7-11-2013

Police, Pro-Government Mob Crack Down On Pension Protests In Nicaragua

Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/10076

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Police, Pro-Government Mob Crack Down On Pension Protests In Nicaragua

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
Category/Department: Nicaragua
Published: 2013-07-11

An auxiliary bishop in Nicaragua’s Catholic Church is among those accusing President Daniel Ortega and his Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN)-led government of "state terrorism" following a series of chaotic protests regarding senior pension benefits.

The turbulent events began on Monday, June 17, when a group of approximately 100 viejitos (old folks), as local media dubbed them, occupied the Instituto Nicaragüense de Seguridad Social (INSS) in Managua. The protestors are all members of the Unidad Nacional del Adulto Mayor (UNAM), which, for several years now, has been calling on the INSS to offer "partial pensions" to seniors who contributed to the social security system during the course of their working lives yet failed to make the minimum number of payments (750 weeks worth) needed to qualify for monthly retirement checks. UNAM claims that roughly 15,000 retired Nicaraguans receive zero government pension money despite having paid into the system for at least five years.

The Ortega administration professes sympathy for the UNAM cause. It did not, however, take kindly to the protest. Policía Nacional (PN) officers laid siege to the INSS building, hoping to force an end to the toma (occupation) by cutting the facility’s water and electricity and by blocking outside supporters from supplying the elderly activists with any food, drink, or medicine.

As news of the standoff spread, sympathizers—many of them students—began demonstrating outside the INSS. More protestors arrived throughout the day on Wednesday, June 19. As evening arrived, the demonstration grew larger still. Authorities hit back, hours later, by launching a police raid on the INSS building—starting at about 1 a.m. on Thursday morning—and forcibly removing the senior citizens inside. César Orozco, 63, told the online news site Confidencial that he was asleep when the police entered the facility. One of the PN officers woke him up with sharp kicks and then forced him onto a bus, said Orozco, who estimates that about 200 police personnel took part in the operation.

Despite the raid, demonstrators—including many of the original UNAM activists—returned to the site on Thursday, clashing at times with police officers. "How can it be that the government is using young people to repress the elderly?" protester Francisco Castro, 65, told the Nicaragua Dispatch, an English-language news site. More skirmishes took place on Friday.

"How could we remain quiet?"

The worst of the violence, however, was yet to come. In the wee hours of Saturday morning, a group of young people who stayed on at the protest site following a Friday night solidarity concert suddenly found themselves face to face with a pro-Sandinista mob that, according to witnesses, was bussed to the site in municipal garbage trucks. Luciana Chamorro, one of the protestors claiming to have been ambushed by the mob, told Agence France-Presse (AFP) that approximately 300 people participated in the attack.
"They showed up and right off the bat started running around and shouting that they were going to kill us," Chamorro said. She is the granddaughter of ex-Nicaraguan President Violeta Chamorro (1990-1997). "They told me they were going to rape me. Later they told us all to get on the floor."

Other victims claim they were robbed and beaten. José Luis Sánchez Martínez, a retiree who was at the protest site when the pro-Sandinista mob arrived, told Confidencial that he saw a young man beaten savagely just in front of him. "They grabbed the kid, threw him on the ground, kicked and punched him, and then carried him off. He was unconscious," said Sánchez.

To escape the violence, some of the young activists fled into adjacent neighborhoods, seeking shelter in the homes of strangers. "Some people were so scared they hid in people's refrigerators," said Gonzalo Carrión, a lawyer with the Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH), a leading Nicaraguan human rights group.

Carrión and other CENIDH members, including the group's head Vilma Núñez, arrived at the scene of the violence at approximately 5 a.m. to assist the frightened and wounded activists and document what had taken place. In a June 24 press release, the organization described the night's events as "one of the most cowardly acts committed by the current government of Daniel Ortega."

The site was also visited early that morning by a group of Catholic priests from the nearby Managua cathedral, where some of the wounded fled to escape the attack. One of the clergy, Auxiliary Bishop Silvio José Báez, labeled the events "an act of state terrorism" and described the attackers as "paramilitary forces." The next day, in his Sunday homily, Bishop Báez again spoke out in favor of the protestors, saying, "How were we not going to raise our voices against the injustice that is being committed against the elderly, who are giving an example to the rest of us? They are fighting for themselves and for our future, too, so how could we remain quiet?"

Nicaragua’s Canal 2, which normally broadcasts the cathedral’s Sunday mass, instead aired the 20-year-old Hollywood film Free Willy. Afterward, the station’s director said the decision was made for technical reasons associated with the Confederations Cup soccer tournament, which Canal 2 aired later in the day.

"Somoza took it"

Sandinista officials say they are keen to help the country’s struggling seniors but, for money reasons, cannot agree to UNAM’s demand for partial pensions. The INSS is simply too cash strapped, says its director Roberto López, who blames the agency’s money woes on former dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle (1967-1979) and on the conservative governments that led Nicaraguan between 1990, when Ortega lost a re-election bid to Violeta Chamarro, and 2007, when he was finally able to squeeze back into power (NotiCen, Jan. 11, 2007). Ortega won again in 2011 in open violation of Nicaragua’s Constitution (NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2011), which bars presidents from serving consecutive terms and limits at two the total number of terms a leader can hold office.

"When our grandparents want to know what happened to the money they saved since 1956, I tell it to them straight. Somoza took it," López explained during a June 21 presentation at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua (UNAN) in Managua.

The remnants of those political forces are now bent on destroying social security outright, FSLN Deputy Gustavo Porras, who also heads the Frente Nacional de los Trabajadores (FNT), told reporters on June 21. Porras described UNAM’s cause as "just," but insisted it is being
"manipulated" for political reasons. "The right wing feels bad when the people prosper, they feel bad," he said. "Comandante Daniel Ortega has been providing answers, little by little, to all the aspirations of the people."

On Monday, June 25, Porras led a pro-government rally in Managua that drew thousands of supporters. Curiously, the event featured an appearance by UNAM head Porfirio García, who later that day reached an agreement with Sandinista leaders to put an end to the demonstrations. In exchange, the Ortega regime said it would provide free eye exams to qualifying seniors and resume payments of a "solidarity bonus" that the government first extended to roughly 8,000 people in 2011 in the run-up to that year’s presidential election. The INSS did not, however, agree to UNAM’s longstanding demand for a reduced pension scheme.

Partisan police force?

The INSS will continue to hold weekly meetings with UNAM and its leader, who has promised not to launch any new protests as long as the lines of communication remain open. After being shut for a week, the INSS building in Managua is now open and the adjoining streets once again relatively quiet.

The calm is deceiving, say government critics, who are still unnerved by the sequence of events that took place. For one thing, the standoff demonstrated that the FSLN is still willing to organize and unleash violent mobs to intimidate government opponents. The tactic had fallen by the wayside in recent years. Now it’s back, say groups like the CENIDH, which point to the mob members’ clothing (Sandinista T-shirts) and mode of transportation (municipal-owned vehicles) as clear evidence of FSLN involvement in the attack.

The week’s events also seemed to confirm what both CENIDH and Amnesty International (AI) argued in their most recent annual reports (NotiCen, June 20, 2013): that Nicaragua’s Policía National is becoming increasingly partisan to the Sandinistas, which already dominates municipal politics, has a sizeable majority in the country’s unicameral legislature, and also holds sway over the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ).

Witnesses to the Saturday morning mob attack suspect police removed many of their personnel prior to the arrival of the attackers. Those officers who did stay did little to intervene, ignoring pleas by students and seniors who called on the police to protect them. "[The police] were giving instructions to each other, making signs," one young woman who was present during the attack explained during a press conference organized by CENIDH. "I’m convinced that the Policía Nacional was involved in this. They knew what was going to happen. I hold [PN Chief] Aminta Grandera responsible and demand her resignation on moral grounds, because she had to have know what was taking place. If she can’t control the police, who then is in charge?"

-- End --