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President Daniel Ortega Sets Sights on Nicaragua’s Forestry Resources

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
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Having just put the finishing touches on a power-enhancing overhaul of the Nicaraguan Constitution, President Daniel Ortega is now looking to extend control of yet another area of the country’s government apparatus: forestry administration.

In a bill presented to the Asamblea Legislativa (AL) in February, the president’s office outlined a plan to take over all of the state’s various forest-management functions. Among other things, the reform will give Ortega power to decide which forest-based industries and logging companies operate where.

The Ortega administration is selling the proposal as a way to promote "the rational and sustainable use of the forests" and thus crack down on "extraordinary" deforestation, which is affecting large sections of the country, including its many nature reserves (there are more than 70 in Nicaragua). Critics question whether the president’s close ties to ALBA Forestal, a joint Nicaraguan-Venezuelan logging company, may also be driving the decision.

Regardless of the president’s motives, the unicameral AL—where the governing Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) enjoys a two-thirds supermajority—is expected to green-light the measure, just as it did his partial rewrite of the Constitution, which went into effect earlier this year. The pliant legislature approved the constitutional reforms in a pair of quick votes, giving Ortega permission to seek re-election as many times as he chooses, expanding his power to govern by decree, and allowing him to appoint a number of key government officials without consent from the legislature (NotiCen, Dec. 12, 2013, and Feb. 27, 2014).

Rapid deforestation

Studies by the Instituto Nacional Forestal (INAFOR) and Ministerio Agropecuario y Forestal (MAGFOR)—two of the government bodies Ortega is hoping to centralize through his forestry-reform bill—suggest that Nicaragua loses some 70,000-80,000 hectares (700-800 sq km) of forest growth per year. Estimates based on satellite images from the US government’s National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) tell a similar story: between 2000 and 2010, Nicaragua lost more than 8,500 sq km of woodland, more than any other country in Central America.

Fires and other natural disasters are responsible for some of the damage. The biggest culprit, however, is human activity. While some areas are exploited for their wood (by both legal and illegal logging operations), others are cleared to make room for agriculture and cattle ranches. Beef was Nicaragua’s second-most-valuable export product in 2013 after gold, an industry that is also expanding at the expense, in some cases, of old-growth forest (NotiCen, March 13, 2014).

Another factor drawing attention of late is the increasing presence—in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Central America—of foreign drug-trafficking operations, which seek out forested areas to conduct...
various aspects of their illegal business dealings. US researcher Kendra McSweeney of Ohio State University explained in a recent interview with Spain’s El País newspaper that much of the activity is being carried out by Mexican drug cartels, which have moved south in recent years as a result of the drug wars waging in their home country.

"In the past six years we’ve seen a veritable tsunami of cocaine passing through Central America," McSweeney said. "The traffickers work in forested zones to transport [the drugs] and launder their earnings by investing in livestock, mining, and agriculture—things like African palm plantations. Drug trafficking ends up turning the forests into grasslands."

Losing the Bosawás

In addition to its many environmental repercussions, deforestation has also led to violence, most notably in northern Nicaragua’s Bosawás Biosphere Reserve, where Mayangna (Sumo) indigenous communities have been complaining for years about encroachment on their communal lands by jungle-clearing colonos (settlers).

Sometimes referred to as "the lungs of Central America," the Bosawás—encompassing roughly 20,000 sq km—is the Western Hemisphere’s second-largest tropical rain forest after the Amazon. In recent years, land invaders have been hacking away at the reserve at an alarming rate, clearing an estimated 42,000 ha (420 sq km) annually, according to a joint 2012 study by the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) and the Unión Nacional de Ganaderos (UNAG). Unless efforts are made to control the situation, the entire reserve could be gone by 2058, the study warned.

Early last year Mayangna leaders called on President Ortega to declare an environmental state of emergency in the Bosawás. "[The colonists] see the forest as no-man’s land. But it’s not; it’s the biodiversity that provides us with food security," Mayangna representative Jaymond Robins told the Nicaragua Dispatch, an English language news site. "Soon, we are going to have to start asking SINAPRED [Nicaragua’s disaster-relief authority] for bags of food, because the advance of the agricultural frontier is destroying the forests and driving off the animals that we hunt for food."

Initially slow to react, Ortega did finally spring into action starting last May, after an indigenous man was killed during a confrontation with land invaders (NotiCen, Nov. 14, 2013). In an effort to defuse the situation (Mayangna leaders at one point threatened they would "go to war" against the invaders), the government formed a special committee to examine the problem. Authorities also took measures to forcibly remove some of the illegal settlers.

Reaching the "core"

Nearly a year later, however, problems persist. A team of journalists from the Nicaraguan news site Confidencial recently ventured into the Bosawás to investigate the deforestation first hand. In an article published March 5, writer Carlos Salinas Maldonado corroborated Mayangna claims that land invaders are pushing deeper and deeper into what is considered the "core" of the reserve.

"This part of the forest was just cleared five days ago," park ranger Molins Awawack, indicating an area near the central Bosawás town of Betlehen, told Salinas Maldonado and his colleagues. "This means they’re getting ready to use this for livestock grazing. It’s very worrisome, because I see too much damage. Only the government can stop this. There’s nothing else that can. They need to forcibly remove the settlers."
In late February, just days before the Confidencial article came out, representatives from the Mayangna community of Sauni Bu raised similar concerns in a formal petition to the AL. The group specifically asked the legislature to help remove 100 mestizo families whom Sauni Bu leader Óscar Rosales accuses of “illegally usurping” titled Mayangna property.

Their petition is being backed by high-profile human rights activist Bianca Jagger, a Nicaraguan woman and foundation head who was once married to British rock star Mick Jagger. In a Feb. 28 press statement, Bianca Jagger called on the Ortega administration to “take drastic and effective measures to halt the illegal invasions of indigenous territories.”

"Suspicious silence"

Theoretically, Ortega will have an easier time taking such measures once he has consolidated control of the state’s various forestry-management functions. By stripping INAFOR and other forestry-related agencies of their autonomy, the president will be able to act unilaterally—assuming he wants to. Not everyone is convinced he does, particularly given his presumed affiliation with ALBA Forestal, which some suspect of profiting from wood removed from Bosawás.

"The situation is worrisome," Deputy Elizabeth Enríquez—who officially broke her alliance with the FSLN last month—told the opposition daily La Prensa. "National authorities authorized this ALBA Forestal project, which is now turning the area into a desert."

Enríquez represents the Yapti Tasba Masraka Nanih Aslatakanka (YATAMA) indigenous party, as does Deputy Brooklyn Rivera, who also split from the FSLN in March.

Launched in 2009, ALBA Forestal was supposed to collect and process trees felled by Hurricane Felix, a massive 2007 storm that, according to an INAFOR report, left some US$320 million worth of wood just lying about. The company’s government backers promised that whatever revenue ALBA Forestal generated would be invested into Nicaragua’s Caribbean communities.

Five years later, ALBA Forestal is still operating, but with little transparency, argue critics like Deputy Boanerges Matus of the Bancada del Partido Liberal Independiente (BAPLI) opposition bloc. "How many tons of wood is ALBA Forestal extracting from Bosawás? Where is the wood being sent? How much of the revenue stays in the country?" Matus questioned in an interview with La Prensa. "There is a suspicious silence surrounding ALBA Forestal and the resources it exploits. Unfortunately, all kinds of people are involved in the destruction of Bosawás: there are land invaders, lumber mafias, and now ALBA Forestal."

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