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The Contras & The Nicaraguan Peasantry, Part 1

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. Robinson LADB News Analyst On Oct. 2, a group of former contras stormed police barracks in the northern Nicaraguan town of Waslala. Six people died in the confrontation, including Sandinistas and former contras. Barely three months had passed since newly- inaugurated President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro declared, at a much-heralded ceremony culminating the contra demobilization process, that the war in Nicaragua was over. But the Waslala incident, the most recent in a spate of violent confrontations in the countryside, underscored that the war in Nicaragua is not over. Rather, it has pushed on into new arenas, involving a redefinition of the actors and the roles they played in the "contra war" of the 1980s. Nicaraguans' hopes for lasting peace are fading, as thousands of demobilized contras roam the countryside, engaging in a wave of increasingly violent land takeovers and clashing with both Sandinista supporters and the new government in the process. The backdrop to these mounting tensions is a rural crisis which, never fully resolved under the Sandinista government, has been aggravated by the demobilization of the contras and by the agrarian policies of the new authorities. The first land invasions by ex-contras took place in July, followed by several takeovers during August in diverse locations in the north, central and Pacific coastal areas of the country. By September, the takeovers turned violent, involving groups of armed contras and leading to near anarchy in some parts of the countryside. "This is no- man's land," warned the head of the National Union of Farmers and Cattle Ranchers (UNAG), Daniel Nunez, from the northern province of Matagalpa, where some 2,000 contras had invaded cooperatives, intimidated townspeople and gained control of 30 kilometers of highway. Such scenes were repeated in neighboring provinces, including Jinotega, where former contra commander "El Tigrillo" announced that his men were "returning to the fight" because they do not agree with the settlement the contras reached with the government. The motives behind these events are varied. The takeovers have included both well-organized, political attacks on Sandinista cooperatives, as well as spontaneous invasions by land-hungry ex-contras facing desperate economic conditions. The increasingly volatile situation is bound up with the history of political alliances and social conflict over the past 10 years. **Contras and Peasants** The contras started out at the beginning of the 1980s as bands of former Somocista Guardsmen, in alliance with the politicians from Nicaragua's traditional parties. Through a combination of CIA programs and misguided Sandinista agrarian policies, the ranks of the contras swelled as the decade progressed, and Nicaraguan peasants came to predominate in the movement. The politicians returned to Managua in 1989 to take part in the electoral process. Most of the Somocista Guard commanders had been displaced through successive rebellions and restructuring by a younger generation of field commanders, mainly peasants who had come up through the ranks. By the time of the 1990 elections, the "Nicaraguan Resistance" was essentially a peasant army. Within hours of Chamorro's electoral victory last February, contra leaders boasted that they would shortly be marching into Managua as the victorious armed forces of the new government. In their view, the Resistance had been largely responsible for bringing about the Sandinistas' electoral defeat, and they had the right to share in the victor's banquet. In the following weeks, however, it became clear that this was to be a government dominated by heirs to the traditional landed oligarchy. They had no plans of including the contras in the official power structure, much less in the armed forces. Having thus been denied a role in the government, the

contra combatants made clear that they were not prepared to turn over their weapons without a substantial bounty in return. After several weeks of tense, stop-and-go negotiations, and with the spectre of civil war hanging over the new government, the contras were finally enticed into demobilization by the promise that they could form semi- autonomous "development poles" around the country. According to the May 30 agreement signed by the new authorities and the contra leadership, the poles could be placed in 23 different locations totalling 3,280 square miles nearly one-fifth of Nicaraguan territory. The contras would also be able to create their own police force to patrol the poles. In addition, the government committed itself to prioritize social and development projects and job creation investments in the poles. The US Congress earmarked \$47 million of the \$300 million aid package for Nicaragua specifically for demobilized contras and their families. The deal negotiated with the Chamorro government did not mean the disappearance of the contras as an organized force, but rather transformation from an armed movement with a political wing into a political party with an armed wing. In July, several contra field commanders announced the formation of the "Nicaraguan Resistance Civic Organization" (RN-OC), as a rural-based political party, to replace the military organization. Having been disarmed and excluded from power, the RN- OC is, in essence, an opposition peasant party. Of the approximately 60,000 demobilized contras and family members now inside Nicaragua, all but 15% are poor, mostly illiterate, peasants. Historic Pressures for Land The contra land demand took place in the context of existing problems of landlessness in the countryside. The Sandinista agrarian reform, although it was by far the most comprehensive ever undertaken in Central America, never fully satisfied the demand of Nicaragua's landless peasants. Land tenure under the Somoza dictatorship was one of the most highly concentrated in Latin America and agrarian reform was at the heart of the Sandinista program. Between 1979 and 1990, just over half the country's arable land was reformed, benefitting 120,000 families, or some 60% of the rural population. However, having suspended expropriations as part of an effort to maintain an alliance with medium- and large-scale producers, the Sandinistas had run out of available land to distribute by the late 1980s, and some 40,000 rural families were still landless. The demobilization of the 60,000 contras and family members added to this pool of landless, and dramatically increased pressures in the countryside for land. And the tensions will be further aggravated when repatriation begins in late October for some 20,200 to 30,000 family members of contras still in Honduras. Accustomed to having their basic needs met by US funding, the contras suddenly found themselves not only landless, but indigent. The World Bank estimates that 70% of the rural population lives in "extreme poverty." One ex-contra complained, "We earned more when we were fighting." False Promises Despite its expressed commitment to the Resistance members, the government quickly found that there were real limits, both political and economic, to granting new lands to the contras. In particular, the Chamorro team's economic policies and the political alliances necessary to sustain them ran against the logic of distributing lands to tens of thousands of contras-cum-poor peasants. The UNO platform calls for what some critics refer to as "agrarian counter-reform," or reversal of the Sandinistas' reform program. The government's agrarian policies revolve around two goals: privatization of the economy, and the promotion of agro-exports. The first goal is in line with its philosophy of a "social market economy," in which the market determines property relations including land tenure. In this scheme, the state is limited to traditional regulatory functions and to production that the private sector is unable to undertake. The second goal aims at creating conditions for economic recovery by increasing foreign exchange earnings, and stabilizing the external sector and the country's finances. In one of its first measures, the new government issued two presidential decrees on May 11 Decree 10-90 and Decree 11-90. These decrees, respectively, provide for the renting of public lands to private

concerns, and for a review of all lands redistributed since 1979, with a view towards returning those "unjustly confiscated" to their original owners. Whether or not privatization makes sense in terms of economic efficiency, it has generated social tensions between agricultural workers on the one hand, and the government and agro-business on the other. Similarly, the return of confiscated lands to their original owners, many of whom left the country in 1979, is causing insecurity among those who were beneficiaries of the Sandinistas' land distribution. The Chamorro government has said it would not take land away from peasants who are working it. But it has also promised the large-scale producers and businesspersons that properties would be returned, and has not indicated how it will juggle the contradictory interests of these two sectors. The Government's Balancing Act The "technocrats" of the Chamorro team would clearly like to perpetuate the balancing act rather than casting their lot with one side or the other. Yet conflicting sectors are simultaneously exerting pressures on the government and on each other, creating a potentially explosive situation. The Chamorro cabinet faces increasingly stiff opposition from businesspersons and landowners, represented in the powerful Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP), and from the right-wing in UNO, led by Vice President Virgilio Godoy, which constituted major power bases in the coalition that brought Chamorro to the presidency. They are demanding, in return for political allegiance, that the government waste no time in privatizing state holdings and in the wholesale return of properties to their original owners. (cont.)

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