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Nicaragua Jails Army Doctor Who Criticized Police Crackdown on Canal Protestors

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A recent military court ruling in Nicaragua has added new fuel to the fire for opponents of the Central American country’s larger-than-life canal project, which officially broke ground in December but continues to spark protests at home and draw mostly unfavorable press coverage abroad.

The ruling, handed down in mid-March, involved an Army doctor arrested two months earlier for allegedly making disparaging remarks regarding a police crackdown on anti-canal protestors. "We're having a Red Christmas just like in the 1980s," the physician, Lt. Yader Montiel Meza, was reported to have said after police broke up a Dec. 24 protest that coincided with the canal project’s official launch (NotiCen, Feb. 5, 2015). Military prosecutors accused Montiel Meza of conduct unbecoming an officer. And on March 10, military court judge Efraín García sentenced the lieutenant to three months in prison.

An Army spokesperson defended the decision and insisted that Montiel Meza, 42, received due process. But rights groups and government critics slammed the ruling, calling it unfair and politically motivated and accusing the military of kowtowing to the partisan whims of President Daniel Ortega. "[Montiel Meza] is now a prisoner of conscience," attorney Wendy Flores of the Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH), a leading Nicaraguan human rights organization, told reporters.

Flores and others say the Army doctor is being punished not for anything he did or said against the military but because his statement was seen as an insult to Ortega and his once-revolutionary Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), which has a two-thirds "supermajority" in the legislature, controls nearly all of the country’s municipal governments, and exerts influence in both the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) and Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE), Nicaragua’s top electoral authority (NotiCen, Nov. 15, 2012).

Critics complain that Ortega and the FSLN have also gained increasing control of the national police force and the 12,000-soldier-strong Army. The latter is headed by Gen. Julio César Avilés Castillo, a loyalist who was able to retain his post beyond the normal five-year term limit thanks to a military reform the FSLN-dominated Asamblea Legislativa (AL) pushed through in early 2014. The reform allows the Army’s chief of staff to stay on indefinitely.

The vote took place one day after the unicameral legislature approved a tailor-made constitutional makeover that, among other things, eliminated presidential term limits. Ortega can thus stand in as many future elections as he chooses (NotiCen, Dec. 12, 2013, and Feb. 27, 2014). The FSLN leader is in his second consecutive presidential term and third overall, not counting his run as head of the junta (1979-1985) that governed the country following the 1979 Sandinista revolution.

In a recent interview with the opposition newspaper La Prensa, Roberto Cajina, a security consultant who works with the Red de Defensa y Seguridad de América Latina, accused the Avilés Castillo-
led Army of relinquishing its political autonomy. "The Army is an institution that has absolutely submitted to Ortega," he said. "It’s in favor of Ortega and his political projects. There’s no doubt about it. They now even fly the black-and-red [FSLN] flag at official events, something that no Army chief of staff had previously allowed."

Cajina pointed to the military court decision against Lt. Montiel Meza as further evidence of the military’s submission to Ortega. "The only thing this ruling looked to do was send a warning message to all the troops … and to the society in general that the Army is not going to tolerate opinions that go against what the executive power does or says," he opined.

"Savagely repressed"

And yet, regarding the polemical canal project, neither the Montiel Meza ruling nor the bloody Christmas Eve police crackdown that preceded it have succeeded in silencing the growing chorus of dissenting voices, which includes rural protestors, church representatives, environmental groups, and even business analysts.

Protests, mostly involving campesinos living in the projected path of the interoceanic shipping channel, have continued despite the events of Dec. 24, when, according to some reports, police killed two demonstrators, injured many others, arrested more than 40 people, and kept a cadre of six activist leaders locked up incommunicado for more than a week. One of those leaders, activist Octavio Ortega (no relation to the president), told The Washington Post in early February that police smashed his face with a rifle butt and broke his arm. "We are being repressed savagely," he said.

Opponents complain that the public was never properly consulted on the estimated US$50 billion venture, which Ortega began touting after his 2011 re-election (NotiCen, Sept. 27, 2012). He later used his rubber-stamp powers in the AL to award the project—in the form of a lengthy no-bid concession known formally as Ley 840—to the untested Chinese firm Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development Group (HKND). HKND is headed by mysterious Chinese telecom magnate Wang Jing, who, according to Forbes magazine, has a personal fortune of US$7.5 billion (NotiCen, Aug. 15, 2013).

The deal gives Wang and his company exclusive control of the project for 50 years (plus an additional 50 years should the company want to renew the concession). It also gives HKND eminent-domain powers, sparking fears that tens of thousands of people will be pushed off their land to make room for the behemoth endeavor.

"This canal is illegitimate, moved forward by a dictatorship and handled with total secrecy," Sofía Montenegro Alarcón, political coordinator of the Nicaraguan Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres (MAM), argued in a March 17 presentation at the Inter-American Dialogue think tank in Washington, DC. "Basically, it sells Nicaragua’s territory and its people to an unknown Chinese concession with power unheard of in the history of Latin America," the anti-canal activist added. "The concession says whatever land or resources are needed for this project can be expropriated. The regime is not accountable—not to Nicaraguans, not to anybody."

Causes for concern

The Ortega administration, as it has since first dusting off the centuries-old canal idea, claims the venture will energize the Nicaraguan economy and create tens of thousands of jobs. The government’s point person on the project, Telémaco Talavera, says approximately 50,000 workers
will be needed during the five-year construction phase, which HKND claimed to have begun last December. He says half the jobs will be filled by Nicaraguans. The rest will be handled by workers from China and other countries. Talavera also promises double-digit economic growth by as early as next year. The Nicaraguan economy grew 4.7% in 2014, according to the country’s Banco Central.

HKND has not yet begun to work on the canal itself or on the various side projects—including a tourist resort, international airport, free-trade zone, and deepwater ports—that are supposed to accompany it. The company did break ground, reportedly, on an access road near Rivas, an arguably insignificant start that gave HKND an excuse, nevertheless, to hold a confetti-covered kickoff event last December.

Some Nicaraguans are banking on the government’s rosy economic forecast. "The president and HKND are not going to go before us and promise us this if it were a big lie," Luis Adolfo Barbosa, president of the Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores José Benito Escobar (CST-JBE), the country’s main construction workers union, told Al Jazeera earlier this month. Others are more skeptical, saying the economic windfall—assuming the project can even be completed as promised—will benefit Chinese investors and Nicaragua’s economic elite but is unlikely to make much of a difference for the country’s poor, who will be hard-pressed to even qualify for the jobs being created.

Another big question mark is the effect the venture could have on the environment, particularly in Lago Cocibolca, Central America’s largest lake, through which HKND plans to run a major section of the canal. The canal, from its starting point in Brito, on the Pacific coast, to Punta Gorda, on Nicaragua’s Caribbean side, is designed to stretch 278 km. Some 105 of those kilometers run through Lake Nicaragua, as the body of water is also known.

The lake is massive—it covers more than 41,000 sq km—but is also quite shallow, with an average depth of just 12.5 meters. Environmentalists say that the channel, which will need to be nearly three times that deep to accommodate large cargo ships, will require significant dredging. That dredging, they say, could wreak havoc on the lake’s flora and fauna. It could also ruin Lago Cocibolca as a vital source of drinking water.

Pedro Álvarez, an engineering professor at Rice University in Houston, Texas, who also spoke last month at Inter-American Dialogue, warned that the sediments churned up from the dredging could create "a dead zone devoid of dissolved oxygen where no aquatic life can persist." He went on to say that dredging, because of the projected ship traffic, would have to be recurrent. "Increased turbidity represents a threat to the unique freshwater sharks that need to see in order to hunt, not to mention invasive species brought by transoceanic ships," he said.

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