12-19-1986

Sandinistas Pardon Hasenfus; U.S. "gratified," But Policy Toward Nicaragua Will Not Change

Deborah Tyroler

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

Recommended Citation
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/268

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.
Sandinistas Pardon Hasenfus; U.S. "gratified," But Policy Toward Nicaragua Will Not Change

by Deborah Tyroler
Category/Department: General
Published: Friday, December 19, 1986

Dec. 17: The Nicaraguan National Assembly approved a pardon for Eugene Hasenfus, sentenced to 30 years in prison by the Anti-Somocista Popular Tribunals, by a vote of 70 to 4. President Daniel Ortega presented the request for pardon after discussing the matter at length with visiting Democrat Sen. Christopher Dodd. During an afternoon ceremony at the presidential residence, Hasenfus was turned over to Dodd, shortly before the senator, accompanied by Hasenfus and his wife, Sally, left Nicaragua aboard a US Air Force plane. Before arriving at the Miami International Airport Dec. 18, Dodd and the Hasenfuses spent the night in Guatemala City. Ortega said the pardon was a goodwill gesture to show that the Nicaraguan government wished to live in peace with the United States. He said he hoped it would lead to the eventual termination of the "criminal war imposed on us," as well as ending the deaths of Nicaraguans, and the death or imprisonment of North Americans sent by the US government. The president, flanked by Sally Hasenfus and Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto, reiterated his government's position that Hasenfus was a "victim" of US policy. Next, Ortega stated the pardon was in "recognition of the struggle by...religious, political and social sectors in the United States in favor of peace, the termination of the war and the normalization of relations between the United States and Nicaragua." The pardon was also announced by the government radio station, LA VOZ DE NICARAGUA. Earlier Ortega said the pardon was, in addition, a birthday gift for Hasenfus's son, Adam. Adam turned seven years old Dec. 18. Accordingly, the birthday gift was a message to "remind President Reagan that in Nicaragua there are also children who need to celebrate birthdays without the threat of death or mutilation," he said. Sally Hasenfus told a press conference that she couldn't be happier with the pardon. "I am very thankful...Happy birthday, Adam, from President Ortega," she said. The couple has two other children: Sarah, 12, and Eugene, 9. Dodd told reporters he believed that Hasenfus could be an "important witness" in the congressional investigations underway into the diversion of funds to the contras from the Iran arms sales. When asked in the Guatemala City airport why he believed the Nicaraguan government granted him pardon, Hasenfus responded that it seemed as if it was a Christmas goodwill gesture. The White House and Department of State announced the Administration was gratified Hasenfus was being reunited with his family, but pointed out that the entire incident was orchestrated by the Sandinistas for maximum propaganda benefit. Next, it was announced the Reagan Administration had no intentions of modifying policy toward Nicaragua. Dec. 18: Upon arriving in Miami, Hasenfus refused to speak to a horde of some 200 reporters and photographers about his future plans. He said, "Right now I am just looking for some time in these special holidays that I was allowed. And thank God that I was able to be freed and come home to spend with my family. And I'm looking for a little private time with them. There'll be another time when I'll be able to speak to you all again..." At a press briefing, State Department spokesman Charles Redman reiterated the previous day's statements by the White House and State. He said State was gratified that the Sandinistas released Hasenfus, but noted that "the Nicaraguans claim to have held another American citizen for the last six days and have still not granted us consular access." Redman said the Sandinistas were violating "their obligations and normal diplomatic
practice." He added that if the Sandinistas "truly want to make a gesture, it should be toward those in Nicaragua who oppose their oppressive policies,...toward fulfillment of those obligations...made to the OAS to create a democratic system in Nicaragua, and society." The spokesman said he believed it was clear the "handling of the whole incident from the start has been orchestrated for propaganda purposes." Redman confirmed that Washington's "gratitude" did not signal a change in US policy toward Nicaragua. As reported in the NY TIMES (12/18/86), an aide to the House of Representatives said Hasenfus would probably be called as a witness in hearings next year, and that he might be able to provide info on role of Southern Air Transport in the contra supply network. A Justice Department official said the department had already looked into the possibility of prosecuting Hasenfus under the Neutrality Law. He said, "The Neutrality Act is the chief concern. I think the answer is that we could not prosecute him." Hasenfus spent 71 days in jail, after being captured by the Sandinista army on Oct. 6. When Sandinista artillery shot down his C-123 cargo plane the previous day, two other Americans and an unidentified Nicaraguan were killed; Hasenfus parachuted to safety. The plane was carrying munitions and other supplies for the contras. (Various reports, PRENSA LATINA, REUTERS, UPI, NOTICIAS ARGENTINAS)

-- End --