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Who's Who In Nicaraguan Human Rights

by Deborah Tyroler

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[The following interview with Vilma Nunez, former Nicaraguan Supreme Court justice and coordinator of the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH), appeared in Nicaragua Monitor (#15, December 1991/January 1992), newsletter of the Nicaragua Network Education Fund.] Monitor: There are several human rights organizations in Nicaragua now and it is sometimes difficult to know which is which. Could you tell us something about these groups? Nunez: There are three human rights groups functioning in Nicaragua now. The oldest is the National Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (CNPPDH). It was founded in 1977 to denounce the human rights violations of the Somoza regime. I was one of its founding members. Its makeup was heterogeneous. All members were anti-Somocista but not all were revolutionary. The CNPPDH gained great respect for its work. Monitor: What happened to the Permanent Commission after the Sandinistas overthrew Somoza? Nunez: The Commission became consistently more conservative...It was fine for the Commission to maintain a critical position in relation to the government, but instead it became ever more confrontational. Monitor: What was the group's relationship with the US? Nunez: Around 1985 the CNPPDH became involved with the Puebla Institute and other US right-wing groups in campaigns to damage the prestige of the revolution. Since the government of Violeta Chamorro took power, the Commission has been attacking the army (Ejercito Popular Sandinista-EPS) and the police in an attempt to drive a wedge between the government and the armed forces. Commission members are making a mistake: here the coercive powers of the state are under the constitution and the president. Unfortunately, the Commission does not look at the total human rights situation in the country. It has a political agenda and only examines cases that might reflect badly on the Sandinistas. Monitor: Where does the Commission get its funding? Nunez: The Commission does not reveal where its funding sources. We have a report from the US Embassy showing that the Commission obtains direct funding from the US government as well as from US private organizations. The president of the Commission is Lino Hernandez, who pertains to Vice President Virgilio Godoy's camp. Monitor: Isn't there another human rights group connected to the US? Nunez: The Nicaraguan Human Rights Association (ANPDH), is a direct instrument of the US State Department funded entirely by the US government. The Association was created when Congress mandated a human rights organization because of the bad publicity about contra brutality during the war. The Association received \$3,000,000 left over from funds appropriated for the contras. After the election of Chamorro, the Association arrived in Nicaragua from Honduras to set up offices. Most ANPDH workers are located in the northern region, and reportedly focus their work on supporting the human rights of former contras. Monitor: The ANPDH made accusations of clandestine cemeteries or mass graves created by the Sandinistas? Nunez: Yes. We cannot say that all such accusations are false, but all have been manipulated. The human rights situation under the revolution was not perfect. There were problems of human rights violations on the part of the contras and the government. For example, the government declared a state of emergency and restricted some basic rights. In the war zones, soldiers were found guilty of crimes, such as assassinations of messengers or sympathizers of the contras. Some people were taken prisoner and disappeared. The government did not deny these problems. But behavior of this kind was never policy... Amnesty International recognized that Nicaragua was the only country in Central

America where military officers were serving long prison terms for human rights violations. In 1990, 60 officers were in jail for such violations. All of these incidents took place in war zones. Of course, this does not justify the violations. There are other violations which have not been investigated. The US-funded ANDPH, however, completely politicizes the accusations. During the war there were many bodies of contras left behind in the jungle. Others were buried together rather than leaving them out to rot in the air. The Association never "discovers" bodies of contra victims. Instead, they have hidden any remains that cannot somehow be blamed on the Sandinistas. Of the two anti-revolutionary human rights groups, I have more respect for the Permanent Commission than for the ANDPH. Monitor: What is the history of the group you head? Nunez: The Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH) was established after the 1990 elections by members of political organizations, including the FSLN, and religious groups...The Center is the Nicaraguan affiliate of the Commission on Human Rights in Central America (CODEHUCA). Monitor: How do you answer questions about impartiality? Nunez: It is very difficult to be impartial or objective in a polarized nation like ours. Instead, we are non-partisan, and attend to demands of people who come to us. Our work is completely separate from party work. Human rights work, however, is essentially political. We also feel the need to defend economic and social rights. Under the democratic political forms that we have, economic repression in the form of poverty, malnutrition among children, and so forth has been increasing. The government has been trying to use the police to quash dissent...for at least eight months now. Monitor: What is the procedure followed by the Center when someone comes to you to denounce a human rights violation? Nunez: We investigate all individual claims. We go to the government office accused of the violation and try to resolve the problem. We actively intervene on the victim's behalf. The media splash method is not ours, except when we get no response from the responsible authorities. Monitor: What else does your organization do? Nunez: We have a program of popular education on human rights, this is our truly strategic work. We organize three to four workshops each month for different popular organizations. We also prepare public information broadcasts for four radio stations. This weekend we have a seminar for leaders on economic and social rights. Monitor: What are the sources of Center funding? Nunez: We are very open about the sources of our funding. We get money from the Dutch government, the Dutch foundation NOVIB, the World Council of Churches, Bread for the World, the Oscar Romero Christian Initiative of Europe, and the ICFD (Canadian non-governmental organization). The government of Norway finances our human rights education projects.

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