Congress was ambivalent about funding the *contras*, and in April it defeated the administration's request for \$14 million in military aid. In May, Reagan imposed an embargo against Nicaragua after using executive power to declare that the U.S. was in a condition of "national emergency" because of the "threat to national security and foreign policy" that Nicaragua represented. But by June, presumably because of Pres. Daniel Ortega's trip to the Soviet Union, Congress approved \$27 million in "humanitarian aid" to the same *contras* amid a new wave of anti-Sandinista sentiment strongly supported by the White House. So, when discussions were suspended in Bogotá, it occurred at a time when U.S. pressure on the Nicaraguan government was newly increased.

When the LASA Task Force interviewed Michael Joyce, the political officer at the United States Embassy in Managua in August, he made it clear that the U.S. saw the indigenous insurgency only in relation to its overall support for the *contras* in Nicaragua. He said that the U.S. favors reconciliation between indigenous groups and the Sandinista government *only* as part of the U.S.-proposed "dialogue" between the *contras* and the Sandinista government, mediated by the Catholic church hierarchy, a demand formulated by the *contras* themselves in 1984.

Another significant event was a meeting in Miami in early June that brought together both MISURA and MISURASATA into a new organization called ASLA ("unity" in Miskito). This meeting called for an assembly to be held in late August or early September during which the organizational leadership would be elected. Both the walkout from the Bogotá meeting and the formation of ASLA may have been to "protest their [the Sandinistas'] unilateral action in forming their own commission to consider how to grant the Indians a measure of self-government."³²

Rivera's group hoped the Honduras assembly would be the occasion for strengthening his hand in future negotiations with the Sandinistas. Armstrong Wiggins, Rivera's principal spokesman and a member of the Indian Law Research Center in Washington, felt confident that Fagoth would be expelled at that time and Rivera would

31. American Friends Service Committee, "Fourth Round of Talks between Nicaraguan Government and MISURASATA" (Philadelphia: AFSC, July 1985).

32. "Nicaraguan Indians Remain Disunited in Autonomy Quest," *Washington Post*, August 28, 1985.

30. MISURASATA Draft Agreement, Bogotá, December 8, 1984.

become the major Indian leader. ASLA would then name a political-diplomatic, military, and autonomy commission. The resulting structure would have greater standing and unanimity among all Indian factions. It would also buttress Rivera's demand that the autonomy plans be scrapped. It would unite all the armed opponents of the government under one banner. Rivera could then reopen talks from a much stronger position, politically and militarily, than before.

The assembly convened in Honduras on September 1, 2, and 3. Wiggins was confident that there would be adequate representation of all coastal people. Many were said to be arriving from Nicaragua across the Río Coco. Days before, Fagoth apparently mounted a military attack on the community of Rus Rus, where the assembly was held. He was taken into custody by the Honduran army and expelled from the country again. At the same time, Rivera's advisors and guarantors, on the eve of his departure to Honduras, informed him that his security could not be assured; so once again he was not able to go to Honduras.

The meeting, now dominated by MISURA, quickly assumed an anti-ASLA tone. Instead of creating a unity organization to strengthen Rivera's negotiating position, it assumed an anti-Sandinista, pro-*contra* position. It disbanded ASLA and founded yet another organization, KISAN (Nicaraguan Coast Indian Unity), whose stated goals were to continue the war and to defeat the Sandinistas. The assembly was opposed to dialogue with the Sandinistas and instead favored formally entering UNO, the blanket *contra* organization that was founded in San Salvador in May 1985 by Arturo Cruz, Alfonso Robelo, and Adolfo Calero. There was mention of a \$300,000 down payment for KISAN that was to come from UNO from the \$27 million that Congress had approved in June. The Honduras meeting took the direction opposite to the one Rivera was hoping for and instead allied itself with the FDN, the *contra* military force.³³

The Autonomy Document

During this period, the government-initiated autonomy project proceeded apace. The national commission met and drew up a draft document. In July 1985, over one hundred coastal leaders assembled in Managua to discuss and modify this document. This assembly, after considerable discussion, ratified the document that would become the basis for the present public consultation on autonomy. It was called "Principles and Policies for the

Exercise of Autonomy Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Communities of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua." Many Nicaraguans we interviewed felt that the document reflected a broad consensus of those at the assembly. Most described it not as a predesigned statement that would be mechanically ratified but rather as something for discussion and modification. While in the crucial areas of land ownership and resource control it was somewhat vague, it was the most comprehensive government statement to date. It was divided into three parts: general considerations and historical antecedents; principles and objectives of regional autonomy; and organization and functions of the autonomous regional government and of the national government of Nicaragua.

The first section explains the unique conditions and status of the coastal population and the need to devise specific legal provisions for it. The second section locates autonomy within the guidelines of the Sandinista revolution (sovereignty, anti-imperialist) and stipulates that autonomy is to be exercised in "the geographic area which they (coastal people) traditionally have occupied" (p. 16, par. 7). It states that the material base necessary for the preservation of ethnic identity involves "collective or individual property rights over lands traditionally occupied" as well as the "use of lands, forests, surface and subterranean and coastal waters." In addition, the revenues from the use of natural resources will be reinvested in the communities.

To "represent and guarantee" the exercise of autonomy, the document calls for the creation of "autonomous regions," each one with a regional government consisting of a regional assembly and a regional executive. The regional government would exercise local police functions, promote participation in national defense, collect taxes, participate in the implementation of economic development plans, and manage all matters relating to land tenure and investment.³⁴

This differs from the 1981 statement primarily in that it states as its goal the achievement of autonomy of the Atlantic Coast. While its statements about land and natural resource use are not very different from the language of the 1981 statement, the political mechanisms, i.e., the regional assemblies, envisioned under this autonomy plan, and the description of it as subject to modification as communities begin to discuss it, offer greater possibility to achieve more self-determination than the Atlantic Coast has ever had.

After the Managua meeting that gave rise to this document, regional autonomy commissions were formed,

33. We are grateful to Peter Ford, a British journalist, who attended the meeting.

34. Comisión Nacional de Autonomía de la Costa Atlántica, *Principios y políticas para el ejercicio de los derechos de autonomía de los pueblos indígenas y comunidades de la costa Atlántica de Nicaragua*. Managua, 1985.

one for Zelaya Norte and one for the south. This initiated the process of *consulta* (consultation) whereby the regional commissions undertook to promote discussions among the population so as to elicit opinions from as broad a section of the population as possible. The original timetable announced by the government was to have a draft statute available by October 1985 for debate in the National Assembly for ratification in the new constitution. Since then, however, the process has become dependent on the pace of the *consultas* so that it is now expected to be completed by the end of 1986.

This conjuncture, a sustained cease-fire in spite of the suspension of external negotiations between the government and the insurgents, along with the growing internal process of defining the legal and organizational bases for autonomy, set the stage for the LASA Task Force visit in August 1985.

VI. Internal Autonomy Processes

Atlantic Coast autonomy is a goal desired by virtually all political factions since 1979 and, most probably, since long before that. But support for a given version of autonomy has depended on who appears to be initiating the proposal. Since 1985, the autonomy plan, first proposed by the government, has increasingly become a matter for coastal people to debate. Accordingly, the presence of the central government has been reduced and regional organizations and opinions have moved to center stage. The debate has been spirited, occasionally acrimonious, and involves more and more people and greater diversity of opinions. The goal of the two regional autonomy commissions is to involve all coastal citizens in the autonomy debate.

MISURASATA views this process as one of unilateral imposition of Sandinista ideas and control and argues that the only real autonomy can come after direct negotiations between MISURASATA and the government to establish conditions for genuine participation. MISURASATA feels that without conditions—explicit recognition of nonnegotiable Indian rights, witnessed by external observers and guarantors—the autonomy process will be too much under the control of the Sandinistas.

The position of MISURA and KISAN's Honduras and Miami leadership is a total repudiation of the autonomy proposal, although several MISURA and KISAN military commanders inside Nicaragua have begun to participate actively in the autonomy discussion.

To date, while there is no universal consensus about autonomy, there is enough suggestive material in the government draft that the population of the coast has begun to take it seriously. In our view, a genuine effort to expand participation was occurring. There was no evidence of coercion or exclusion of participants because of their

views or their identification with MISURA, MISURASATA, or even KISAN. Indeed, most people stated that the process could not succeed without the active participation of the insurgents.

While we were there in August, workshops were being held to prepare "promoters" who would organize community discussions and solicit reactions to the declaration of principles document. Called "consultations" (*consultas*), these community discussions were being publicized with the popular comic books used for other government programs in health and education. The comics made explicit that the process was on-going and that the declaration of principles was an initial draft and could be modified by the ideas and interests expressed in the *consultas*. The comics, published in English, Spanish, and Miskito, end with an appeal to participate and make one's own views known. The English version says, "Autonomy is a project for everyone; it is not finished and needs the suggestions of all the indigenous people and communities of the Atlantic Coast. This is your project. Let's all participate. Make your point of view known."

In Zelaya Norte, the regional autonomy commission felt the need to reestablish its legitimacy within the Miskito community. The regional commission called an assembly of delegates of the communities to discuss participation in the autonomy process and to submit themselves to election to ratify their representation of the Miskito community. During this assembly, on August 17th and 18th, zonal committees were named, i.e., working groups to cover subregions of Zelaya Norte, within which communities would elect representatives to the commission. A peace commission was also named. Its job was to speak to the combatants and to urge them to participate in the autonomy *consulta*.

In Zelaya Sur, at first the commission was quite open-ended and virtually any interested citizen could participate. Then, in December, a more clearly defined Creole group emerged. They advocate disenfranchisement of mestizos not born on the coast. This emergent ethnic nationalism is an expected consequence of the autonomy discussion. Thus far, this ethnic advocacy has characterized the Miskitos, but as the process progresses and the ethnic dimension is more overtly acknowledged, we may expect to see a similar posture on the part of the Sumos as well.

During the Fall of 1985, the role of the national autonomy commission was virtually eliminated. Now, the process is in the hands of the two regional commissions. The southern commission is coordinated by Johnny Hodgson, the northern commission by Armando Rojas, and the national coordinator is Ray Hooker, member of the original national commission, and a native of Bluefields. So, the structure of the autonomy commissions has become decentralized and completely coastal in membership.

Johnny Hodgson and Yolanda Campbell, another member of the southern regional autonomy commission, stated in January 1986 in Managua, that the *consulta* was finished in the south on November 30, 1985. By the end of the year, the major results were tabulated. The tabulation yielded five major areas that concerned the population. They are, in order of importance: a) the utilization of natural resources, i.e., the need to return proceeds from resource exploitation to the communities; b) the nature and functioning of the proposed regional government, especially with regard to ethnic representation; c) the creation of a center of higher education and the extension of the bilingual education program (English); d) the ability to generate regional self-sufficiency through trade within the Caribbean region; and e) new means of guaranteeing regional security and defense with local people, including the insurgents, who are strongly opposed to the entry of the FDN into southern Zelaya.

The northern commission has not advanced as rapidly in its *consulta* largely due to the fluctuating atmosphere of conflict as well as occasional local outbreaks of hostilities. Marcelo Zúñiga, a member of the commission, said that the outreach part, i.e., dissemination of the literature, was 90 percent completed in January 1986, but that the actual community discussions through assemblies was only 60 percent done. The least well covered areas are in the mines region (Siuna, Rosita, and Bonanza) because the FDN had entered there trying to create a supply line to its forces in Boaco and Chontales.

René Enríquez, director of the social action arm of the Moravian church (IDSIM) in Puerto Cabezas, stated that the preliminary indications are that 90-95 percent of the population support some form of autonomy, although there has been criticism of the way the *consulta* has been done.

A more official position, that of Dr. Mirna Cunningham, the regional government minister, and Hazel Lau, a federal deputy for Zelaya Norte, holds that the infrastructure for the *consulta* is completely in place, democratically elected, and has essentially completed its job of involving the community.

Another Moravian church view is that of Superintendent Andy Shogreen. Rev. Shogreen stated in an interview that the government has undergone a marked change in its policies toward the coast since 1983 that he characterized as "more diplomatic, more political, and less military." He counseled a patient attitude for the government and felt that the government should slow the pace of the autonomy discussion until it was more widely understood and accepted. He said there was still too much government presence on the commission and that it should become more open to a wider spectrum of opinion.

The differences in view as to the success of the *consulta* are accompanied by vigorous debate and action by

the members of the commission. In Zelaya Norte, the issue of the legitimacy of the commission remains important. Therefore, there are a number of statements in circulation criticizing the composition and functioning of the commission. Most recently, representatives of MISATAN (see below), the Moravian church, and CEPAD (a Protestant agency) have withdrawn from the commission, each with a similar critique concerning the excessive government presence on the commission. That does not appear to weaken public interest in autonomy; rather, it indicates how intense and important the debate is.

Noncombatant Indigenous Groups

MISATAN, a Miskito organization, was created in August 1984. Although it initially began work in 75 communities, it was slow to gain support; it was seen as simply another arm of the Sandinista government or the FSLN. Its leadership was more supportive of Sandinista revolutionary objectives than most of the indigenous population, but it was also critical of past government policies and supported regional autonomy. As government policy itself evolved toward allowing the return to the river and in support of autonomy, MISATAN gained more credibility in the indigenous community. Its major action has been in aiding the return to the river, and this has enhanced MISATAN's legitimacy.

MISATAN is quite open in condemning government actions during 1982-83. Since it is a Miskito organization, its general philosophy focuses on the recovery of the Miskito community and the validation of Miskito culture in the region. Rufino Lucas, in charge of legal matters for MISATAN, stated that MISATAN would become accepted as the principal Miskito organization since it was functioning in communities. It was making sure that supplies reached communities, its members were accompanying the truck convoys taking people back to the river, and it was an active voice of Miskito advocacy. In an interview in Spain, Lucas said that autonomy "gives us the room to recuperate our attributes of identity, the Miskito language may be recognized as an official language, we may reconstruct our communities, organize our work according to our traditions and govern ourselves for the first time in many centuries."³⁵

In the fluid and changing situation on the coast, it is often hard to identify the individual positions of major local participants. For instance, there are some, like Hazel Lau, who although closely identified with the government and the FSLN have not officially joined the Frente and maintain some distance from the official positions. Lau often identifies herself as one of the founders of MISURASATA. There is also a group of Miskito intellectuals who have main-

35. *El País*, November 11, 1985. Profile of Rufino Lucas Wilfred. Joan M. Perdigo. Madrid.

tained their neutrality by not joining any established group. There appears to be considerable disagreement among the participants about the position, loyalties, and alliance of the others—some independents being variously viewed simply as government supporters or as representatives of the Miskito people, and some official government supporters viewed as working from within to promote Miskito interests.

The Miskito participants, independents, MISATAN members, and members of the Frente, are all strong supporters of the return to the river, dialogue with the insurgents, and some version of the current autonomy process. To the extent that they have defined positions on the direction the autonomy process should go, the Miskitos seek Miskito control of traditionally occupied lands, and they advocate Miskito as the single "official" language for the Miskito population with Spanish as a second language. They also support bilingual education and the maintenance and development of other indigenous and Creole languages for the other ethnic groups on the Coast. Their demands for political autonomy include the formation of a single autonomous regional government for the whole of Zelaya Department rather than the creation of separate governments for Zelaya Norte and Zelaya Sur. In a broader long-term vision, they talk about the creation of a local university to train Miskito professionals needed by the communities. Unofficially, they advocate a definition of an expanded Mosquitia, that would include that part of Honduras taken from Nicaragua by the World Court decision of 1960.

The second largest indigenous organization, SUKAWALA represents thirty-two Sumo communities, or approximately 8000 people. Reorganized on March 12, 1985, SUKAWALA seeks the return of the Sumo from two resettlement camps in Nicaragua, as well as several thousand Sumo refugees in Honduras to their original communities along the river valleys near the mining towns of Siuna, Rosita, and Bonanza. Since September 1985, the Sumos in Honduras have been actively seeking to return to Nicaragua with guarantees of their safety. In the beginning of 1986, there was steady movement of Sumo people from Honduras to the community of Musawas.

The Sumos are also working to restore their language, which has been largely replaced by Miskito. Although Sumos work closely with Miskitos on issues of indigenous rights, they are concerned that their language and culture may be submerged or dominated by the Miskitos. They appear to have successfully encouraged the government to resettle mestizo settlers from some communal Sumo lands. Sumos also seek ethnic and community representation in the proposed regional assembly, fearing that their small numbers would be swamped by other ethnic groups. A long-standing leader of the Sumos, Ronas Dolores, was an active advocate of Sumo rights even under Somoza. Despite not joining the FSLN, Dolores was elected in

November 1984 on the FSLN ticket as Hazel Lau's alternate to the National Assembly.

The Sumo vision of autonomy, then, places highest priority on the return to their home communities of those Sumo families who have become refugees in Honduras. It also envisions a broader and undefined restoration of their historical prominence in much of the region, the extension of the use of the Sumo language, and the revival of the religious practices that existed prior to the Moravian conversions.

The third indigenous group, the Ramas, live in small communities in the Southern Coast near Bluefields and number less than 1000. The Ramas have become highly acculturated over time and at present there are somewhat less than two dozen speakers of Rama. The rest of the Ramas speak Creole. Their central concern appears to be to live undisturbed on Rama Key, an island which has experienced alternate occupation by guerrillas and Sandinista troops. Without their own representative organization, they nevertheless have representatives on the Regional Autonomy Commission. We were not able to interview any Rama representatives, although we did receive information about their situation from Dr. Collette Craig, a linguist, who is studying the Rama language and has recently spent time on Rama Key.

Autonomy is generating a sense of group consciousness among the Creoles and the Sumo. This renewed sense of ethnic identity coexists with a general coastal identity that provides a unity within this diversity. These various identities are the elements of a genuine multi-ethnic society, something that the Atlantic Coast may well provide an example of for the rest of Latin America.

Nonindigenous Organizations

The Creole population of Zelaya Sur is quite significant in the autonomy discussion (see below). But its social organization is such that there is no one internal organization that speaks for the entire community. Perhaps, the Regional Autonomy Commission of Zelaya Sur would come closest to this description. The Moravian church is deeply involved in community affairs and is one of the community's representatives as well.

One central problem in the process of autonomy is the role and representation of the large mestizo population on the coast. This population represents a numerical majority, about 65 per cent of the coastal population, living a peasant existence in small communities and in isolated homesteads. While the interests of this population are presumably represented by the Sandinista government, these local mestizos, like the Creole community, have ethnic organizations of their own. Nor are they represented well by the more developed mass organizations such as the farmworkers association (ATC) or the women's organization (AMNLAE).

Religious Organizations

The Moravian church has been an active participant in all the significant issues pertaining to the Atlantic Coast. Since almost all communities have a resident Moravian pastor, the church's experience with events since the revolution has been direct and intimate. The Rev. Norman Bent is the national director of the social action arm of the church (IDSIM) and expresses the view of the church leadership and of some of the village pastors. In his view, the church supports reconciliation, dialogue, family reunification, and peace—all with maximal community participation. After detailing the heavy-handed Sandinista effort to bring the revolution to the coast, he stated that, of late, the government has acknowledged its errors and is now acting in good faith, in a "courageous and humble" fashion. In August 1985, he felt that the autonomy process was moving faster than local people could absorb it. He felt it necessary to include all factions, including the insurgents. He also pointed out that the church is not a monolith. Village-level pastors are often sympathetic to anti-government insurgent Miskito fighters and not in agreement with a current in the church akin to the theology of liberation.

Another Moravian pastor, Fernando Colomer, a participant in the talks between the government and MISURASATA in Bogotá, felt that the present moment was full of interesting possibility. He approved of the many talks being conducted with local insurgent groups and saw as a short-term benefit the fact that the government, in accordance with these agreements, is facilitating the movement of goods to communities. In his view, when he was interviewed in January 1986 in Puerto Cabezas, the Indian movement is in some disarray. The jockeying for power he sees among the various leaders is dissipating their strength. With regard to the position of Brooklyn Rivera, he said, "Brooklyn must pick his friends carefully in order to capitalize on the present conjuncture." He, like other Moravian leaders, felt that U.S. influences in the region, especially its support of an armed opposition, "will only bring more suffering to the Miskito family."

North American Moravians support the efforts of the church to help effect peace. They also favor aid to Atlantic Coast refugees in Honduras, Costa Rica, or in other parts of Nicaragua. Most important, though, is their commitment to a solution to the conflict through dialogue among the participants as well as for the solution of the Central American conflict through international mediation efforts such as those of the Contadora group.³⁶

CEPAD, a Protestant development agency working on the coast, has been a principal conduit for international support for local projects and part of the public discussion

of autonomy and peace. Rev. Benjamín Cortés, a leader of CEPAD, has also been involved in the MISURASATA negotiations. He indicated many hopeful aspects of the present situation. He dates the change in the government's attitude from the end of 1983 and its amnesty. Now there is more "humility" on the part of the government. Since May 1985 there has been a 90 percent reduction in the number of military confrontations, and the government has withdrawn its troops from most of the communities. Further, the government has done everything "humanly possible" to help in the return to the river and in regional reconstruction. He feels that the government now accepts the legitimacy of Indian demands and understands that the Indian fighters enjoy considerable community support. The communities' support for peaceful solution favors continual dialogue with the insurgents.

The major obstacle to peace is the constant effort to raise the level of armed conflict. KISAN, through its link with UNO and the FDN, has tried to destabilize the situation, most notably by burning the bridge at Sisín, obstructing the movement of people to the river. KISAN, whose leadership Cortés describes as "corrupt," is opposed to a peaceful solution although the Honduran leadership may not be able to control its members once they are inside the country.

The other difficulty in restoring normal life and returning the refugees to their homes is not so much connected to material resources. Rather, it is the "paternalistic" attitude of the government in attending to local needs without more direct participation by local people. Cortés says there is now a need, and an opportunity, to create a plan for "holistic reconstruction" that would be done in partnership with community people. The discussions ("dialogues") now under way between various insurgents and the government are a start toward this *co-gestión*, and in this respect, CEPAD is active in trying to promote a renewal of the talks between MISURASATA and the government that broke off in May 1985. Rev. Cortés thinks that the FSLN has not exhausted its possibilities to ensure a resumption of talks. Efforts are also underway to work with coastal refugees in other countries such as sponsoring a trip to Nicaragua for a delegation that would return and report to their communities elsewhere.

All of these noncombatant organizations were quite willing and interested in participating in the autonomy process. All operate both at the political as well as the social service levels. All freely express criticisms of the government's role at the same time they continue to work with the government. At the moment, with the withdrawal from the regional autonomy commission of MISATAN, the Moravian church, and CEPAD the focus of activities connected to autonomy and peace is in the process of helping communities rebuild and return to the river, as well as in the process of dialogue that is going on on the ground in several places.

36. Wilde, Margaret D., "The East Coast of Nicaragua: Issues for Dialogue." Paper for the Board of World Mission, Moravian Church in America. June 1984.

In this fluid situation, there is much room for all participants to maneuver as well as abundant possibility for difference among the various groups. The autonomy process has provided an opportunity for indigenous and ethnic groups to question the future, and participate in it, in a more ample manner than ever before. Ethnic and cultural pride and group consciousness are becoming the legitimate basis for political participation at a national level.

Current Military Situation

An important step taken to establish conditions for peace in Zelaya Norte was the agreement signed in Mexico in April 1985 between the Nicaraguan government and MISURASATA. It committed both sides "not to initiate offensive actions" against each other. Although marred by several violent confrontations, the cease-fire was a significant beginning in a continuing process.

This agreement only bound MISURASATA and the government, but MISURA, the other, and perhaps larger, indigenous force, also made efforts to abide by the agreement. Indeed, before the international dialogue was broken off in May, the internal chief of staff of MISURA, Eduardo Pantín, initiated negotiations directly with the local representatives of the Ministry of the Interior (MINT) to sign a cease-fire in his area of control near the community of Yulo. Mediated by the local representative of the Red Cross, Dr. Eldo Lau, the agreement established territories of respective control, separate hours for each side to use the roads, and bases for continuing negotiations. According to Dr. Lau, Pantín and other members of the internal high command of MISURA, Raúl Finley and Orlando Maclean reported that their efforts had the approval of the national command of MISURA in Honduras.

Following this agreement, the government announced that the population in the resettlement camps could return to their homes on the Río Coco. The government pledged to assist with transportation and rebuilding as well as to supply the population with basic grains for ten months until it could establish cultivation in the river communities.

MISURA troops maintained undisputed control over parts of the southern littoral and plain, including the towns of Yulo and Sangilaya. They also freely moved through much of the rest of Zelaya Norte. As a result, the opportunities for breaking the cease-fire either intentionally or through accidents were numerous. Still, the two armed forces maintained a posture of relatively peaceful coexistence at least through October.

In spite of the occasional reports of violations of the basic cease-fire on both sides, there appeared to be a genuine effort to respect the agreements and to treat incidents as exceptions or mistakes rather than as tests of the power or resolve of the opposing force. Sandinista army squads were sent into villages on the Río Coco to

deactivate mines that had been placed there during the fighting. MISURA squads also deactivated their mines. Later, when cleanup brigades went to the upper Río Coco villages to cut the brush that had grown there during the past three years, one worker in the community of Santa Fé detonated a still active mine and seven workers were killed in the explosion. Even this lamentable incident, however, did not break the truce.

The top army officer in Zelaya Norte, Comandante Antenor Rosales, told us that the Sandinista army (EPS) has restricted its presence to several communities on the coast and withdrawn from many others. In fact, he said that the EPS had left one coastal community unattended precisely to allow communication between the guerrilla fighters in the country and their external military and political commanders and as a way to send their sick out. This military measure corresponded with the political distinction that held that most of the Indian groups were not *contra*. Rather, they were seen to be in support of their historical agenda and not focused on the overthrow of the government. Many people in the government stated openly that MISURASATA's demands of 1980 were legitimate and could now be responded to through negotiation. On the other hand, KISAN, at least its leadership, is seen as a *contra* group.

MISURA troops also appeared to maintain the cease-fire even though their principal negotiator, Eduardo Pantín, died days after the signing. There were reports that the MISURA leader, Steadman Fagoth, opposed the agreements and may have ordered Pantín's assassination. On the other hand, both MISURA and MISURASATA charged that the Sandinistas felt Pantín was reneging on the agreements and therefore had him killed. Dr. Lau, who examined the body and interviewed the eleven witnesses, is convinced Pantín's death was an accident in which Pantín's own gun fell from his belt as he was sitting down to the negotiating table killing him with one shot that passed through his chest and into the ceiling. In spite of Pantín's death, the leader who replaced him has continued the basic agreements. Lines of communication remain open and talks continue in the effort to extend these agreements. During the Fall of 1985, for example, a further agreement was reached with the insurgents at Yulo concerning the small ferry over the Wawa River at Wawa Boom. The ferry, crucial for all vehicular traffic going south from Puerto Cabezas, was given to MISURA fighters (followers of Pantín). They promised to keep it running, to allow traffic to pass freely, permitting government workers with food and medical attention as well as troops to move in the region. Fearful that KISAN might try to damage the ferry, the insurgents (*alzados*) asked for military help from the Sandinistas. Now, one bank is controlled by the insurgents and the other by the Sandinista army. The insurgents received new weapons and other military supplies from the army. These insurgents have begun to function more like a local self-defense force than like *contra* opponents of the government.

Another important example of a local agreement was the handing over of the bridge at Sisín to insurgent troops. The agreement, much like the one at Wawa Boom, involved the insurgents directly in the process of normalization. Here, however, the stakes were higher since all the traffic going to the river must pass over this bridge. KISAN recalled the commander, Wilfredo Martínez, who had signed the agreement, to Honduras and sent in his place "Aguila Negra," as he is known there, who burned the bridge. This was a major setback to the effort to get people back into their communities, one condemned by many leaders in the region.

The government has also continued its amnesty program for detained people—in July the local command released twelve prisoners, and while we were in Puerto Cabezas in August, one MISURA officer turned himself in, exhausted, and in need of medical treatment. In January, more prisoners were to be released.

This effective cease-fire has allowed the return to the river and the autonomy process to occur in a relatively peaceful manner. In August, we could not ascertain whether the parties to the cease-fire were also using this lull to resupply and prepare for future conflicts. Neither side, however, charged the other with such intentions, suggesting that at least a moderate amount of trust was emerging. But between August and January, with the formation of KISAN, the military threat increased. KISAN troops, identifiable by their blue uniforms, and well armed, were reported in several places. In the last week of January, KISAN was said to be massing on the Río Coco, below Waspan. There was also a report that Steadman Fagoth, also with troops, perhaps for the FDN, was threatening upriver from Waspan.

While our task force was in Zelaya Norte in August 1985, the level of tension was low. Civilians and foreign observers moved freely throughout the region and there were no reported incidents of armed confrontation. Evidence of earlier conflict—as many as eight army trucks or tanks blown up by mines—was present along the roads we traveled. In January 1986, however, the tension had returned because of the increased presence of KISAN troops and the general preoccupation that they might be targeting areas where agreements had been reached with Indian fighters.

In Zelaya Norte, although the external threat appeared to be increasing, some armed opponents of the government (*alzados*) were undergoing experiences leading to a re-evaluation of their position. Below, we present an account given by one of them.

Talk with an *Alzado*

Reynaldo Reyes, a Miskito called Comandante Ráfaga, was elected the executive chief of the intelligence division of the high command of KISAN in the September meeting.

Supportive of the intransigent posture, he was sent into Nicaragua from Honduras to renew the fighting and to collect information on the state of the return to the river. Before joining the rebels, he served in the Sandinista army, was jailed for his disagreement concerning treatment of the Miskito population, and finally escaped from jail and went to Honduras.

In January, in the Hotel Costeño in Puerto Cabezas, he spoke about the "abrupt change" he underwent while on this mission. In the villages of Saupuka, Saklin, Bismona, Kum, Bilwaskarma, and Wasla, he addressed large crowds—sometimes 1000 people—and the response was the same everywhere. Villagers expressed their desire for peace and said they would deny support to the KISAN fighters if they were opposed to negotiations with the government.

Reyes, 37, a minister of the Church of God, was impressed by the possibilities of dialogue he saw in Yulo. With an entourage of heavily armed men, he made contact with the Ministry of the Interior. This led to a trip to Managua and to several conversations with Tomás Borge, the minister of interior. Through these talks, he maintained his status of *alzado*, i.e., insurgent, and kept his arms.

These talks have been carried out in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Reyes said that dialogue means "a place to listen and to question." He said that Borge responded to his comments favorably and said that all of his demands were reasonable so long as there was no further bloodshed and that there were not "two presidents in Nicaragua." Reyes asked for two seats on the regional autonomy commission. Borge offered five.

Reyes is strongly critical of the government's autonomy plan, particularly with respect to its provision concerning land and natural resources. He, like others on the coast, believes that 80 percent of the profits of resource exploitation should be reinvested in the communities there. He supports the demilitarization of the area and the freeing of Miskito prisoners.

Reyes also spoke at length about the leadership of KISAN. Brooklyn Rivera and the future of KISAN, he said, were manipulated by the FDN. He described the maximum leadership as corrupt—intellectually and morally unfit to lead. Reyes also criticized numerous human rights abuses that the insurgents have committed. During our January visit in the Miskito barrio of El Cocal in Puerto Cabezas, he gave a talk and showed a videotape (on equipment given to him by the MINT) in which Rev. Norman Bent appeared. He intends to give this presentation in communities outside of Puerto Cabezas.

Regarding Brooklyn Rivera, Reyes contrasted his own direct experience with the people's and his awareness of their suffering to Rivera's distance from the struggle over the past years. He said, "If the eyes don't see, the heart doesn't feel" ("ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente").

Therefore, he urged Rivera to assume the leadership in direct discussions with the government. He felt that Rivera was relying too heavily on foreign advisors and was not attentive enough to conditions on the ground.

Comandante Ráfaga represents, in our view, a significant new development toward resolution of the coastal conflict. The process of dialogue, begun in Yulo in May 1985, has continued in spite of the ever present threats to peace. It indicates that the government is genuinely interested in extending the dialogue so as to deal with questions like regional self-defense, peace, and autonomy. It reflects the widespread feeling among the people of exhaustion and opposition to violence. Warfare as a means of settling differences is less tenable on the Atlantic Coast.

While Rivera gained support from sympathetic groups in Europe, Canada, and the United States, with the suspension of talks with the Nicaraguan government and the withholding of military supplies by the CIA, MISURASATA was weaker inside Nicaragua, both politically and militarily, than it had been before. Rivera's recent clandestine trip to the Atlantic Coast in January was apparently meant to measure his support among the communities and the armed insurgents, most of whom were affiliated with MISURA or KISAN.³⁷ Rivera probably asked for a suspension of the various small negotiated cease-fires to pressure the government to negotiate directly with him. According to Reyes, however, instead of uniting behind Rivera, the communities voiced the same demand for immediate peaceful negotiations that Reyes had heard the previous October.

Unfortunately, Rivera's trip was perceived not as a diplomatic mission, but rather as a provocation. Rivera was accompanied by Russell Means of the American Indian Movement, Clem Chartier of the World Council of Indigenous People, and Hank Adams of the Survival of the American Indian Association. Means has stated that he is sending 100 "warriors" to Nicaragua to support the Indian struggle. He also recently gave his view of the issue. He said, "What the MISURASATA is now doing is to look for an alternative to the autonomy issue because of the lack of substantive negotiations from the Sandinistas. And they realize the *only* alternative to autonomy is INDEPENDENCE! So, now they are putting the independence issue to the villages."³⁸ The Sandinista response to Rivera's "clandestine" trip was to attack Layasiksa, the community he was in at the time. The raid, using airplanes, reportedly caused one fatality.³⁹

At the time this report was written, the autonomy process, dialogue with the insurgents, and demilitarization, were bringing stability to most communities. They are facilitating an orderly return to the river (see next section) an intense political ferment centering on autonomy, and the beginning of an indigenous community self-defense mechanism. These processes hold great promise. They have generated pockets of negotiated peace that could well spread. But KISAN and the FDN appear ready to destabilize the situation by intensifying the conflict. MISURASATA remains distrustful of the government and it is at present unclear what role it will play in the resolution of differences on the coast. Should Rivera decide to take a more active role with the insurgents inside of Nicaragua, it would no doubt aid the movement toward peace.

The great potential for resolution, developed during the past year or so, requires that the coast remain apart from an East-West geopolitical involvement. Perhaps the most disastrous possibility would be for the U.S., in its support for the *contras*, to rekindle the military situation through its surrogates, KISAN and Steadman Fagoth.

Unfortunately, the forces of violence have made themselves felt just as this report was going to press. During the first ten days of April, it was reported that fighting had broken out on the Río Coco, between Bilwaskarma and Kum, and thousands of Miskitos, recently returned to their villages from Tasba Pri, were crossing the river into Honduras to become refugees in an apparent repetition of the events of early 1982. This time, however, more information is available and quite a different picture emerges from that of 1982.

Although William Casey, the director of the CIA., and Elliot Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, described this flight of Miskito people as the result of Sandinista atrocities, independent observers tell a completely different story. Journalists from the *Boston Globe* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and an Americas Watch observer found that "evidence was lacking of new Sandinista abuses that caused their flight." Rather, they found that "KISAN (successor to MISURA and affiliated with the Unión Nicaragüense de Oposición, UNO) had spread fear as part of a deliberate plan to evacuate the Miskitos from Nicaragua to Honduras." It was further found that, while KISAN was holding Miskitos in staging areas on the border to prepare their stories, the American Embassy in Tegucigalpa planned to fly sixty journalists to the border to record these stories. Inclement weather, however, cancelled this plan, which was described by one foreign relief official as the "worst public relations job I've ever seen."

Public opinion was prepared for this media show through reports that came from Tegucigalpa, from Roger Herman, KISAN's liaison with the American Embassy, unconfirmed, although printed, until the three observers

37. "North American Indian Delegation Goes to Nicaragua, Backs MISURASATA." *Camp Crier* (Denver, Colorado) 3:8 (December 1985). [A monthly Indian-oriented publication.]

38. *Ibid.*

39. "In Nicaragua Town, the War Intrudes." *New York Times*, Feb. 8, 1986.

mentioned above went there. What is most disturbing about this episode is the freedom with which KISAN and the American Embassy utilize the Miskitos to defame the Nicaraguan government. Extensive interviewing with refugees showed that none of them had experienced any brutality, but they had all been coerced and frightened to once again become refugees. False rumors were uncritically published in the press. In addition, during the debate over the \$100 million aid to the *contras*, further funds were earmarked for KISAN.⁴⁰

This tragic event, causing further misery for 6,000 people, suggests that the reconciliation process was working too well inside Nicaragua. The external opposition was losing in its effort to discredit the Sandinistas. So, the only response left to them was to rekindle a military situation. Disgracefully, they were aided in this effort by the United States.

VII. Return to the River

One of the demands that Brooklyn Rivera presented in the initial negotiating sessions in Mexico in December 1984 was that the Miskito and Sumo be allowed to return to the original communities from which they had been moved in 1982. Since many of these communities were located along the banks of the Río Coco, this process came to be called the "return to the river," although many communities were in dispersed areas throughout the northeast of Nicaragua.

In the early months of 1985, under the favorable conditions of a tentative cease-fire between the Miskito insurgents and the EPS, the Sandinista government began to move several small communities from their settlements in Tasba Pri back to their original lands. It appears that these communities were chosen because they were near Sandinista military establishments and could be more easily defended (or supervised) should the cease-fire break down.

The task force visited four communities, two of which had been settled for more than five months. This section will describe the general process of the return to the river that began late in the spring of 1985 when the government authorized cleanup teams from each of several villages to return to their communities and begin preparations for the rest of the community to follow. These teams were to begin clearing away the jungle growth that had rapidly taken over the living and agricultural spaces of the original communities. In preparation for the cleanup teams, both the

insurgents and the government agreed to disarm the mines they had placed in communities and roads. The government had planned to provide transportation, some construction materials and food for those returning to the river in an orderly but slow process. This assumed that the bulk of the population was to return to their communities only after the October harvest of rice and beans at Tasba Pri. MISATAN was given major responsibility for the return to the river. Its leaders were to work closely with the communities before and during the move. In this effort, MISATAN often pressured the government to respond more rapidly to the demands of the population.

In May the orderly process as planned by the government accelerated as pressure to return to the river built up within the camps at Tasba Pri and Sangilaya, and in Puerto Cabezas. Encouraged by reports from the returning clean up teams and by MISATAN organizers, some spontaneous migration began. The government did nothing to stop this movement and by the end of May it recognized that the process had taken its own course. Tomás Borge announced in a speech at the end of May that the government would do all it could to assist the process of the return, but that its resources were limited. It would seek international assistance for transportation, supplies of food, and construction material. Several private voluntary organizations expressed interest in helping in this effort. Oxfam-U.K. sent a representative there, as did a European consortium, the Project Counselling Service for Latin American Refugees.

A special Committee on the Return was formed consisting of representatives of all local organizations in cooperation with the government to facilitate the process. Government vehicles were assigned to transport people and goods to the river. In addition, private truckers were hired at high fees to assist the movement. The effort, however, was limited by the scarcity of functioning vehicles in the region; only twenty-seven large trucks were reported to be in operation when we were there. Government ministries such as MICOIN (Ministry of Commerce and Industry), MITRAN (Ministry of Transportation), and the public assistance apparatus of INSBBI (government welfare agency) were assigned responsibilities for transportation and supplies. Some financial support came from the FACS (Fundo Augusto César Sandino). Special efforts to find sufficient materials—even such small items as hammers and nails—were limited by the general scarcity of tools and supplies in Nicaragua.

Although the International Red Cross has played a crucial role in supplying nutritional programs to many of the communities in contested territory south of Puerto Cabezas, it has played a limited role in the return to the river. It accompanied one truck convoy early in the process and forced it to turn back when EPS (Sandinista army) trucks were observed in the vicinity, contrary to the agreement that the EPS would avoid contact with the

40. Americas Watch, *With the Miskitos in Honduras* (New York: Americas Watch), April 11, 1986. "Fearing Sandinistas, Indians Flee to Honduras," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 6, 1986. "A Media Event—with No Audience," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 6, 1986. "Nicaraguan Indians Move to Honduras," *Boston Globe*, April 7, 1986. "Fleeing Nicaragua's Violence," *Boston Globe*, April 20, 1986. "Exodus of Indians from Nicaragua Feared as Fighting Is Reported," *New York Times*, April 2, 1986.

returning population. The Red Cross, however, has not been asked by the government to assist in this process, and it has, therefore, followed its standard policy of not becoming involved without official invitation.

Community "Snapshots"

On August 10 and 11, the Task Force visited several communities at different stages of their return to the river. In addition to observing the Miskitos resident in Puerto Cabezas, we also went to Waspan, Bisma, Sangilaya, and briefly, to Bum Sirpi. During this voyage of more than 500 kilometers, we had a good chance to see some of the effect of the relocations, and to get an idea of the process that will occur in the general return of Miskitos to their river communities. We observed Miskitos boarding trucks with their possessions in Puerto Cabezas, the depressing first moments as they reached a devastated Waspan, and the relatively resettled communities of Bisma and Bum Sirpi. Along the route, we saw indicators of the war in destroyed vehicles and several craters in the road. In all places, we had ample opportunity to speak to people. Although there were no restrictions placed on our movements, we did have to report our whereabouts and destinations at various checkpoints in the area. We spent the night in one community, Bisma, and participated in a village assembly where the whole community discussed their problems.

Sangilaya

Sangilaya was a center of relocation in the *llano norte* region near Puerto Cabezas where residents from several surrounding communities were moved. The government said the camp was formed, for developmental reasons, to make a capital-intensive agricultural project more feasible. The project was poorly planned, however, without attention to soil quality or availability of water. It never prospered.

The government-constructed houses were in traditional style, i.e., one room and a kitchen area elevated on stilts. The materials were superior to the traditionally constructed houses we saw. The lumber was well milled and they all had new zinc roofs. The houses were neatly lined up 20-30 feet apart from each other, a cause of complaint because of the crowding.

Sangilaya is controlled by MISURA troops, some of whom we saw, uniformed and armed, but we were not able to speak to them. Nevertheless, there appears to be some government-MISURA cooperation here. Government supplies (food, medicine) were arriving there, perhaps from the government welfare agency INSBBI. We also saw government trucks helping people move their possessions back to their villages. Many houses, about one-third, were in various stages of being dismantled. We saw piles of lumber neatly

stacked next to the zinc roof sheets, waiting for trucks to move them. It was also reported to us that in Tasba Pri there is the same eagerness to return to the villages.

This keen desire to return home in spite of the expected hardships was accompanied by strong support for the cease-fire. For many people, the "return" takes priority over the autonomy discussion or has come to be thought of as autonomy itself. In Sangilaya several houses were displaying a poster, in Miskito with a picture of Eduardo Pantín and the other signers of the cease-fire.

Waspan

Connected by road with Puerto Cabezas, Waspan is the largest and most important town on the Río Coco. A commercial and governmental center, it is referred to by most people as the "capital of the Río Coco." Two members of our task force had visited Waspan before the relocations of late 1981. Most buildings were made of wood or cement block and there were many services such as banks, government offices, a health clinic, a baseball stadium, several school buildings, a Catholic church, several Moravian churches, and a grass landing strip. Honduran territory is clearly visible on the other side of the river and people freely move between both sides, even now.

The town was evacuated in 1981 and its inhabitants were just returning at the time of our visit. Everywhere the natural vegetation had overwhelmed the land. It was so overgrown with forest that it was hard to visualize the original town. All wooden buildings were badly damaged or totally destroyed. Many concrete block or brick structures, such as the secondary school, were severely damaged too. The roofless charred frame of the Catholic church, the rusted metal bleachers at the baseball field, the faded AeroNica sign, all bore witness to the terrible decline of this once-thriving river entrepôt.

There were about thirty families there who had arrived about two weeks earlier. They were living in lean-to's (*champas*) made of sheet plastic and pieces of roofing zinc. They had begun receiving government supplies including rice, maize, beans, and other materials such as rubber boots. But their move to Waspan had been done so quickly that all the supplies had not caught up with them yet.

These returnees, camped near the remains of their houses, were confronted with a reality quite different from what they imagined. Here they saw the destruction of the community. People pointed out community landmarks, such as the secondary school, that were once objects of pride and now lay in ruins. Among the squatters were some who were quite bitter toward the government. For them, the Sandinistas were the enemy and they were highly suspicious of any government plan or promise.

We heard a wide range of opinions from the recent returnees. Some expressed bitterness and hostility toward the government. One older man suggested that if he were younger he would have joined the guerrillas; others complained that the government promises of helping with the reconstruction were only partially fulfilled. Still others, while not applauding the government efforts, suggested that much was being done in the face of scarce government resources. Most returnees adopted a wait-and-see attitude. We felt they were willing to support the government again if it made reconstruction possible. At Waspan, however, the task of reconstruction seemed difficult and long.

The returnees had immediate material needs for the resettlement process. Basic tools such as machetes, hammers, nails, wood for construction, and chain saws or portable sawmills, were all of first importance. In addition, cloth for mosquito netting, canoes, and outboard motors were also immediately needed. Those returning to the river and their representatives, mainly Moravian pastors, gave major emphasis to making this return successful. The general feeling was that this process constituted a minimum test of the Sandinista willingness to participate in a peaceful and constructive end to the violence. The cooperation with transport, supply of materials to reconstruct houses, enough food until the next rice harvest, were seen as the significant elements of rapprochement.

Representatives of Nicaraguan private voluntary development agencies, CEPAD, IDSEM, and others from European groups assessed local needs. Several North American agencies have also made contacts and are in the process of providing support. The FSLN has made a donation of 30 million córdobas toward the reconstruction of the Moravian church and the purchase of a new organ in Waspan. But the most severe bottleneck in obtaining this support is the difficulty in transporting it.

Minister of the Interior Tomás Borge has promised to increase the number of planes that go to Puerto Cabezas. Materials now arrive in Puerto Cabezas, either directly by plane from Managua, overland, or by boat from Managua to Bluefields, and from there by boat to Puerto Cabezas. The logical route would be directly overland to Puerto Cabezas, but the highway from Managua is now unusable because of *contra* action. Convoys of humanitarian cargo seem to be a natural target for them. Since the *contra* burning in May 1985 of the "Bluefields Express," the boat that goes between Rama and Bluefields, an important means of supply has been curtailed. And with the burning of the bridge at Sisín in October 1985 by KISAN, another important link in regional reconstruction has been damaged.

In spite of the trauma that Waspan represented, even to us, the people were exhibiting considerable self-reliance. House lots were being cleared and house frameworks were being erected while families were temporarily in makeshift

tents. Some families had begun planting cassava, a favorite crop grown near houses. In abandoned fields, there were still some bananas and citrus fruit to be harvested. Some people spoke about crossing the river to get fruit from fields on the Honduran side. They felt that if they crossed prudently, there was minimum danger from the Honduran Army or MISURA fighters. One of the Waspan returnees had visited a nearby village whose people had just come back the past week from Tasba Pri after three years absence. The village had not been destroyed, so their job was mainly that of clearing away the overgrowth and repairing the still-standing houses. For them, the priority demand was the replacement of the livestock they used to have.

Bismona

Bismona is a small fishing community about three hours, by jeep, east of Waspan. Its land connection to Puerto Cabezas makes it a half-day trip. It is also possible to go to Puerto Cabezas by boat, through the huge Bismona lagoon, and then on the open sea. The lagoon yields considerable amounts of fish and shrimp and the nearby forests appear to have abundant game.

Along the road to Bismona we saw six burned, overturned military vehicles, victims of the fighting prior to the cease-fire. Just outside the community was a small detachment of the Sandinista army.

Bismona's houses appeared to be almost completely restored to the condition they were in in 1981, when one member of our group visited the community. In some cases, the new houses, next to the old ones, used some Perhaps this was because Bismona is not directly on the river and the danger of incursions and attacks was less. By August, the time of our visit, the inhabitants of the village had been back from Tasba Pri for over five months.

Bismona's houses appeared to be almost completely restored to the condition they were in in 1981, when one member of our group visited the community. In some cases, the new houses, next the old ones, used some makeshift materials (old zinc panels to repair walls). Some people felt that the previous houses were larger and better outfitted because of the availability of good materials. The village still lacked the large number of wooden sailing canoes needed for the fishing cooperative. The Costa Rica-based delegate for a European relief agency, Project Counselling Service for Latin American Refugees (PCS), was making arrangements to contract canoe makers from other villages to make the needed canoes.

This was one of the two pressing problems they told us about. The other problem was that of marketing the shrimp. They said that, under normal conditions, it was possible to obtain 5,000 pounds of shrimp in one night's fishing. But without a dependable means of transporting

them to Puerto Cabezas and some assurance of buyers, this resource was useless. Another related question was a refrigerated storage facility to hold the shrimp and fish until a truck or boat would come. The government had supplied one prior to the move, but it was now destroyed.

We observed and participated in a village assembly held in the community chapel. The assembly was called to reach agreement about the PCS role in providing canoes. Opinions were heard from the Moravian pastor (a Miskito, resident of the village), several leaders (not identified as elders), the lieutenant from the local army detachment, the CEPAD representative, and the PCS worker. The villagers were extremely articulate in their discussion of the various factors that were necessary to their economic development: transport, canoes, storage, and marketing. The tools for fishing, canoes, line, etc., seemed easily arranged. The other bottlenecks were not a matter of the present turmoil, but rather of the traditional state of underdevelopment of the coast.

The presence of the EPS officer did not appear to deter anyone from speaking. His comments at the meeting were intended to urge cooperation between the EPS and the community. He noted that they had already built several bridges together. The pastor also praised the support of the EPS for community projects. The most severe criticism at the meeting was directed against the government for its slowness in meeting community needs.

In general, there was still a wait-and-see attitude toward the government, much as in Waspan, but in Bismona the general level of well being seemed quite high. Along with the villagers we feasted on shrimp, fish, oranges, venison, corn bread, cassava, good water, and coconuts. This abundance is owed to the favored ecological position of the community. But now, after three years of turmoil and uprootedness, they are once again facing the perennial problems of underdevelopment. As they said, for them autonomy meant an end to the fighting and greater support from the government for the development effort that had barely begun when fighting engulfed their region.

While these community "snapshots" are sketchy evidence at best, they perhaps serve to place the "return to the river" into a suggestive progression, from the initial phases in the camps, through the dislocation and shock of the first days back at the river to a suggestion of a return to some sort of normality after five months of rebuilding. Of course, restoring a small fishing village like Bismona is an easier task than rebuilding a more complex commercial center like Waspan. Nonetheless, it does provide some grounds for optimism that the tasks of rebuilding can be done and can give way to the longer-range tasks of development.

Reconstruction Plans

The effort to rebuild is shared by various government agencies, local development groups, and foreign private voluntary agencies contributing money to help in this effort. The Special Projects office of the government house in Puerto Cabezas, headed by Marcelo Zúñiga, coordinates these efforts. In general, foreign agencies contribute the cash needed to buy materials that are not available in the country such as hardware (tools, zinc roofing material), motors, vehicles, and spare parts. Locally, the effort to install adequate medical facilities is handled by the Ministry of Health (MINSA). At present, there are plans to rebuild the Moravian hospital at Bilwaskarma that was destroyed by the insurgents. A medical center is planned for Waspan and a small hospital at Tronquera. In addition, mobile medical units are needed to follow the population back to their villages. These would be canoes outfitted with necessary equipment for emergency surgery, first aid, and medicine to care for patients in their villages. Dr. Eldo Lau, the MINSA director for Zelaya Norte, is in charge of this effort.

CEPAD and IDSIM have coordinated their efforts. CEPAD is focusing on the river above Waspan and IDSIM has projects in ten communities on the river below Waspan. CEPAD is concentrating on helping communities resettle and supplying them with the most urgently needed items, some of which are supplied by PCS. IDSIM has drawn up a plan for the communities in its zone.

As explained by René Enríquez, the director of IDSIM, the first stage is to reconstruct housing. This is being done in conjunction with the Ministry of Housing (MINVA) which is supplying training in the use of tools and the efficient use of materials. Zinc for roofs is also supplied. The Ministry of Education (MED) has drawn up construction plans for schools to be built by people in the villages. With contributions from Holland (ICCO), two clinics are being built to serve the communities in this zone, between Bilwaskarma and Kum. This activity is supervised by the MINSA.

After the initial settling-in has finished, the next stage involves restarting agriculture and animal husbandry. While this is taking place, the plan calls for supplying families with basic foodstuffs for one year. This consists of items such as rice, rice seed, maize, beans. Also included are household implements such as plates and cooking utensils. Banana cuttings are supplied to each community as well as ten cows to begin their herds. These communities have had experience in cooperatives and this structure will continue. Two trucks, one of 8- and the other of 1.5-ton capacity will be shared by the ten communities, at the end of one year the 8-ton truck will go to Kum and the other to Bilwaskarma. The area under discussion has been victimized by KISAN and the future of this particular project is in jeopardy.

In addition to these focused projects, the Committee of the Return (Comité de Retorno) has been functioning for the past nine months to facilitate the movement of people and goods toward the river. It also acts as a conduit for materials that arrive from the government or through international contributions. MISATAN is another participant in the reconstruction process. It has received funding from Oxfam-U.K. and Oxfam-Canada as well as from the government. Perhaps MISATAN's withdrawal from the regional autonomy commission and its more intense involvement reflects its judgment that the return and reconstruction are currently more important than shaping the autonomy statute.

The insurgent groups are important in this process as passive or negative participants. Thus far, through negotiations on the ground, the return has had the agreement of most of the insurgents. Since the movement of people is not done with the EPS, the truck convoys are vulnerable to attack. Incidents of attacks (threats and beatings) by MISURA were reported by Rev. Fernando Colomer of IDSIM, in Saklin, Waspan, Saupuka, and Bilwaskarma during the last six months. But, in general, such incidents can be settled through negotiated agreements. With the burning of the bridge at Sisín, however, it appears that a successful return of Miskitos to their river communities is threatening, particularly to KISAN.

The government's support for the return conflicts with the insurgent account of the imprisonment of the Miskito people in "concentration camps." Further, the political costs of attacking newly settled Miskito communities are apparently too high. So, impeding the return, or hindering the support of returned communities, is one tactic being used. The tactic of attacking the return and reconstruction process is called part of a "reactionary attitude" by Enriquez.

While the autonomy process, with its questions of participation and land rights, was of some interest for the returning Miskitos, the prime issue was the immediate material possibilities of rebuilding under peaceful conditions. People were anticipating this support—hammers, nails, mosquito netting, outboard motors—as the acid test of Sandinista good faith. For their part, the Sandinistas, the military, the political apparatus, and other parts of the bureaucracy, were trying to supply these resources, along with transportation and food supplies. On the other hand, it was also clear that the return to the river alone would not be a "quick fix" to restore Miskito support for the national government. Although there was evidence of gratitude for the change in policy and many expressed a "wait-and-see" attitude, strong suspicions remain.

If the return is successfully accomplished, if the Sandinista promises are paid off, and if the autonomy

statutes are developed to general satisfaction, then the Miskito population will have a chance, perhaps for the first time, to attempt to solve the perennial problems of underdevelopment and powerlessness, under decent conditions.

VIII. Zelaya Sur

Zelaya Sur, or Special Zone 2, shares some of the special quality of Zelaya Norte, but has its own historical and cultural traditions. The Zelaya Sur population may be divided into four rather clearly defined strata. A peasantry, living along the major rivers, is mostly mestizo, many of whom have migrated from the Pacific side of the country. They tend to live in dispersed homesteads and depend on a mixture of economic activities, including farming, fishing, and wage labor. The Creole population constitutes the working class of Bluefields. They are the fishermen, stevedores, and seamen. There are many Creoles, too, who work in craft production that includes carpentry, fishing ("artisanal"), and boatbuilding. The fourth category is a group that carries out the administrative, commercial, and transport functions of this region. They include many professionals, often educated abroad, many of them Afro-Americans, or Creoles, but they include mestizos as well. This stratum is largely concentrated in the city of Bluefields.

The city of Bluefields is the most important community in the southern part of the department of Zelaya, Special Zone 2. Bluefields is on a large bay, and maritime activities have always been of utmost importance. Its population has been dedicated to merchant shipping, offshore fishing, lagoon fishing and oystering, and to the many associated commercial offshoots of these activities. It is a city that has prospered from its trade with ports in the U.S. and other countries. Before 1979 its fortunes had declined considerably and, in the present moment, the questions of autonomy, peace, and regional representation are as pressing for its future as they are for all the other populations of the Atlantic Coast. The municipality of Bluefields, including the city and its environs, is largely Creole in ethnic composition (over 56 percent) with a small number of other groups (Miskito, Sumu, Rama, and Garifona). Mestizos tend to live in more rural settings. As a region, this may be broadly characterized as a Creole city and a mestizo hinterland.⁴¹

Bluefields, with its English-speaking population, has evolved a very different style of life from the rest of Nicaragua. During the period of foreign interests in the Atlantic Coast, American, Honduran, and Colombian ships frequently called at the port. People from Bluefields

41. CIERA-MIDINRA, "Diagnóstico Integral Zona Especial II, Documento Base, Tomo II" (Managua:CIERA-MIDINRA, July 1984).

visited Costa Rica and Honduras. Working as crew on merchant ships was a way of life for many men, and it is not uncommon for a man to have been away working for 25 or 30 years and to return to Bluefields to retire with savings earned on the job. In fact, many Bluefields people have migrated and their families at home receive remittances, much as in other Caribbean countries. Perhaps 25 per cent of the Creole community lives outside of the country. During the last three years, many young men have gone to Costa Rica, particularly to Puerto Limón, often to escape the draft.

Prior to the revolution, in the 1970s, employment was available at high wages and there were dollars to be made. Turtles, lobsters, shrimp, and oysters were sold for cash to boats that came for the purpose. In the stores of Bluefields people bought Corn Flakes, Quaker Oats, Pet Milk, Carnation Milk, Del Monte canned goods, and many other United States products that came on the ships. One of the constant complaints heard now is that the selection of consumer goods is considerably smaller than before. With the added restrictions caused by the *contra* war, these shortages are perceived as even more acute. The government is making an effort to satisfy this demand, but cannot possibly match the previous times of plenty.

As in the North, there was little insurrectionary activity in Zelaya Sur during the struggle against Somoza. In fact, many people in Bluefields only learned of Somoza's defeat from Costa Rican television reports. As in Zelaya Norte, the initial efforts of the Sandinistas to establish their presence were not warmly received here either. The Cuban teachers who came to help organize the literacy crusade became the object of serious demonstrations in 1980. The perceived reduction in the level of living was blamed on the revolution. While not formulated in as clear a manner as in Zelaya Norte, there nevertheless was a growing tension and hostility toward the Sandinistas in Zelaya Sur.

Bluefields, like many other Nicaraguan communities, had little experience in representing itself on a national level before the revolution. The representation of the population of southern Zelaya did not grow out of ethnic organizations like MISURASATA in the north, since no equivalent exists there. The various churches, most importantly the Moravian, as well as business groups and labor unions, constitute the most enduring and stable organizations.

When the autonomy process began, a regional commission, with about thirty members, was created for Zelaya Sur. As in the case of Zelaya Norte, there was local representation on the national commission and on the regional commission there were a mix of Creoles and mestizos. One member told us that anyone could participate since entry into the commission was simply a matter of attending meetings.

The autonomy draft statute suggests the possibility of creating separate "autonomous regions," presumably one for the north and another for the south. In the south, there is support for two zones and considerable thought has been given to establishing a boundary between the north and the south. The southern commission places the northern limit of their zone at La Cruz del Río Grande de Matagalpa, a major river north of Bluefields. It also wishes to expand the zone westward to include considerable territory in the departments of Boaco and Chontales to provide a hinterland for Bluefields. This new zone, with the agriculture necessary to feed the city, as well as hardwood forests that could be part of an export lumber industry, would be economically viable. It would also contain the river port of Rama that flows to Bluefields. All the elements for balanced development would be in place: food, export material, transport routes, and access to foreign trade. With the deep water port currently being constructed at El Bluff, Bluefields would be the most important port in the country. One community leader expressed the reason for this thinking this way: "We have 95 percent of the fisheries here but only 5 percent of the decision-making."

In addition to the desire for a separate and expanded economic region, there are indications that the southern commission would prefer a separate political autonomy rather than being included in a single autonomous region with the north. While northern sentiment leans toward one assembly for the entire coast, arguing that it would have more weight nationally than a series of regional assemblies, the south prefers two, citing the economic integrity and greater ease of administration. Behind this, there seems to be some wariness that a single assembly might be dominated by Miskito interests.

Despite these differences, there is a basic agreement with the north on cultural issues. A bilingual, bicultural education program would be part of autonomy for the whole coast. One of the difficulties concerns the status of Creole as either a genuine language or a variant of English. Some educated sectors of Bluefields feel that Creole is merely an English dialect, or "poorly spoken" English, and the language of instruction for bilingual programs should be standard English. Others feel that many children speak Creole as their only language, and if they receive instruction in standard English it will be a foreign language for them. This issue is far from resolved at the moment but is being seriously addressed. In January 1986, workshops organized by North American specialists in bilingual education were held in Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields. As a result, in Bluefields, the teachers themselves are developing the skills to address this question.

Given the concentration of the population in Bluefields compared to the more dispersed north, the mechanism for the autonomy's *consulta* has been through door-to-door canvassing rather than community assemblies. A group of

promoters were trained to initiate conversations with people after first leaving the draft autonomy document with each family. In August, this door-to-door technique was just beginning. By January, however, the door-to-door *consulta* was complete and the results were being tabulated.

Southern Zelaya has seen less military activity than the north. Troops from MISURASATA and ARDE (Edén Pastora's Democratic Revolutionary Alliance) have operated along the San Juan River that separates Nicaragua from Costa Rica. Pastora, however, concentrated his forces on the Pacific side, while MISURASATA, focusing on the Atlantic side, concentrated its operations north of Bluefields. While we were there, there were unconfirmed reports that the FDN, usually only active on the Pacific side, had begun attacks in southern Zelaya. Bluefields was relatively free from military pressure until it was attacked by MISURASATA in May 1985 and about twenty attackers were killed.

A little-known group called the Southern Indigenous Creole Community (SICC), now allied to KISAN, has been fighting the Sandinista army, but it appears to be extremely small and seems to enjoy little support. The principal of the Moravian School, Faran Dometz, told us, "SICC is sick."

Southern Zelaya, because of its different background, has reacted to autonomy in a distinct manner from the north. In Bluefields, the major concerns were centered on the economic development of the new zone and the importance of acquiring the political characteristics of the new autonomous region. Given the ethnic composition, mostly Creole and mestizo, with few indigenous elements, the questions of indigenous "nationhood" were not salient.

Southern Zelaya, especially Bluefields, has historically functioned like a free port, open to the Caribbean. Although this region has contributed several important members of the Sandinista government, in general people seemed to be distant from the revolution, and the fervor, seen in the Pacific part of Nicaragua, is reduced here. Autonomy in southern Zelaya, both the process and the outcome, must reflect this condition.

IX. Conclusions

The situation we observed in August and the subsequent follow-up we have done suggest that the autonomy process is in flux with no clear and determined conclusion in sight. It is, however, one of the more optimistic processes among the many conflictual issues that Nicaragua currently faces. It is the only area of conflict in which both insurgents and the government have established an enduring cease-fire and the basis for a negotiated redress of grievances. Both sides appear willing to take risks to achieve peace and to establish a unique settlement to satisfy indigenous aspirations for rights, power, and autonomy within the Nicaraguan state.

The conflict itself would not be easy to resolve in the best of circumstances. A long history of mistrust, misunderstanding, and malign neglect characterize the history of relations between the Atlantic coast and the national governments of the Pacific side. The Sandinistas inherited this situation when they came to power in 1979. The already existing process of development on the coast along with the Sandinista enthusiasm for integrating their "brothers" into the Revolution only exaggerated the misunderstandings and provoked even greater resistance to what was perceived as a threat to the unique culture and social heritage of the indigenous and Creole peoples. The Sandinista government was as insensitive to this situation as most other governments have been.

This conflict was complicated, however, by the immediate threat to Nicaragua posed by military units created, trained, and financed by the U.S. The external conflict created a context in which Miskito demands for self-determination were seen by the Sandinistas as separatist and related to U.S. efforts to overthrow the government by arming indigenous insurgents and by attempting to turn world opinion against the Sandinistas through false accusations of "genocide." This tense context heightened the internal conflict and contributed to the relocation to Tasba Pri on the one hand, and the growing insurgency on the other.

After three years, both the resettlement policy of the government and the violent struggle of the indigenous forces failed to achieve a lasting settlement. Both sides have taken steps toward a peaceful resolution of the resettlement and the insurgency. The external negotiations between MISURASATA and the government and the internal cease-fire arrangements with MISURA'S Eduardo Pantón and other armed opponents of the government set the basis for the return to the river, all of which reduced the tension in the region. The autonomy process, when ratified within the new constitution, could become the legal guarantee of the satisfaction of the historic grievances of the coastal peoples. But the cease-fire must last and the external negotiation must become a part of the internal autonomy discussion in order for this process to succeed.

Since the breakdown of talks with MISURASATA, the government has successfully engaged Indian insurgents to sign small, territorially limited agreements. This has transformed the military dimension into a political one and has legitimized the insurgents as a self-defense force in protection of their communities. It is within this context that fundamental aspects of autonomy are being discussed. These agreements are enabling the autonomy process to function even better.

The risks are obviously great for both sides. The MISURASATA negotiators are afraid that the government is manipulating its autonomy process only to neutralize the Atlantic coast in order to more easily fight the *contras* on the Pacific side. For their part, the Sandinistas fear that the

return to the river, and the handing over of strategic points to the insurgents, could become a new base of support for insurgency encouraged by "humanitarian" or more lethal aid from the U.S. But these efforts at negotiation carry indications of good faith as well. MISURASATA's willingness to negotiate alienates it from the more intransigent elements of the insurgents while the return to the river, a security nightmare itself, recognizes the importance to the Miskito and Sumo of their communities.

Despite these risks, the alternatives to achieving peace and autonomy will be disastrous for both sides. While we were there, all the Miskitos we spoke to were opposed to the renewal of the fighting. Many resist further identification with and dependence on the mestizo-dominated FDN and the U.S. and see some kind of bargain with the Sandinistas as the best available alternative—better than anything even a successful counterrevolution could offer. Indigenous people have less to gain from an overthrow of the Sandinistas than from a successful negotiation with them.

For the Sandinistas, the alternative to a genuine autonomy statute is a return to the costly, military stalemate, implying a diversion of resources that are needed for other, more useful, projects.

As was pointed out in the LASA report on the November 1984 Nicaraguan elections, there is great potential for internal compromise and settlement among contending forces in Nicaragua. It is the outside forces, in particular the U.S. government efforts to support the *contra* war, that make compromise more difficult. In this case, by encouraging insurgency rather than negotiations and autonomy, the U.S. may be sacrificing the human rights of the very people whose cause it has publicly adopted. Equally significant, it may undermine the possibility of a negotiated settlement of the historical conflict between the Miskitos and the Nicaraguan nation-state, a settlement that could provide a model for the resolution of such conflicts in other Latin American countries.

X. Epilogue

By the end of summer 1986, most of the elements that will decide the future of the Atlantic Coast are in play. The events of Semana Santa on the Río Coco are now much clearer and suggest the nature of KISAN strategy; there is further clarification about autonomy; the U.S. Senate has approved \$100 million in aid to the *contras*. The revised approach to the Atlantic Coast adopted by the Sandinista government and the financing of war by the United States are on a direct collision course. The future will decide whether autonomy and peace, or counterrevolution will prevail.

The autonomy process merits continuing attention, precisely for its implications for all multiethnic societies. The future will require creative responses to the endemic tension between indigenous peoples and nation-states. In Nicaragua there is much left to be resolved. The autonomy process is an effort to develop a democratic solution to these problems. We observed an emerging tension between the Miskito-dominated north coast and the Creole-dominated south. There was also the unresolved problem of large numbers of mestizos who constitute a majority of the population and who are widely distributed throughout the region. The interests of Creoles and mestizos as non-indigenous ethnic groups are clearly different from those of the Miskitos, Sumus, and Ramas.

Among the indigenous groups, too, there appears to be a differentiation of interests along with more intense group identity. The autonomy process itself is fomenting consciousness of ethnic and indigenous identity. Within the present outlines of autonomy, multiple identities will set the stage for self-rule. That is, within the regional assembly, representatives will have to juggle interests that reflect their identities as members of ethnic groups, as coastal people, and as citizens of Nicaragua. The autonomy process, then, will have to develop clear and creative mechanisms for defining separate ethnic rights to language, culture, land, and natural resources as well as forms of representation in an autonomous legislative body that can satisfy and negotiate the various constituent needs.

The most challenging task, of course, will be to define the scope of autonomous rights and powers vis-à-vis the nation-state. As we have seen, these areas are currently only vaguely defined, with a considerable distance between the Sandinista government's proposals and those of Brooklyn Rivera. The internal autonomy process also has only begun to seek a definition of the scope of separate rights and powers. The challenge of peace and autonomy is yet to be achieved, but this unusual process holds hope for a unique resolution of the historical conflicts. Indeed, as one astute observer of Nicaragua has reflected, it could, and should, be the basis for a "second Nicaraguan revolution."

About half of the 8,000-10,000 people who crossed the Río Coco into Honduras in late March and early April of this year have already returned to their communities on the river. The size and swiftness of the return migration suggest that people did not flee in such spontaneous terror as was suggested by the State Department in its June 1986 publication, "Dispossessed." In July we interviewed Miskitos awaiting repatriation through the United Nations (in León, Nicaragua). According to them, their real fear prior to going to Honduras was due more to what they had been told by KISAN than to violence done them by the EPS.

Most people we spoke with did not see or hear any fighting, and those who heard sounds of fighting saw no casualties. Rather than seek permanent refugee status in Honduras, involving a move further into Honduran territory, these people opted to return, even though it meant leaving just at the moment of the bean harvest, which will make it difficult to obtain food. Some of those interviewed said they were "kidnapped" by KISAN and were bitter about the way they had been used. Neither the State Department's account of this as a Sandinista "attack," nor its comment that this "signaled an end to an uneasy truce between Miskitos and the government," is true.

Also this past summer, an International Symposium on State, Autonomy, and Indian Rights was held in Managua. Participants included indigenous people from North and South America, social scientists, and many organizations that work on behalf of indigenous people. The workshops made it clear that, while the Nicaraguan government's autonomy proposal was far from a perfect response to indigenous and ethnic aspirations, it represented an important step forward in comparison with other countries of the Americas.

The *anteproyecto* (draft) autonomy statute prepared by the southern commission was presented to the plenary session. The section on land tenure presented a variety of tenurial forms including one called "autonomous regional lands." This indicates that after the formation of an autonomous regional government, those lands not owned by communities, nor by any of the other entities specified such as individuals or companies, would be under the jurisdiction of the regional government. The nature of the regional government, chosen by elections, would reflect the priorities of the inhabitants of the zone in cultural, political and economic terms. This is a better solution than the 1981 language about "state land" (cf. chap. 3, "The Land Issue").

Northern Zelaya has not yet produced an autonomy draft, reflecting continued serious problems there. In part this failure is caused by the constant military threat, making it difficult to hold discussions in the communities; but it also reflects the lack of consensus. In Northern Zelaya, the Moravian leadership, as well as other Protestant groups working there, seem to be intensifying their criticism of the government. They have apparently sought to reduce their support for communities and to offer their assistance programs in such a way that they are detached from the government.

Community members, especially in the north, feel great pressure: on the one hand from the KISAN fighters to oppose the government, and on the other from the government, urging them to return to their communities and continue the process of rebuilding. The KISAN faction that is engaged in dialogue with the government (*pro Paz*) has also

become a presence in many communities to encourage people to seek peace. Miskitos of Zelaya Norte, with the accumulated experience of the past six years, must now decide where their future lies.

The tension on the coast was enormously heightened with the U.S. Senate's passage of \$100 million in military and economic aid to the *contras*. For Zelaya Norte, it can only mean increased military activities by KISAN in coordination with the FDN, and now with overt CIA direction. They will probably attempt to burn bridges, evacuate communities, and attack the development infrastructure as they have in the past. They will be further aided in this by the military airfield built by the United States across the border in Honduras.

The Congressional appropriation for the *contras* includes funds for MISURASATA, and jockeying for this money has begun. Brooklyn Rivera went to Honduras in July and held talks in the Mosquitia. He was poorly received by the KISAN leadership and denied access to the Miskito population of Honduras as well as excluded from the decision-making role.⁴² Journalistic sources state that his goal is to command a military front there, but he has not been able to achieve that. It is believed that MISURASATA will accept part of the \$100 million *contra* fund, even if it means a significant change in its position. However MISURASATA has been critical of KISAN and UNO (especially Adolfo Caldero), and has had touchy relations with the U.S. State Department.⁴³

The Sandinista security preparations involve both a greater military presence and solicitation of aid from the communities in their own self-defense. Local officials said that community people are more determined now to keep out any FDN or KISAN fighters. As evidence, officials cite the recovery of a large arms cache with help from the community. The most effective way to repel these increased military activities would be through a combination of government and community, but that approach requires the government presence to be seen as a help rather than an intrusion.

United States support for the *contras* maintains a high level of tension, prolongs violence, and postpones plans for peaceful reconstruction. Continuing violence on the Atlantic Coast will have the doubly unfortunate effect of hurting coastal villagers and setting back for an indefinite period the rightful aspirations of indigenous people and communities.

42. "Nicaragua Indians Fail to Heal Split," *New York Times*, July 5, 1986.

43. In a letter to Secretary of State George Shultz, March 7, 1986, Brooklyn Rivera said: "Accordingly we must exercise extreme care in avoiding even the appearance that we may be an ally or tool of those forces [UNO]. If we are tainted by them, our international credibility and our struggle for Indian liberation will be badly damaged."

Interviewees

The following is a list of 51 people we interviewed as part of our study. We had, at the very least, a lengthy conversation, and in many cases, several, with each interviewee. We indicate each person's primary affiliation for purposes of identification.

CIDCA

Galio Gurdian, director, member, National Autonomy Commission
 Charles Hale, researcher, CIDCA, Bluefields
 Dr. Susan Norwood, researcher, linguistics, CIDCA, Puerto Cabezas
 Miguel Gray, researcher, CIDCA, Bluefields
 Antonio Zurita, researcher, CIDCA, Puerto Cabezas
 Judy Butler, researcher, CIDCA, Managua

Autonomy Commission Members

Ray Hooker, Federal deputy, and
 Zelaya Sur, coordinator, Northern and Southern Regional Autonomy Commissions
 Hazel Lau, Federal deputy, Zelaya Norte
 Manuel Ortega, National Autonomy Commission
 Orlando Nuñez, National Autonomy Commission
 Armando Rojas, coordinator, Regional Autonomy Commission, Puerto Cabezas
 Marcelo Zúñiga, Regional Autonomy Commission, Puerto Cabezas
 Dorotea Wilson, Regional Autonomy Commission, Puerto Cabezas
 Leonel Pantín, Regional Autonomy Commission, Puerto Cabezas
 Bobby Holmes, Regional Autonomy Commission, Puerto Cabezas
 Johnny Hodgson, coordinator, Regional Autonomy Commission, Bluefields
 Yolanda Campbell, Regional Autonomy Commission, Bluefields
 Alfredo Arana, Regional Autonomy Commission, Bluefields

Indigenous Organizations

Brooklyn Rivera, director, MISURASATA
 Armstrong Wiggins, MISURASATA, Indian Law Resource Center
 Norman Campbell, MISURASATA, Miami
 Rufino Lucas, legal affairs director, MISATAN
 Murphy Almandariz, SUKAWALA, Sumo organization
 Ronas Dolores, SUKAWALA
 Reynaldo Reyes, executive chief, G-2, KISAN

Moravian Church Leaders

Rev. Andy Shogreen, Superintendent, Moravian Church, Puerto Cabezas
 Rev. Norman Bent, president, IDSIM
 René Enríquez, director, IDSIM, Puerto Cabezas
 Rev. Fernando Colomer, director, Refugee Program
 Rev. Rafael Dixon, pastor
 Prof. Faran Dometz, principal, Moravian School, Bluefields

Development Workers

Lotte Lauper, International Committee of the Red Cross, Puerto Cabezas
 Dr. Eldo Lau, director, Nicaraguan Red Cross, Ministry of Health, Puerto Cabezas
 Rev. Benjamín Cortés, CEPAD, Managua
 Evanor Coleman, CEPAD, Puerto Cabezas
 Ronald Brooks, head, Bilingual Education Program, Bluefields
 Gordon Hutchison, Project Counselling Service for Latin American Refugees

Military and Government Personnel

Dr. Mirna Cunningham, Minister of Government, Puerto Cabezas
 Comandante Antenor Rosales, military commander, Zelaya Norte
 Lt. Cesar Paíz, Ministry of Interior, Division of State Security
 Mirna Taylor, public relations, Government House

Researchers

Xavier Gorostiaga, S.J., director, INIES, Managua
 Amilcar Turcios, INIES
 Dr. Collette Craig, linguist, University of Oregon
 Phillipe Bourgois, anthropologist
 Susan Meiselas, photojournalist

Other

Michael Joyce, political officer, U.S. Embassy, Managua
 Steve Tullberg, Indian Law Resource Center, Washington
 Ted MacDonald, Cultural Survival, Cambridge, Mass.
 Daniel Martínez, journalist, *Barricada*
 Gilbert Watson, resident, Puerto Cabezas, former lumber company manager

We also interviewed about 30 unidentified people in Waspan, 25 in Bisma, 5 in Sangilaya, 30 in Puerto Cabezas, and 15 in Bluefields.