

6-17-1987

# Contras Vs. Nicaraguan Witnesses: Notes On Conflicting Evidence In Circumstances Of Benjamin Linder's Death

Deborah Tyroler

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

---

## Recommended Citation

Tyroler, Deborah. "Contras Vs. Nicaraguan Witnesses: Notes On Conflicting Evidence In Circumstances Of Benjamin Linder's Death." (1987). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/701>

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](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## **Contras Vs. Nicaraguan Witnesses: Notes On Conflicting Evidence In Circumstances Of Benjamin Linder's Death**

*by Deborah Tyroler*

*Category/Department: General*

*Published: Wednesday, June 17, 1987*

In recent interviews with the contras responsible for the death of US citizen Benjamin Linder and Nicaraguan witnesses to the incident, NEW YORK TIMES correspondent James LeMoyne and other foreign journalists have noted several discrepancies between respective accounts. Linder died in an April 28 ambush in a war zone in northern Nicaragua near the village of San Jose de Bocay. Linder, a 27-year-old mechanical engineer, came to Nicaragua to work on a rural electrification project. At the time of the ambush, he was armed with a rifle and accompanied by armed and uniformed Sandinista militiamen. The Nicaraguan government and Linder's family have charged that he was killed by a bullet fired into his head from less than two feet away after he had been wounded by the contras. Linder's death has been the subject of a congressional investigation, and Rep. Les AuCoin (D-Ore.), has called on the State Department to make a thorough inquiry. Ten members of the 12-man contra unit responsible for ambushing and killing Linder and two Nicaraguans were interviewed in a contra camp on the Honduran-Nicaraguan border three weeks ago. Their story was then checked against accounts provided in Nicaragua by doctors, militiamen, relatives of others killed in the ambush and friends of Linder who prepared his body for burial. Curiously, the contras interviewed gave the wrong date for their ambush. They told reporters that a local spy had told them a Cuban was working to build a dam with Sandinista soldiers about a mile from the small peasant village of San Jose de Bocay. The spy reportedly said a local state security agent responsible for several contra deaths was accompanying the group and would also be a worth while target, the contras added. Early the next morning, they said, the spy took them to a spot where they could easily ambush the group and kill or capture the supposed Cuban and the security agent. The contras said they hid in a canyon and at 8:30 a.m. 10 Sandinista soldiers in uniform and carrying guns walked into the ambush. When the Sandinistas were 10 yards away, the contras called to them to surrender but "they answered with gunfire, so we gave it to them." The contras assert that Linder and others with him fought for more than 10 minutes and that Linder fired his weapon before being fatally wounded in the head. Five Sandinistas were killed and four wounded with bullets and hand grenades, the contras asserted. They said they quickly searched two bodies before fleeing, knowing that a larger army unit from a nearby base would soon pursue them. Linder was among the dead, they said, but since he was small, in uniform and bearded, they did not recognize him as an American and could not be sure if they had killed a Cuban or not. But they took Linder's wallet and small camera, which was shown to a reporter. The wallet contained documents in English, a language the contras do not speak. The contras said they felt they had carried out a successful operation. Not until the next day, the contras said, did they learn from a radio report that they had killed an American. Within days they were ordered to make a full report to their commanders. According to LeMoyne, interviews in Nicaragua offered uniform accounts of the ambush that were consistently at odds with that given by the contras. Four people in San Jose de Bocay who either saw the bodies or were with Linder at the time of the attack were interviewed separately last week. They did not know in advance that a reporter was coming to see them. They said seven men were in the group ambushed, not ten as the contras say. They also said three men were killed in the

attack, not five, and there were no wounded. According to the accounts, the seven men were going to the site of a small dam Linder was building. At least four of the Nicaraguans were armed and uniformed militiamen, they said, and two were in civilian clothes. Linder was in civilian clothes, but was armed, they said. The group was preparing for the day's work when ambushed, according to Cecilio Rosales, a militiaman who survived the attack. He said Linder had laid his gun on the ground and was taking notes when he was hit. A second militiaman who survived gave a similar account to two other reporters. The contras did not call the group to surrender, but rather threw hand grenades and opened fire immediately at very close range, according to Rosales. There was no return fire, he said, because the attack was too devastating. The three men later found dead at the scene did not all appear to have died immediately, as the contras assert. One, Pablo Rosales, was wearing civilian clothes. According to several witnesses, he was found with bullet wounds in his legs and a fatal knife wound in his heart. The dead man's wife, a niece and a cousin and the military doctor who inspected his body all said in separate interviews that they saw the knife wound in Rosales' chest. Linder had bullet wounds in one arms and what were probably shrapnel wounds in his legs, according to four doctors, two of them Americans, who saw his body. The wounds were not fatal, the doctors said. What killed Linder was a bullet fired into his right temple, they said. Linder's body was washed before a formal autopsy was carried out, complicating the medical investigation into his death because valuable evidence could have been erased. A Sandinista military doctor who conducted the autopsy concluded that Linder had been shot in the head from less than two feet way. A photograph taken of Linder two days after his death shows a dark ring around the bullet wound in his head. Three US pathologists consulted by telephone said the ring was probably a powder burn made by a weapon fired at very close range. (Basic data from NEW YORK TIMES, 06/16/87)

-- End --