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On Strike & Violence In Nicaragua: Summary Of Events & Statements, July 5-july 11

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On June 27, the National Workers' Front (FNT) announced plans for a series of partial work stoppages in public and private workplaces beginning July 2 to pressure the government into resuming negotiations with labor unions on several issues. FNT strategy included expanding the labor protest to a general strike if the government failed to resume talks. [See CAU, 07/04/90, 07/06/90 for earlier coverage on strike.] The Front is comprised of the Sandinista Workers' Central (CST), Association of Farm Workers (ATC), National Union of Employees (UNE), National Union of Journalists (UPN), CONAPRO Heroes and Martyrs, Federation of Health Workers (FETSALUD), and the Nicaraguan Teachers Association (ANDEN). According to the FNT, the government reneged on accords following a general strike in mid-May, and suspended talks with labor union leaders in late June. In May President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro's government pledged to refrain from dismissing public employees solely on grounds of political preference. FNT spokespersons said that the government has implemented "mass dismissals" of civil servants sympathetic to the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) since the earlier strike. In addition, government officials had agreed (and then ignored) to refrain from privatizing certain agricultural cooperatives that are currently judged productive and economically viable. Privatization in this context translates to a "review" of lands confiscated by the FSLN government at the request of former landowners. Next, the FNT insists on the participation of Nicaraguan labor organizations in the economic policymaking process, as specified under the country's constitution. Labor leaders say the current government has devalued the currency nearly every other day, implemented price hikes throughout the economy, eliminated subsidies on public transport and basic goods and services, and plans to cut the public sector workforce by 40%. Meanwhile, government officials have developed no substantive policies to reduce unemployment and offset the accelerated deterioration of Nicaraguan workers' standard of living caused by its economic program to the present and in the future. Other FNT demands include a \$200 per month minimum wage for public employees, and an increase in the minimum wage for all Nicaraguan workers. The current minimum wage is equivalent to \$26 per month. In May, the government agreed to a substantial salary hike for public employees. However, because of spiralling inflation in part the result of the government's numerous currency devaluations and corresponding price hikes on consumer goods and services, workers' purchasing power continues to deteriorate at an accelerated pace. Consumer price level inflation between April 25 and late June has been estimated at about 300%. The FNT also opposes government plans to privatize many of the businesses and industries nationalized after 1979. In a July 10 communique, the FNT said: "Our struggle is essentially for job security and a minimum wage that permits a decent standard of living for our neediest families who are daily victimized by...continually rising prices created by the UNO administration's artificial policies. A collective agreement with the government has proved elusive. After the government reneged on certain recent accords..., the FNT decided to call a general strike. "After announcing that negotiations with labor unions had ended, the Labor Ministry declared the FNT strike to be 'political,' and therefore, illegal and non-existent. With approximately 100,000 workers on strike, and more planning to

join the work stoppage, most organized workers in Nicaragua will be participating in this 'non-existent' strike for economic survival. "Next, government officials announced that as of July 9, union members' pickets, demonstrations and other collective actions will be outlawed and repressed. FNT spokespersons denounced the statement, asserting that Nicaraguans have constitutional rights to strike, and to assembly. "Even under its emergency decrees during the war with the contras, the previous government did not resort to repression against workers resembling the behavior adopted by this government in its first two months... "Nicaraguan workers will not be intimidated nor coerced by threats and unconstitutional actions perpetrated by the UNO government. Ours is a just cause and we are using the constitutional and internationally sanctioned recourse of the strike for the defense of our legitimate right to economic survival." July 5: In Managua, Central American University (UCA) students occupied the National TV System (SNTV) in support of public employees demanding the reinstatement of two workers dismissed from SNTV. According to Nicaragua Network, the fired persons were put back to work. University students also staged demonstrations in several other locations in Managua. Employees at INSSBI (Ministry of Social Security and Welfare) and MIDINRA (Agrarian Reform Ministry) joined the strike after the arrests of FNT leaders. (See CAU 04/06/90.) On Thursday evening, negotiations between the FNT and the UNO government commenced. Government negotiators said they would discuss less than half of the strikers' 14 demands, and postponed talks until Friday. The FNT announced that it would participate in discussions on all demands, or none. Nicaragua Network reported strike actions and demonstrations underway in Matagalpa, Granada, Somoto, Esteli, and Jinotepe. Next, in the past few days, urban workers and farmers in Juigalpa staged demonstrations protesting the government's economic policies, and plans to return confiscated lands to Somoza-era owners. July 6: Marvin Antonio Ponce, 18, a strike supporter, was shot to death by unidentified persons on a motorcycle. [On July 7, thousands of students and workers accompanied the young man's casket from the hospital to his home. Thousands participated in a funeral service for Ponce on Sunday.] According to Nicaragua Network, residents reported that the "rural police" (former contras) were being mobilized near Esteli, and the El Almendro contra resettlement area. Negotiations with FNT leaders were suspended by government officials who described union demands as unreasonable. In turn, the FNT said the government was not bargaining in good faith. Officials offered a 43% salary hike for the lowest-paid civil servants, and to subsidize transport for teachers and students. Workers who failed to return to their jobs on Monday were threatened with dismissal. July 9: By 6:30 a.m., barricades comprised of paving stones, debris, and in some cases, burning tires, obstructed intersections throughout Managua, and the city of Leon. By 9:30 a.m., anti-riot police had dismantled barricades, opening up transit in most major thoroughfares. The Transportation and Economy and Development Ministries brought in non-unionized workers by truck to drive buses and fill other public employee positions. Interior Minister Carlos Hurtado threatened to use all necessary force to quell the strike. FNT spokespersons said 87,000 workers had joined the strike, in addition to an estimated 40,000 students. In Managua, workers at government ministries and many state-run utilities and service companies electricity, telephone, city buses were on strike. In Matagalpa, between 8,000 and 10,000 farm workers had walked off the job. Also in Matagalpa, thousands of strikers and supporters marched through the streets to a police station where union leader Rodolfo Blandon was detained. After his release, Blandon said conditions in Nicaragua are reminiscent of the Somoza era when the National Guard regularly arrested union leaders. When Antonio Jarquin, leader of the Confederation of Nicaraguan Workers (CTN), arrived at the Labor Ministry accompanied by a few dozen supporters, strikers and their sympathizers responded by throwing rocks. Police used teargas to disperse the crowd, and removed barricades

the strikers had erected near the Ministry building. The CTN is a member-group of the anti-Sandinista Permanent Confederation of Workers (CPT), established in 1989. Police removed strikers from the Construction and Transportation Ministry (MiCoTrans) compound, and dismantled a barricade. When police were called to the Labor Ministry, strikers reoccupied the compound. The FSLN national directorate issued a communique calling for negotiations between striking unions and the government. Confrontation, said the FSLN, would lead only to chaos. Employees of the National TV System (SNTV) occupied the station early Monday afternoon. Shortly after the occupation, an electricity blackout caused by a storm cut off transmission. Power was restored in time for viewers to watch the 7 p.m. soap opera. During the broadcast, a message trailed across the bottom of viewers' TV screens: "To the relatives of SNTV workers, don't worry. We are at our work stations." Managua's international airport was shut down and customs workers closed off the border with Costa Rica. Clashes between strikers and opponents in capital city streets resulted in injuries to about 30 people, according to AFP. Witnesses cited by Nicaragua Network said a man was shot to death during a street fight at a textile mill in Managua. Local radio broadcasts reported that two persons had been killed during the weekend in street confrontations in other Nicaraguan cities. On Monday night, police used bulldozers to clear away barricades erected by strikers throughout the city. FNT leader Lucio Jimenez warned of "catastrophe and chaos" if the government failed to immediately reopen negotiations on union demands. He called on Nicaraguans to support the general strike with "civic forms of struggle." Notimex reported that over 100,000 workers have joined the strike. Radio Sandino reported that five persons had been killed, and dozens injured in the conflict. Anti-Sandinista crowds armed with sticks, machetes and firearms, attacked several workplaces occupied by the strikers, forcing anti-riot police to intervene with clubs and tear gas. The Chamorro family's newspaper, La Prensa, was surrounded by a crowd of armed strike supporters who prevented workers from entering. At several points, riot troops were called in to separate the factions. The troops, trained and equipped under the previous government, appeared to obey orders and maintain rigid discipline. According to the New York Times, the police limited themselves to halting the violence. In a statement late Monday, former president Daniel Ortega blamed government economic policies for the strike, and asserted that the FSLN was making every effort to resolve the crisis. He blamed Chamorro's "extremist supporters" for the uproar. Ortega warned against any government attempts to break the strike: "This conflict cannot be resolved by force. Any such attempt would be an invitation to general chaos." Dozens of student supporters of the strike seized Radio Nicaragua (formerly Radio Nicaragua) shortly before 5 p.m. Two hours later, a student announced over the radio that police told them to leave, and they were doing so peacefully. The Labor Ministry warned that strike leaders could be arrested and tried for fomenting public disturbances, a charge that carries a mandatory sentence of six months to two years imprisonment. In a nationally broadcast message over state-run radio and television on Monday evening, President Barrios de Chamorro said she had called out the army to quell protests. The president called for restraint, urging "democratic Nicaraguans not to let themselves be provoked, and not to answer violence with violence, which has already claimed victims." Chamorro asserted that the FSLN is directing the nationwide strike and the unrest. July 10: AFP reported that the army had ignored orders to intervene. Government and military spokespersons ignored questions by journalists on why the army had not been deployed. On Tuesday morning, virtually all main intersections in Managua were obstructed by barricades which were re-erected Monday night. Police and army troops pulled down roadblocks and cleaned up after street bonfires but did not oust strikers from government ministries and state-owned businesses they occupy. Strikers continued to build roadblocks to replace those taken down. Gunfire spread from the working-class

neighborhoods of eastern Managua to the central part of the city. Armed strike opponents were holed up at the offices of the pro-government radio station Radio Corporacion. Members of the group said they were protecting the station from Sandinistas who wanted to burn it. The unrest cut off electricity and water service to most of Managua. Mail service and operator-assisted phone calls have been suspended since last week. Police said at least three people had been killed and about 100 injured. Hospitals, according to AFP, reported much lower casualty figures. Late Tuesday, a government statement expressed hope that the situation would be resolved peacefully. Police and army troops removed an armed anti-Sandinista group that was occupying Radio Corporacion facilities at about midnight. Witnesses cited by AP said the group, which had been using Radio Corporacion as its headquarters, shot one of the soldiers and pulled another from their vehicle. The state-run Radio Nicaragua reported that "a minority of some 3,000 armed Sandinistas" had control of the city and were holding more than a million residents hostage. AP cited witnesses who said soldiers were helping build barricades despite orders that they restore peace in the capital. July 11: The FNT asked the government to reopen negotiations immediately to end the street fighting, and the nationwide strike. A communique read over Radio Ya said, "In agreement with what the constitutional government expressed, we urge the start of negotiations between the government and the FNT to find a solution to the demands presented by the workers." The FNT proposed that negotiations begin at 2 p.m. local time. Next, the organization called on strikers "to create conditions that favor the start of negotiations by allowing circulation of citizens and transportation at the points where Sandinista police demand it." The statement indicated that the union was calling an informal truce for several hours. Following the FNT communique, a few barricades came down. Strikers still occupied most government ministries and some state-run companies. Air traffic controllers went back to work Wednesday and said the international airport was open, although no flights were arriving or departing. There were no new reports of casualties Wednesday. Explosions and gunfire were heard throughout Managua into the early morning hours. Barricades remained on city streets, and police used bulldozers to try to clear the streets. US State Department spokesperson Richard Boucher said, "We see this strike as a politically-motivated effort by the Sandinistas to undermine the economic recovery plan of the Chamorro government." In Panama City, a Southern Command spokesperson said a US C-130 military transport will airlift on July 12 "administrative supplies" to the US Embassy in Managua. The spokesperson said no US troops were being sent to Nicaragua, the airlift being a "routine flight." According to AFP, rumors had spread in Panama on US plans to invade Nicaragua. DPA (Deutsche Presse-Agentur) reported that gunfire was exchanged in several Managua neighborhoods Wednesday, and that five persons had been killed and approximately 100 injured since Friday. The same source cited unidentified observers as saying that armed former contras were involved, and that the FSLN had expressed fear of US military intervention. Witnesses said they had recognized at least 15 contra leaders among the pro-government crowds fighting with strikers and their supporters in the streets. At about noon, Radio Corporacion's transmitter and antenna were blown up. No one claimed responsibility for the dynamite explosion. Station director Castillo Osejo blamed "the Sandinistas, because nobody else would be interested in doing such a thing." AP reported that former president Ortega had denounced Radio Corporacion for calling on the government to request US military intervention to end the strikes. Late Wednesday, President Barrios de Chamorro announced she would negotiate with strike leaders. Army chief Gen. Humberto Ortega told reporters at the same news conference that soldiers would quiet Managua within hours. Ortega said the army "will never carry out a coup against any government here, much less the government of Dona Violeta. But neither will the army and police fire on the people." The president reversed her earlier insistence that the strike must end before talks could

begin. She said she was willing to negotiate once the streets were cleared of barricades, basic public services were restored and strikers cleared from government installations. Ortega said four people had been killed and 15 to 20 wounded in confrontations between strikers and government supporters. The Nicaraguan Human Rights Commission earlier estimated 84 injured. AP reported that a truce of sorts had been established Wednesday night, and talks were underway. Presidency Minister Antonio Lacayo and FNT leader Lucio Jimenez headed the government and union teams, respectively. The Pentagon refused comment on rumors in Canada and Nicaragua on the movement of soldiers from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, or the US Southern Command in Panama. [Basic data from Nicaragua Network (Washington, DC and Managua), 07/05/90, 07/09/90, 07/10/90; AFP, 07/10/90, 07/11/90; Notimex, 07/09/90, 07/11/90; New York Times, 07/10/90; AP, 07/10/90, 07/11/90; DPA, 07/11/90]

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