

1-12-1990

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## Recommended Citation

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## Nicaragua: Contras Accused Of Killing Religious In Ambush

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Friday, January 12, 1990

Jan. 1: On Monday evening, gunmen ambushed a car carrying religious workers on a road near Puerto Cabezas, resulting in the deaths of two nuns, Sister Maureen Courtney, 45, and Sister Teresa de Jesus Rosales, 24. Sister Francesca Marie Colomer, and Fr. Paul Schmitz, Auxiliary Bishop of Bluefields, were injured. Sister Jovita Winkel, a member of the general council of the Sisters of St. Agnes of Fond du Lac, Wisc., was cited by AP as saying that Courtney, a native of Milwaukee, Wisc., had lived in Nicaragua for the last 12 years, and had been involved in pastoral work, including teaching religious classes in Waspan, Nicaragua, at the time of the attack. Sisters Rosales and Colomer were residents of Puerto Cabezas. Schmitz, 46, a native of Fond du Lac, went to Nicaragua as a missionary in 1972 and was ordained Auxiliary Bishop in 1984, according to Brother Larry La Cross, a spokesperson for the Capuchin order's provincial headquarters in Detroit. Sister Jesus Rosales was a Nicaraguan citizen. Sister Colomer is also Nicaraguan. Thomas Quigley, adviser on Latin American affairs at the Washington-based US Catholic Conference, said he spoke to the Provincial Superior of the Capuchins in Managua. The account given to him and cited by AP follows: Two carloads of church people started out, including Bishop Salvador Schlaeffler of Bluefields, and Bishop Schmitz, his auxiliary. They were going to a meeting scheduled for Puerto Cabezas, to meet with leaders of the Miskito community. They drove from Managua to Siuna en route to Puerto Cabezas. Schlaeffler and the people in that car decided not to continue driving that night because it was late. Schmitz and the three sisters of Saint Agnes continued on. At about 7 p.m., they were ambushed, resulting in two dead and two wounded. Radio Catolica reported the attack, as did the government-run Voz de Nicaragua. The government station said the attackers were "contra forces encouraged by the invasion of US troops in Panama." Jan. 2: President Daniel Ortega called for "the international community and the political and social forces of the country to condemn this brutal crime" against the religious workers. Before boarding a plane in Puerto Cabezas, Bishop Schmitz told reporters that "it was very dark outside" when the attack occurred. "I only know that a mine went off or a grenade and there was heavy shooting afterward...We identified ourselves but nobody came to the pickup," he said. Schmitz was wounded by a bullet in the left arm and was admitted Tuesday night to a military hospital in Managua along with Sister Francisca Colomer, who suffered wounds in the face and body. Church officials said the group was driving in a white pickup with yellow crosses painted on the sides. Regional deputy commander Julio Rugama said the church workers were ambushed by about 60 contras who operate in the region. The military commander whose men evacuated the wounded, Lt. Col. Juan Lorenzo Santana, said the religious workers' vehicle appeared to have been attacked because they came upon a group of about 10 contras who were planting a mine in the roadway. Jaime Arauz, one of two local civilians questioned by government officials on Tuesday, told reporters the two had been kidnapped by a group of contras who said they were waiting to ambush an army convoy. Jan. 3: In a radio interview monitored in Managua, contra spokesperson Aristides Sanchez Herdocia, said: "The resistance is incapable of doing this. We are Catholics and support the work of the Catholic Church. We have done absolutely nothing." White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater called the attack "outrageous" and said it "underscores the need to bring peace, stability and democracy to Nicaragua." "We have no information on who is responsible for this attack and we note that the

church officials themselves have no indication either...The Nicaraguan government has provided no information to substantiate its charge that the contras launched the attack," said Fitzwater. Fitzwater added, "We hope the Sandinistas do not seek to obscure this tragedy by engaging in a propaganda battle." An unidentified State Department spokesperson cited by AFP said \$50 million in non-lethal aid to the contras approved early last year would be halted if the contras were found to be responsible for the attack. Under this legislation, the actions of the contras must be monitored to ensure that no assistance goes to any of them who engage in offensive operations or human rights abuses. AP cited Sister Jean Steffes, mother superior for the Sisters of St. Agnes, from Fond du Lac as saying: "Both sisters were killed instantly as result of gunfire. The white pickup truck in which the group was traveling was clearly marked with yellow crosses...When those still alive in the truck shouted they were religious, the firing ceased, but by then two were dead." According to a report by the New York Times, Catholic clergy based in the Atlantic coastal region said they were well aware of contra activities near the scene of the killings, and they had "no doubt" that the rebels were responsible. In the words of Rev. David Zywiec, a US-born Capuchin priest who works in Puerto Cabezas: "We are all familiar with the road they were using. We have no reason to question what the Sandinista authorities have told us." Bishop Salvador Schlaeffler (also a US citizen), who was traveling with the slain nuns until shortly before they were killed, declined to comment directly on the contras' role. He said the attack could have been avoided if the church workers had not tried to travel at night in an area of known contra activity, and if their recently purchased pickup truck had been familiar to contra units operating in the area. Schlaeffler, who was the victim of a contra ambush in 1985, said he decided to spend the night in Siuna, but the group in the other car, driven by Sister Courtney, decided to continue on the isolated highway to the next town, Mina la Rosita, and were attacked about an hour into the two-hour trip. The Times cited church officials who viewed the damaged vehicle before it was removed from the scene who said that it appeared to have been struck by a single rocket or rocket propelled grenade on the hood just in front of the windshield, spraying the inside of the vehicle with shrapnel. The vehicle was also riddled with bullets, they said. In official press accounts, the Nicaraguan government described the killings as a "premeditated ambush," and connected it to growing tensions between the US and Nicaragua over the invasion of Panama, saying the contras had been emboldened by the Bush administration's use of military force in the region. In the New York Times (dated Jan. 3, published Jan. 4), Elaine Sciolino writes: "The killing of an American nun on a highway in a remote area of Nicaragua on New Year's Day highlights the differing standards Washington sometimes places on protecting American lives in Latin America." Sciolino cited unidentified State Department officials who said that US embassies in Managua and Tegucigalpa were making inquiries, but that Washington has no plans to conduct an investigation at the ambush site. This decision was in part justified by the Nicaraguan government's expulsion of US embassy employees in Managua after US troops raided the home of the Nicaraguan ambassador in Panama City. [Ed. note: There are more US Embassy employees per capita in Nicaragua than in most countries throughout the world with which the US maintains full diplomatic and trade relations. At present, Nicaragua is the target of US trade embargo.] Sciolino cites Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-CT) as saying that much of the violence in Nicaragua "can be blamed squarely and unambiguously on the US-backed contra rebels, who were scheduled to be demobilized and resettled a month ago with US assistance." She writes that Washington's reaction to the Nicaraguan incident was similar to its absence of support for Jennifer Jean Casolo, the US citizen arrested in El Salvador on charges of hiding arms and ammunition for the rebels. Sciolino cited a spokesperson for Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) who said it was unlikely the Bush administration will pursue the killings in Nicaragua. Notimex reported on statements by

civilians Ronald Dolores Mairena and Jaime Arauz Lopez who witnessed the attack on the religious workers. In Puerto Cabezas, the two young persons said they were kidnapped hours before the attack by a column of contras made up of about 60 men. They were told they would be taken to Honduras. The witnesses said that at about 6:30 p.m. local time, the contras attacked with rifles and rocket launchers the truck carrying the religious workers on the Siuna-Rosita road. They said the contras did not ask the persons inside the vehicle to identify themselves, but began shooting as soon as the truck appeared. Lt. Col. Lorenzo Santana, military chief for the region, said the contra group was under the command of Evaristo Aguinaga, and is part of the contras' Jorge Salazar III task force which operates in Boaco and Chontales departments. Santana said Sandinista troops have tracked their movements in the area for some time, and that they fled the site of the attack after being notified that government troops were on their way. The two witnesses, he said, managed to escape during the confusion of the contras' flight. Jan. 4: State Department spokesperson Adam Shub said Washington had "reached no conclusion" on who was responsible and had requested Managua to allow US diplomats to visit the site of the attack. Shub told reporters that the contras had no units in the vicinity of La Rosita, and that the Nicaraguan government had not reported on contra presence in the area for over a year. On the other hand, he added, there had been reports of attacks by renegade Nicaraguan troops against regular forces in that area last October. Shub also said the Nicaraguan Interior Ministry "has been involved in the past in fabricated alleged contra incidents," according to defected Nicaraguan officials. [Ed. note: Shub did not provide names of defectors, nor of specific incidents and dates of Ministry agents disguised as contras "committing atrocities." Nor did reporters on the scene request details, examples, or confirmation of even one such incident by an independent source.] Mother Superior Paquita Alcacer, head of the Immaculate Conception School in Managua, told AP: "We know the area [where the attack occurred] is full of contras. It is logical that if they (contras) are capable of killing peasants, defenseless women and children, then there is no doubt" they attacked the pickup truck on Jan. 1. She added, "that is what I think, which doesn't necessarily mean it's the truth, but I think so." Sister Francisca Colomer, a Nicaraguan Miskito Indian wounded by grenade shrapnel was flown to Milwaukee Thursday morning on a plane that carried the body of Sister Maureen Courtney home for burial. The other dead nun, Sister Teresa Rosales, a Miskito Indian, was buried Wednesday in Puerto Cabezas. Jan. 8: In a report distributed Monday, Witness for Peace described interviews with Mairena, 16, and Arauz, 20, both residents of Ojo de Agua. The two young men told WFP investigators that they were abducted at about 2 p.m. Jan. 1. The same contras ambushed the truck carrying the religious workers at about 6:30 p.m. near Ojo de Agua, 20 miles east of Siuna. Arauz told WFP he recognized the leader of the band, who called himself "Ruben," as Evaristo Aguinaga, a local farmer who had joined the contras several years earlier. Another contra was called "AK-China." Mairena and Arauz said the contras took them to the main road between Siuna and Rosita, where the contras said they were going to lay an ambush. They arrived at the road at about 5:30 or 6:00, and about 10 to 15 contras remained at the road, while the rest of the column went ahead. At this time, it was raining and already dark. Mairena said, "While they were taking up positions for the ambush, they left us guarded by a contra. The contra watched over us about 30 or 50 yards from where they were going to do the ambush. While we were there, the contra told us not to run, because if we ran he would kill us." At about 6:30 p.m. Mairena and Arauz said they heard a vehicle approach, which the contras attacked with a rocket-propelled grenade and automatic rifle fire. The contra who was guarding them left the two men to join the other contras, and warned them again that if they ran they would be killed. Nonetheless, the two escaped and spent the night sleeping by a river. The next morning the two young men returned to the road and went to the home of Hipolito Gutierrez, a friend

who lives about 400 yards from the ambush site. An hour after the ambush occurred, members of the military reserve from a resettlement community three miles west of Ojo de Agua arrived and removed the dead and wounded from the vehicle, and carried them to the Gutierrez home. Mairena and Arauz told WFP they did not know who had been ambushed until they arrived at the Gutierrez residence. They said they did not believe the contras knew who was traveling in the vehicle. Jan. 9: In Managua, Mairena and Arauz told reporters of their experiences on Jan. 1, and confirmed that the contras were responsible for the attack on the religious workers. [Basic data from AP, AFP, 01/02-04/90; Notimex, 01/03/90, 01/04/90, New York Times, 01/03/90, 01/04/90; 01/08/90 report by Witness for Peace (Washington, DC); DPA, 01/09/90]

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