5-26-1989

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Nicaragua Expels Two U.S. Diplomats

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Friday, May 26, 1989

On May 25 at a news conference in Managua, Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto announced that the Nicaraguan government had ordered the expulsion of two US diplomats for intervening in a teachers' strike to demand higher salaries. The two diplomats are Joel Franklin Cassman, chief economic officer at the US Embassy, and Kathleen Williamson Barmon, head of a US government labor office based at the US Embassy in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. D'Escoto said the expulsion decision was taken after the two participated in a teachers' protest in Chinandega, 110 km. northwest of Managua. Later, Nicaraguan officials said the diplomats had participated in fomenting unrest in at least one other department, Leon. Williamson was given 48 hours to leave Nicaragua, and Cassman, 72 hours. D'Escoto spoke with reporters after meeting with John Leonard, US charge d'affaires. Leonard denied the charges against the diplomats, asserting the expulsions were "unjustified." Leonard said the diplomats had been invited to a meeting in Chinandega where they were carrying out normal diplomatic activities. AFP reported that some 36,000 teachers across Nicaragua have been threatening for a week to go on strike in an effort to pressure the government for higher salaries. According to government sources, Williamson arrived in Nicaragua five days ago exclusively to foment the teachers' mobilization. D'Escoto said the two had "urged teachers to ignore the laws, offering them economic assistance if they were forced to confront the authorities." He added that the diplomats' goal was part of stepped up efforts by the US Embassy to "make the government's economic adjustment plan fail and hinder the electoral process" for the February 1990 elections. The foreign minister told reporters that the US administration was "irreversibly compromised in its contempt for international norms," and that the expulsion order "teaches a lesson to any country which intends to violate Nicaragua's laws." In a letter to US Secretary of State James Baker, d'Escoto said that "the use of diplomatic status to subvert (Nicaraguan) internal order has been a constant of the US embassy, which in the past has forced Nicaraguan authorities to expel the diplomatic officials involved." Dionisio Marenco, a spokesperson for the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), said the diplomats had been ordered to leave because they were "interfering in the internal affairs" of Nicaragua. He said they "went around distributing money and exhorting the teachers to strike." In Washington, the State Department issued a statement denouncing the expulsions. The statement said, "The Government of Nicaragua has professed a desire to normalize its relations with the United States and with its neighbors. Its gratuitous expulsion of two US diplomats incompatible with such a professed desire." An unidentified State Department official was quoted by the New York Times as saying that the charges were unfounded and that Washington would order expulsion of two Nicaraguan diplomats unless Managua revoked its order. The official said the Nicaraguan authorities had apparently "panicked when they saw the teachers' union go on strike" this month. Consequently, he added, the government tried to make people believe that "the gringos are behind the strike." (Basic data from AFP, AP, Xinhua, 05/26/89; New York Times, 05/26/89)

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