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Deborah Tyroler

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Nicaragua: Year-end Human Rights Report

by Deborah Tyroler

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In its recent year-end report, the Nicaraguan National Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (NCPPHR) said the human rights situation in Nicaragua improved considerably in 1989, compared to 1987 and 1988. The major problem continues to be "terrorist actions" by the contras. The CNPPDH documented an increase in contra attacks since the "humanitarian" aid package was passed by the US Congress last year. Since September 1989, contra activities have been oriented toward impeding or boycotting the electoral process. In 1988, the NCPPHR documented 1,004 contra attacks against settlements and cooperatives, and ambushes of civilians vehicles. In the first nine months of 1989, 1,523 contra attacks against the above targets were counted by the Commission. NCPPHR figures are based upon its own investigations as well as information from the Nicaraguan government, Witness for Peace and rural religious groups. According to the NCPPHR, 146 human rights violations allegedly committed by agents of the Nicaraguan government were reported in 1989. Of the total, the Commission has concluded investigations of 120 cases. Forty of the alleged violations have been corroborated by the Commission. The principal target of denunciations is the Sandinista police (93 cases), followed by the Armed Forces (15), judicial authorities (14), penal system employees (10), and State Security (8). The remaining complaints were lodged against the social security, agrarian reform, labor and health ministries. Police were primarily charged with brutality during arrest and illegal detention. The NCPPHR has expressed concerns regarding inadequacies of Nicaragua's judicial system. For instance, over 50% of all imprisoned persons are awaiting trial. According to a study conducted by the Commission, "the effectiveness of the right to [legal] defense in Nicaragua is very limited." The Commission also criticized judges for "a lack of initiative...in ensuring a more belligerent defense posture." Also to blame for the inefficient court system are "legislative limitations, the existence of antiquated laws,...the very structure of judicial power" and scarce finances. In the last four years, according to the Commission, 79 summary executions by Sandinista soldiers. As of year-end 1989, 52% of those cases had been investigated, resulting in the convictions of 17 officers and soldiers, sentenced to prison terms of between six and 30 years. Other members of the armed forces were sanctioned for lesser offenses. The Commission has emphasized that "Nicaragua is the only country in Central America where the government punishes its own military for crimes of this nature." [Basic data from 01/06/90 report by Nicaline News Network (Managua, Nicaragua)]

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