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Nicaragua: On Mass Release Of Guardsmen

by Deborah Tyroler

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In a brief ceremony March 17 in Tipitapa, the Nicaraguan government officially pardoned 1,894 former members of the National Guard imprisoned when the Sandinistas overthrow Somoza in 1979. The pardon granted unrestricted freedom to all, excepting 39 of the former Guardia. Government officials said the 39 have been found guilty of "atrocious crimes" and had been violent or uncooperative in prison. They will remain in prison, most in Tipitapa, located east of Managua. Meanwhile, officials have suggested that their cases would be reconsidered in any future pardon for imprisoned contra and contra supporters. The latter would be released when contra bases in Honduras are dismantled. During the 30-minute ceremony, an announcer read the pardon decree and introduced officials, including President Daniel Ortega and Interior Minister Tomas Borge. Prisoners and a crowd of 3,500 relatives applauded when the announcer introduced representatives of the Organization of American States, the Red Cross and the Nicaraguan Roman Catholic Church. The prisoners filed past desks in the recreation yard to receive documents certifying their release with a formal seal and identifying them by thumb-print. The prisoners and their families rushed to embrace before boarding 60 chartered buses bearing signs for their hometowns. Among the crimes committed by the 39 who remain in prison are the murder of children, and a Sandinista prisoner who was pushed to his death from a helicopter. The authorities said all the prisoners remaining in jail also belonged to a group of former guardsmen who refused to accept work or education assignments in prison and who maintained military discipline according to their former ranks. Of the prisoners released, the officials said, 640 were in that group. The pardoned prisoners included more than 300 former guard officers. Among the officers were three colonels and 20 lieutenant colonels. According to the New York Times, most prisoners who were freed said they had been well treated in prison. Their statements confirm a consensus among human rights groups that conditions in Nicaraguan prisons meet or surpass standards in other Central American countries. (Basic data from New York Times, 03/18/89)

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