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Nicaragua: Opposition Rally In Masatepe Ends In Riot

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Dec. 10 in Masatepe, about 30 miles south of Managua, a campaign march by about 300 supporters of the National Opposition Union (UNO) was broken up by violence. In the ensuing melee, one person was killed and at least a dozen injured. [News accounts differed on the numbers of people who had assembled to hear UNO presidential candidate Violeta Barrios de Chamorro speak. The AFP reported that about 5,000 opposition supporters were on hand, and the New York Times, an estimated 10,000. Apparently, persons involved in the riot were marching in the area of the town park, and numbered about 300. The group of FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) supporters was much smaller. Contradictory news accounts indicate their number was between 15 and 25.] Journalists were told by witnesses that groups of opposition activists burned two vehicles, and looted and partially destroyed a house that was used by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) as a campaign office and also another nearby house. During the fighting in the town park, between UNO and FSLN supporters, some people in the opposition crowd shouted, "Let's burn down the Sandinista house!" and a mob went to the campaign house three blocks away and started throwing rocks. The door of the house was knocked in and a motorcycle dragged out, while others destroyed furniture and other articles inside the building. The crowd allowed the occupants of the second house to leave with several children before stoning it. Both buildings were heavily damaged. According to Notimex, some 25 persons participated in the attacks on the houses and the vehicles. Owner of the house containing the FSLN campaign office, Francisco Blanco, told Notimex that the looters removed televisions, tape recorders and other items, and burned the rest. AP cited witnesses who said that opposition activists set fire to the motorcycle removed from the FSLN office, and to a jeep with license plates from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. UNO spokespersons said the Sandinistas provoked the riot, and local FSLN spokespersons said UNO supporters were responsible. Masatepe police chief Lt. Fernando Montoya said police were following orders in not intervening in the riot until it was nearly over. "We had instructions not to get near the march," Montoya said. "Going to the disturbances meant giving them (UNO) a pretext to say that we were there to repress them." Montoya said one person was killed. AFP reported that some witnesses said participants in the riot produced knives and machetes and one man fired off an AK-47 rifle. They said police were also pelted with stones, but made no arrests. Next, AFP reported that the witnesses said those who looted the FSLN office appeared to be under the influence of alcohol. Dec. 11: The official FSLN newspaper, Barricada, said that the violence Sunday was "clearly premeditated by the leaders and activists of the UNO." The paper described the Sandinista crowd as a group of curious local citizens who had stopped to watch when they were attacked by about 300 demonstrators. In Washington, State Department spokesperson Richard Boucher said, "(Nicaragua) can hold free and fair elections without violence and intimidation, and begin the process of bringing peace to Nicaragua. Or it can continue to turn the thugs loose on peaceful opposition rallies, thereby ensuring the election results will be deemed illegitimate and that the crisis in Central America will continue." Boucher said the "Sandinista-controlled mob wielding clubs and machetes" provoked the riot, adding that international observers asked Sandinista police and security forces to intervene but "they did nothing to halt the violence." Killed in the riot was Manuel Guevara Calero, who was claimed by both the Sandinistas and UNO as one of their followers. Both sides held marches in

honor of the dead activist who was to be buried Monday afternoon. Police arrested Santos Martin Sanchez, Rosa Maria Berta Lopez, Jesus Victor Pavon and Irving Isaac Lopez, who were found in possession of items taken during the looting of the two houses in Masatepe. The Nicaraguan Interior Ministry promulgated a series of new measures to prevent future disturbances during the electoral campaign. Police were instructed to maintain distance from political gatherings, and to act only in cases where it is necessary to do so to avoid manipulation of police actions and decisions. The ministry reiterated prohibition of the sale of alcoholic beverages at political gatherings and events, and the possession of any type of weapon at the scene of such assemblies. Police are ordered to arrest persons engaged in selling alcohol or carrying weapons in such circumstances. Next, police were ordered to carry and display identification whenever they are called on to break up violent incidents in order to avoid confusion. (Basic data from several reports by Notimex, 12/10/89, 12/11/89; AP, AFP, 12/11/89; New York Times, 12/12/89)

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