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Deborah Tyroler

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Nicaragua: Notes On First Day Of Voter Registration

by Deborah Tyroler

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About 5,000 voter registration booths were opened throughout Nicaragua on Oct. 1. Eligible voters are estimated at about 1.9 million. President Daniel Ortega was the first in line at the booth serving his neighborhood in central Managua. In remarks to reporters, Ortega called on all Nicaraguans to register "so there will be massive participation" in the Feb. 25 general elections. The AP reported irregularities at Ortega's booth. It opened an hour late at 8 a.m., the representative of the National Opposition Union (UNO) on the board did not show up and his deputy arrived without any identification. The deputy was sent home to find his ID, but hours later had not returned. Dozens of two-member observer teams from the United Nations and the Organization of American States were present at registration booths. OAS Secretary General Joao Baena Soares led an observer team to oversee registration in the heavily populated Pacific Coast region. After visiting 11 registration booths in Leon, Nicaragua's second largest city, Baena told reporters, "I see that people are motivated, and that there's a great interest in registering." Later, the OAS secretary general told reporters he was satisfied with the overall outcome of the day's activities. UN observers heard complaints from some opposition poll workers who maintained that their credentials had been rejected by local voting authorities. The credential problems, according to the New York Times, appeared to be associated largely with first-day difficulties of a large-scale registration process. Reps. David Drier (R-Calif.), Howard Coble, (R-NC), Cass Balenger (R-NC), and Porter Goss (R-Fla.), were among those visiting registration booths. Jaime Bonilla, an UNO leader, said 30% of UNO officials scheduled to work at registration booths had not received their credentials. Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo complained that the estimated 500,000 Nicaraguans living outside the country were prevented from taking part in the February elections. On Oct. 2, UNO sent a letter to the Supreme Electoral Council denouncing irregularities in voter registration. At a press conference, UNO campaign chief Antonio Lacayo, said that a "large number" of UNO representatives were denied participation at the registration booths because the regional electoral councils had not delivered their credentials in a timely fashion. He added that some Nicaraguans did not register because they knew UNO representatives were not present. The letter was signed by UNO legal representative, Hernaldo Zuniga, who claimed that some registration booths were moved from originally designated areas, resulting in a type of forced abstention. [The UN and OAS missions will conduct separate but coordinated observer activities. Later in the campaign, the Council of Freely Elected Heads of Government, will join the monitoring effort with a 30-member monitoring team. On Oct. 1, UN technicians inaugurated a radio and satellite communications network that will link hundreds of international observers across Nicaragua until Feb. 25, 1990. Elliot Richardson is UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar's personal representative in overseeing the monitoring mission. Day-to-day operations of the observer force are handled by a UN official from Pakistan, Iqbal Riza. The UN contingent as of Oct. 1 included 29 full-time observers, technicians and specialists in electoral procedure. They are assisted by personnel from other UN agencies already operating in the country, together with 26 Nicaraguan drivers and secretaries. By November, the number of UN observers is expected to double, and then to increase again in February, when the overall number of observers is to reach at least 160. Those observers, assisted by personnel from other UN agencies, will form 80 mobile monitoring teams, a number that UN officials say will permit
close surveillance of at least 10% of all polling stations in the country, yielding a clear statistical picture of any irregularities. A similar number of teams will also be fielded by the OAS.] (Basic data from AP, AFP, 10/01/89; Notimex, 10/01/89, 10/02/89; New York Times, 10/02/89)

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