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Mysterious Massacre Follows Sandinista Anniversary Celebration in Nicaragua

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A pair of deadly shooting attacks just hours after government sympathizers celebrated the 35th anniversary of Nicaragua's Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN)-led revolution have produced across-the-board condemnation but also widespread confusion in the politically polarized nation.

The presumably coordinated ambushes, carried out on the night of July 19 along two different roads in the department of Matagalpa, left five people dead and another 24 injured. The victims were part of separate convoys of FSLN supporters returning home following a major political rally earlier that day in Managua. The anniversary event, led by President Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo, was also attended by Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro; the recently inaugurated leader of El Salvador, former leftist guerilla commander Salvador Sánchez Cerén; Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández; and Cuban Vice President Ramiro Valdés.

Matagalpa city Mayor Sadrach Zeledón (FSLN), one of the first public officials to report the incidents, described the killings as a "cowardly, criminal, cold-blooded massacre." President Ortega, who waited until July 21 to address the situation, also referred to the attacks as a "massacre." The Nicaraguan hermanos (brothers and sisters) who lost their lives "were victims of violence, of irrationality," he said. "Who were they hurting by coming here, to the [La Fé] plaza, to celebrate?"

Church leaders denounced the violence as well, as did opposition parties such as the Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI), which lamented "the bloodshed and death of Nicaraguan citizens," and the Movimiento de Renovación Sandinista (MRS), a Sandinista dissident party, which said in a press release that it "energetically condemns this criminal act carried out against people who were making use of their right to mobilize."

Taking up arms?

Given the circumstances, the killings were widely believed to be politically motivated, perhaps carried out by former contras, counterrevolutionary forces that fought against the Ortega-led Sandinista government (and received training and weapons from the US) during the 1980s. That impression was reinforced when a hitherto unknown organization calling itself the Fuerzas Armadas de Salvación Nacional-Ejército del Pueblo (FASN-EP), via statements published July 20 on social media, claimed credit for the attacks. "We have no reason to fear the oppressor," the FASN-EP wrote. The rebel group, which may or may not be real, went on to say that the killings are "just an example of the operations we have coordinated on a national level."

Less than a week later, former contra-fighter-turned-rural-PLI-leader Carlos García was murdered in broad daylight near his home in the northern department of Jinotega—perhaps in revenge for the July 19 massacre. "They were waiting for him. He was tracked, as we say here," another ex-contra fighter, Germán Zeledón, told the opposition newspaper La Prensa.
Rumors have been swirling in recent years that some former contras have rearmed in response to President Ortega’s increasingly authoritarian-style leadership and to the near-total dominance his FSLN exerts over the country’s various government bodies and institutions. The Sandinistas control all but a handful of Nicaragua’s municipal governments (NotiCen, Nov. 15, 2012). The party also has a two-thirds majority in the Asamblea Nacional (AN), the country’s unicameral legislature, and has thus taken to rubber-stamping all and any legislation the president proposes, including a recent overhaul of the Constitution, which now allows the 68-year-old Ortega—already in his third official term as president—to seek re-election as many times as he chooses (NotiCen, Dec. 12, 2013, and Feb. 27, 2014).

Earlier this year the pliant AN also approved a measure giving Ortega direct command of the Policía Nacional (PN), Nicaragua’s 12,000-strong national police force (NotiCen, July 24, 2014). The PN had previously answered to the Ministerio de Gobernación. Critics blasted the move as the latest in a long list of blatant power grabs by the former revolutionary, who first took leadership of Nicaragua 35 years ago as head of the country’s post-revolutionary junta (1979-1985). "The new law turns the police into a party institution," said opposition Deputy Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Barrios. "Instead of answering to the law, [the PN] now answers to the president. It must be obedient."

A "common crime"

The Ortega regime refuses to accept rumors of rearmament among former contras, despite claims to the contrary by both church and opposition leaders. It has also been careful in recent weeks to challenge the notion that the July 19 attacks, regardless of how they may have appeared, were politically motivated.

On Aug. 7, PN head Aminta Granera held a nationally televised press conference to report that police have "cleared up the extremely complex case in record time." Granera’s presentation followed nearly three weeks of heavy-handed operations involving both police and military personnel, who raided numerous homes and made more than a dozen arrests. "We’ve worked these past 17 days in a serious, responsible, and professional manner, and within the framework of the law, so as to safeguard the security, harmony, and peaceful coexistence of each one of you, our Nicaraguan hermanos," she said.

Acknowledging that the killings were something "never before seen in our country," the police chief described the attacks nevertheless as a "common crime." Standing front and center during the highly staged media event were eight of the nine men police accuse of masterminding and executing the deadly ambushes. Shadowing the prisoners from behind were a line of balaclava-wearing, machine-gun-toting police officers. "This is a group of criminals who have criminal records," Granera said of the accused, one of whom is allegedly a known operative with Los Zetas, an infamous Mexican crime cartel. "We haven’t found any indication to suggest that this may have been a political act."

Earlier in the investigation process police arrested three other suspects accused of aiding and abetting the primary authors of the crimes. Those suspects—accused of throwing stones in an effort to slow down the ambushed FSLN caravans—are reported to be Sandinistas. The three campesinos, as they have been described in news reports, are scheduled to go on trial beginning in late September.
Missing a motive

For many observers, the PN’s actions and explanations in the past couple of weeks have raised more questions than answers. If one of the accused was known by police to be tied to Los Zetas, why hadn’t he been arrested before? How do the aforementioned Sandinista campesinos fit into the picture? And what, most importantly, did the alleged killers hope to gain by their attacks? What was their motive?

Noting, for example, that the attackers did not try to rob their FSLN victims, journalists present at the Aug. 7 press event repeatedly asked Granera to explain what may have prompted the "common crime." The PN chief refused to answer the reporters’ queries other than to liken the crime to the kinds of mass shootings that periodically take place in the US. "What do those people in the US who take an AK-47 and go off to shoot thousands of students in a school hope to gain?" she asked. "[Are such crimes] politically motivated just because there’s no theft involved? I don’t believe there needs to be robbery involved for this be considered a criminal act. We’re talking here about criminals with records."

The PN has also come under fire for its allegedly repressive approach to the investigation. Rights groups such as the Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH) accuse police and military personnel of raiding people’s homes without legal warrants, of making arbitrary arrests, and of violating people’s habeas corpus rights by detaining them for days on end without allowing them access to legal council or presenting them before a judge.

Those allegations have been echoed by family members of the detainees as well by members of the church. "People here are telling us that they’re terrified," Matagalpa Bishop Rolando Álvarez Lago told reporters earlier this month. "The people, regardless of their political affiliation or ideological sympathies, are scared. [They feel] defenseless, vulnerable, and are asking that their rights and privacy be respected."

Álvarez Lago is the youngest member of the Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua (CEN), the country’s bishop’s conference, which met with President Ortega this past May to voice growing concerns about his political record (NotiCen, June 5, 2014). The CEN had been requesting such an encounter since 2007, when Ortega returned to power following several failed bids to regain the presidency he lost in 1990. "We do not think that the current institutional and political structure of the country offers any medium-term or long-term benefits to either the current government, members of the ruling party, or the Nicaraguan people," the CEN explained in a 14-page letter read out loud to Ortega during the long-awaited meeting.

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