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Nicaragua: Notes On 10th Anniversary Celebrations

by Deborah Tyroler

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July 17: On July 17, 1979, President Anastasio Somoza fled Nicaragua, and his family's 42-year dictatorship ended. Since then July 17 is known in Nicaragua as the "Day of Joy." On July 19, 1979, the Sandinista rebels entered Managua, and that date is celebrated as the revolution's anniversary. On July 17-18 the Nicaraguan government sponsored a "Democracy and Revolution" symposium commemorating the Day of Joy. In a two-hour speech on Monday, President Daniel Ortega said the US has an "intransigent, hegemonic imperialist attitude" toward Latin America and the rest of the Third World. He mentioned that former UN ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick and former assistant secretary of state for Inter-American affairs Elliott Abrams refused invitations to attend the anniversary celebrations. Ortega said Nicaragua has more democracy than the US because the Sandinistas have boosted literacy, reduced infant mortality, improved health services and distributed land to peasants. "The revolution means the attainment of democracy," he said. The president said more than 120,000 peasant families have benefited from land distribution and the number of families in farm cooperatives has grown to 76,715. Next, he pointed out that the number of labor unions has increased from 163 before the revolution to 873, representing 28% of workers. Ortega criticized President Bush for concerning himself with "the problems of Hungary and Poland when he has so many problems in Latin America." He described Central America and the Caribbean as "explosive territories." Washington is not interested in helping solve the economic problems of Latin America "because there is no vision, there is an underestimation of our nations" and their problems, he said. The president called on Latin Americans to unite in demanding a change in the US attitude toward their problems. "It's better to collide with US policy now...than face revolutionary struggles tomorrow," he said. On Monday night, the two popular events in Managua were the Little Miss Revolution pageant, a contest for pre-teen girls, and a dance at an open-air fairgrounds called La Pinata with a Costa Rican band.

July 18: In an interview with official newspaper Barricada, former bishop of Cuernavaca, Mexico, Sergio Mendez Arceo, said that participatory democracy has existed in Nicaragua since the revolution: "Democracy is the participation and responsibility of the people, a process which is carried out in this country." Mendez Arceo was in Managua to participate in the "Democracy and Revolution" symposium. Mendez Arceo said he was confident that the February 1990 elections will be clean, given that "the government has invited numerous observers of the electoral process, including delegates from the United Nations and the Organization of American States." The bishop said practically all sectors of Nicaraguan society have participated in the defense of the revolution. Another participant in the symposium, Nobel Peace Prize winner Argentine Adolfo Perez Esquivel, told Barricada that he agreed with Mendez Arceo in that "democracy is not possible without participation of the people in government." Perez Esquivel described the last 10 years in Nicaragua as a period struggle and suffering, but also of hope. "The Sandinista revolution is a hope, a light on the threshold of the last decade of the century." July 19: Highlighting the anniversary celebrations was a mass rally at the Plaza of the Revolution, in front of the ruins of the cathedral, never repaired after a 1972 earthquake. During a speech at the rally, President Ortega presented a detailed defense of government achievements, and critiqued the opposition party coalition known as the National Opposition Union (UNO). In his opening words, he said, "UNO is nothing," making a rhyming
slogan in Spanish. The slogan was repeated by Ortega several times during his speech, and shouted back by the audience at his invitation. More than 1,000 invited foreign guests, delegations from over 60 countries, the diplomatic corps and thousands of foreign supporters of the Sandinista government who came to commemorate the revolution attended the rally. Government-run radio stations reported that the crowd numbered more than 300,000. [In a report released July 16, AP points out that the members of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) directorate have not changed since the 1979 revolution. Some top-level officials, such as Vice President Sergio Ramirez and Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto, are not among the nine. Directorate members follow: * Daniel Ortega, 43, president and likely Sandinista presidential candidate in the February 1990 elections. His leadership style, described as hard work, and a decision-making process open to many opinions, is considered important in holding the directorate together. * Humberto Ortega, 47, defense minister, brother of President Ortega. * Bayardo Arce, 39. As vice-coordinator of the Sandinista executive commission, Arce is described as Ortega's deputy for ideology. He is often characterized as a hard-liner. * Tomas Borge, 58, the directorate's senior member, who helped found the Sandinistas in July 1961. He heads the Interior Ministry, or police and state security. Borge is also described as a hard-liner. * Luis Carrion, 37, minister of economy, industry and commerce. Carrion was born into one of Nicaragua's wealthiest families. * Carlos Nunez, 38, president of the National Assembly, the unicameral legislature. * Henry Ruiz Hernandez, 49, minister of external cooperation since 1985 and planning minister before that. * Victor Tirado, 49, head of the Department of Mass Organizations. Tirado, born in Mexico, joined the Sandinistas in 1963 and became a Nicaraguan citizen in September 1979. * Jaime Wheelock, 42, agriculture minister and son of a wealthy landowning family. (Basic data from AP, 07/16-18/89; Notimex, 07/18/89; New York Times, 07/20/89)

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