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Nicaragua: Landmine Elimination Brings Rare Global Praise

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Nicaragua drew a rare pat on the back from the international community last month when it declared itself free of the nearly 180,000 landmines left scattered about after the country's bloody contra war (1981-1990).

"Nicaragua has fulfilled its commitments for the elimination of all its landmines on its national territory...before May 1, 2010, that is to say, the deadline fixed," chief army engineer Spiro Bassi announced at a June 18 meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, of the Ottawa Convention, an international anti-landmine treaty that Nicaragua signed in 1997.

The effort took 21 years, cost a reported US$81 million, and concluded April 13 with the destruction of the last mine, the Nicaraguan delegation explained. The Nicaraguan Army also destroyed 135,000 stockpiled mines. Through the years, errant mines killed 87 civilians and injured 1,147. In addition, six military personnel died while trying to decommission the leftover explosives.

"This is a key event," said Susan Eckey, the Ottawa Convention's Norwegian chair. "A region that was completely filled with landmines is now safe again. We congratulate Nicaragua for having finished its demining operations."

In Canada, where the treaty was originally drafted, Minister of State of Foreign Affairs Peter Kent called Nicaragua's successful demining program "a remarkable achievement," while the Organization of American States (OAS) released a statement calling the demining effort "a huge accomplishment that until recently seemed almost impossible."

Kudos for now, but questions remain

The widespread praise is well-deserved in this case, particularly since Nicaragua managed to maintain its demining policy intact despite two decades of successive government changes. But the admiration is also a real rarity for the administration of President Daniel Ortega, of the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN), whose policies at home and choices abroad tend to attract more worried looks than lauds from foreign observers.

Of particular concern is an ongoing political crisis that appears to be worsening with each year of Ortega's presidency. Elected (for the second time) in 2006 with just 38% of the vote (see NotiCen, November 09, 2006), Ortega has since orchestrated a series of bold power plays that in recent months provoked a stalemate in the unicameral Asamblea Nacional (AN) and a personnel predicament in the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ).

The situation is only expected to deteriorate further with the approach of the November 2011 presidential election, in which Ortega is determined to participate despite having already served the
legal term limit. By law, Nicaraguan presidents can serve a maximum of two nonsuccessive terms. Ortega, who already led the country from 1985 to 1990, should therefore be disqualified for serving again on both counts.

The crisis began in earnest with Nicaragua's 2008 municipal elections. Opposition leaders cried foul, accusing the government of voter fraud as FSLN candidates claimed victory after victory (see NotiCen, November 13, 2008). The local chapter of Transparency International (TI) agreed, calling the elections "the least transparent with the greatest intimidation in recent years." Criticisms poured in from the US government and OAS as well, and both the US and EU decided shortly after to make substantial aid cuts.

The situation was further complicated last October, when Ortega, lacking enough support in the AL to amend the Constitution's term-limit law, turned instead to his friends in the CSJ. With unusual speed, a handful of Sandinista-affiliated CSJ judges declared the country's term law "inapplicable" in Ortega's case (see NotiCen, November 19, 2009).

The ruling prompted a war of words with US authorities. US Sen. John Kerry, head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a former presidential candidate, said Ortega's "manipulation" of the court "reeks of the authoritarianism of the past."

US Ambassador to Nicaragua Robert Callahan said the CSJ acted "in a way that was improper, unusual, and rushed."

The decision, issued by the CSJ's Sala Constitucional, will eventually have to go before the full court, which until last year was evenly divided between backers of the FSLN and those of the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), Nicaragua's leading conservative opposition party. In May 2009, however, one of the 16-member court's PLC judges passed away. More recently, the terms of three CSJ magistrates (two linked to the FSLN and one to the PLC) expired.

The AN, deeply divided by Ortega's maneuverings, has so far been unable to agree on replacements, prompting the president to use decree power in January to extend the judges' terms. The two FSLN judges, Rafael Solís and Armengol Cuadra, have stayed on, despite complaints from their PLC colleagues. In protest, the other judge, Damisis Sirias, has not rejoined the CSJ, meaning that, for now, the court has just 14 members, eight with FSLN sympathies and six who support the opposition.

The CSJ was supposed to convene a plenary session in mid-June to determine new leadership. But the court's outgoing president, PLC-affiliated Judge Manuel Martínez, refused to do so, fearing the FSLN magistrates would use it as an opportunity to capitalize on their majority and ratify the Sala Constitucional's controversial term-limit ruling. Temporary leadership of the court is now in the hands of Sandinista Judge Alba Luz Ramos.

The impasse has also sparked occasional violence. Opposition lawmakers planned to vote in late April to overturn Ortega's January decree. To prevent the vote, the FSLN dispatched protestors to
literally block legislators from entering the AN. The deputies instead met in a nearby Holiday Inn, which protestors attacked with rocks and explosives (see NotiCen, May 06, 2010).

OAS Secretary-General José Miguel Insulza expressed his "deep concern" about the violence in Nicaragua and emphasized "the need to preserve institutionalization, respect the constituted authorities, and resolve political differences."

Nicaraguan authorities fired back, demanding that the OAS "abstain from making declarations with meddlesome overtones that are based solely on partial media reports by media outlets that are enemies of our people and of the legitimately constituted government."

**Choosing friends, picking fights**

It hardly comes as a surprise that Ortega, who led Nicaragua through the final years of war against the CIA-sponsored contras, would continue to harbor negative feelings toward the US. What is more difficult to understand is why he should be battling it out with people like Insulza, a veteran Chilean politician from the left-leaning Partido Socialista (PS) whose leadership in the OAS was originally opposed by the US.

Since returning to power, however, Ortega has not hesitated to choose his friends and pick his fights, taking an approach to foreign policy that is far from "diplomatic" and seems to combine former US President George W. Bush-era "axis of evil" logic lining up with the axis and a throwback Cold War mentality.

Ortega wasted no time in rekindling relations with his old Cold War ally Cuba. His administration is even cozier with Cuba’s biggest backer in the region, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Almost immediately upon taking office, Ortega signed Nicaragua up for the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA), through which he receives millions in Venezuelan aid dollars. Besides founding members Cuba and Venezuela, ALBA includes Ecuador, Bolivia, and several Caribbean island nations.

Ortega's snug relationship with Chávez has also brought Nicaragua closer to Iran and cooled its contact with Israel. On June 1, Nicaragua "suspended" diplomatic relations with Israel, ostensibly to protest the latter’s recent attack on a Gaza-bound international-aid flotilla. Three weeks later, Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, who visited Ortega in 2007, told a Nicaraguan envoy in Tehran, "We need to make an effort in favor of a real increase in economic relations between Iran and Nicaragua."

Ortega has also made a point of ingratiating himself with Russia, another old Cold War friend. In 2008, he ruffled feathers in Washington but no doubt earned himself a gold star in Russia's book when he joined the Kremlin in recognizing a pair of rebel enclaves in Georgia South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent nations. While most of the world condemned Russia's decision to support the two territories militarily, Ortega defended the move.
During a visit to Nicaragua last month, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov thanked the Ortega government for its "loyalty." He also pledged US$10 million in aid money. Ortega, in turn, lauded Russia's generosity in providing "unconditional" aid, a clear reference to the millions in support that the US and EU withdrew after the 2008 municipal elections.

"Nicaragua can't keep depending forever on budget support that is conditioned politically," said Ortega.

Closer to home, President Ortega is putting Nicaragua's relationship with Colombia to the test by offering asylum to several people allegedly tied to the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), a rebel army that has been fighting the Colombian state for more than four decades. One of the refugees, Rubén Granda, arrived in Nicaragua with his family June 14. Granda, who insists he is not personally involved with the FARC, is the brother of Rodrigo Granda, a top FARC official known as the "foreign minister."

Critics call it a dangerous game, especially for a country that, for economic reasons alone, needs all the friends it can get. With a per capita GDP of just US$2,627, according to the International Monetary Fund, Nicaragua is the second-poorest country in the hemisphere after Haiti. Trading one ally for another does not necessarily pay off. The US$10 million in aid Russia just pledged, for example, only represents 6% of the money it lost in EU support.

As former Nicaragua representative to the UN Julio Icazo Gallard noted during a recent seminar in Managua, "International experience indicates that the countries that are able to insert themselves in the international economy and pull themselves out of poverty are the ones that don't fight with anyone."

(Sources: Xinhua, 06/01/10; La Prensa (Nicaragua), 06/03/10; COPE, 06/15/10; Spanish news service EFE, 06/01/10, 06/14/10, 06/16/10; El Finaciero, 06/16/10; Council on Hemispheric Affairs, Prensa Latina, 06/17/10; El Nuevo Diario (Nicaragua), 06/08/10, 06/15/10, 06/17/10, 06/21/10; Associated Press, 06/14/10, 06/16/10, 06/17/10, 06/22/10; Agence France-Presse, 06/16/10, 06/22/10; Fars News Agency, 06/24/10; Nica Times, 06/11/10, 06/25/10)

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