

8-25-1989

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Deborah Tyroler

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Recommended Citation

Tyroler, Deborah. "Nicaragua: Notes On Human Rights Violations Reported By Americas Watch." (1989).
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Nicaragua: Notes On Human Rights Violations Reported By Americas Watch

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Friday, August 25, 1989

Representatives of Americas Watch met recently with Nicaraguan government officials regarding allegations of a pattern of human rights abuses that if confirmed would indicate government tolerance or complicity at the highest levels of authority. The charges publicly appeared in the April 1989 Americas Watch Bulletin, including a list of 40 alleged cases of human rights violations. A total of about 80 cases were reported to the government by Americas Watch, most reported between mid-March and June 21. Americas Watch was supplied with information to disprove the charges and recently issued a follow-up to this effect. Since the release of the April bulletin, the National Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, Nicaragua's government agency charged with investigating violations, compiled the following information. According to the Commission, the war with the contras has created a climate conducive to a certain number of isolated incidents of abuse, but there has been no pattern of systematic abuse or complicity by high representatives. In less than four months, the government provided responses to 32 of the charges. The remainder continue under investigation to be concluded before year-end. Americas Watch was provided with information on 22 concluded investigations and on 10 others that are nearly complete. Of the 22 completed cases, only six were confirmed as actual rights violations perpetrated by government security personnel. Four cases involved victims who died in cross-fire between government troops and contra forces. Two cases involved persons who were found to be living, and quite healthy. Allegations of abuses in these cases were found to be fabrications. Two other cases involved persons who were killed while attempting escapes, one from prison. The other had been taken to a hospital for treatment after being wounded in combat, and tried to escape. In three cases, violations of rights occurred but the perpetrators were civilians, not government security forces. The civilians in question are currently in jail, and await prosecution. In five cases, evidence at this point is inadequate for either indictment or dropping the charges. Americas Watch was requested to supply more information. [Notes: Article 23 of the Nicaraguan Constitution establishes that the right to life in Nicaragua is inviolable. The death penalty was abolished in 1979 as one of the first reforms of the new government. Nicaragua is one of the few nations in the hemisphere where a significant number 235 of former members of the Armed Forces are completing jail sentences for human rights violations. Nicaragua encourages and maintains an open door policy in relation to visits by internationally recognized human rights organizations and has consistently advocated the adoption of similar policies by its Central American neighbors. Recently, Nicaragua presented a proposal for political verification of human rights by all five of the Central American nations as part of the regional peace process. As of Aug. 22, Americas Watch, Amnesty International and the International Red Cross were formally invited to make a head count in Nicaraguan prisons, and have been given access to the State Security Detention Centers.] (Basic data from 08/24/89 report by Agendas International, New York, NY)

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