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## **US Denies Visa To Dora Maria Tellez, Nicaraguan Hero And Scholar**

*by LADB Staff*

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Academics and legal scholars were flabbergasted when Nicaraguan Dora Maria Tellez, president of the Movimiento de Renovacion Sandinista (MRS), announced in February that the US had denied her a visa for alleged terrorist activities. Tellez had been invited to teach at Harvard Divinity School on religion and society this spring.

She told reporters in Nicaragua, "The Department of State has decided to deny me the visa, which, it seems to me, is fully their right to do. But they have done it alleging terrorist activities, and that, for me, is totally unacceptable." A Harvard spokesperson said the university was "very disappointed."

Dora Maria Tellez first came to world prominence as Comandante 2 in the 1978 Sandinista seizure of the Palacio Nacional, the defining moment in the overthrow of Anastasio Somoza, the US-supported dictator of Nicaragua. She left her country as part of the negotiations that ended a two-day standoff during which the Sandinistas held 2,000 government officials captive. Tellez returned to lead the brigade that took Leon, the first city to fall to the rebel movement. She had been a medical student before the liberation of Nicaragua and became minister of health in the first elected Sandinista administration.

Now a historian, Tellez last year was appointed the Robert F. Kennedy visiting professor in Latin American studies at Harvard Divinity School and the Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies. It was in that capacity that she was to begin teaching.

State Department spokesman Lou Finton confirmed that Tellez had been denied a visa under a provision making those involved in "terrorist acts" ineligible, but he would not, saying he could not, give specific reasons. Tellez said in Managua she had been in the US many times before, at conferences, on holidays, and on official business.

### ***A threat to her safety and personal integrity***

In an email to university newspaper The Harvard Crimson, Tellez said, "In order to deny the visa, they have described me within the section of the Immigration and Nationality Act that typifies terrorist activities. I think it constitutes a violation to my human rights and a threat to my safety and personal integrity." The newspaper said it made repeated requests to the State Department for comment, all of which went unanswered.

Elsewhere at Harvard, John H. Coatsworth, Gutman professor of Latin American affairs and Rockefeller Center director, commented, "It's just another cost we're all paying for the restrictions

on international travel to the United States under the Patriot Act." Of Tellez, Coatsworth noted, "She has a remarkable background as a social activist as well as a historian." Tellez would, according to the *Crimson*, have taught two courses: *From Revolution to Hope: Nicaragua and the Sandinista Aftermath*, and a seminar, *Caribbean Identity, Race, and Ethnicity*.

In Nicaragua, Tellez is researching the history of coffee in the country at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), continuing as president of MRS (see *NotiCen*, 2001-09-06), and preparing for a 2006 congressional run. Harvard did not get directly involved in Tellez's case because, according to Kevin Casey, the university's director of federal and state relations, the visa she had been denied was not to teach at Harvard but to study English at University of San Diego, which she intended to do just before starting the Harvard teaching assignment.

Most recently in Nicaragua, as leader of the MRS, Tellez has come out strongly against the Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) for naming Daniel Ortega as its presidential candidate in the 2006 election. In late February and early March, Tellez strongly advocated a primary election to decide a candidate and criticized the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) for giving the FSLN excessive authority over campaigning. The ACLU has filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request seeking records on the use of the USA Patriot Act to deny foreign scholars entry into the US, and legal Web sites have called attention to the government's playing politics with visas.

The Web site Findlaw.com says this is nothing new. "The list of foreign writers, artists, and intellectuals who, at one time or another, have been denied entry into the United States on ideological grounds is a long one," says the site.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the government barred anyone associated with the Communist Party. But in the 1980s and 1990s, the government adopted a "free trade in ideas" policy, putting an end to the use of visas to bar scholars because of their views. The Patriot Act appears to have put an end to that policy.

The ACLU request focuses on Section 411 of the act, which allows barring scholars if, in the government's opinion, they have "used their position of prominence to endorse or espouse terrorist activity, or to persuade others to support terrorist activity." Tellez as much a terrorist as George Washington As the government remains silent on Tellez's exclusion, academics and writers have attacked the decision, coming as it does at a time when US President George W. Bush has nominated as his intelligence chief John Negroponte, who is associated with the "dirty war" against the Sandinistas.

Gioconda Belli, a Nicaraguan writer and former Sandinista now living in the US, called the decision "absurd." Belli said, "Dora Maria is an outstanding woman who fought against a dictatorship. If fighting against tyranny is terrorism, how does the United States justify the invasion of Iraq? It is an insult." Nicaraguan sociologist Andres Perez Baltodano, who now lives in Canada, described the taking of the Palacio Nacional as a heroic act leading to the overthrow of a dictator. "Dora Maria is as much a terrorist as George Washington," he said.

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