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## Stepdaughter Charges Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega with Sexual Abuse

by LADB Staff

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Explosive allegations against Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega have rocked the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) just weeks before the party convention. In the aftermath, the FSLN is taking drastic measures to forge a united front and purge itself of dissidents. Former Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega (1979-1990) called on supporters to unite following accusations by his stepdaughter that he had sexually molested her.

In early March, Zoilamerica Narvaez Murillo, 30, faxed a letter to the media charging that Ortega started molesting her when she was 11 and continued "in a repeated manner, for many years." She also said she was the victim of aggression, threats, and blackmail. Ortega, 53, neither confirmed nor denied the allegations and said he was "saddened" by them. His wife, Rosario Murillo, who is Narvaez's mother, said the charges were lies. Two days after the allegations were made public, Vilma Nunez, a Sandinista and head of the Centro Nicaraguense de Derechos Humanos (CNIDH), said her organization would investigate the allegations. She called the scandal worse than the electoral defeat in 1990 that swept the FSLN out of power.

A nongovernmental women's group, Red de Mujeres contra la Violencia, which is dominated by Sandinista members, quickly backed Narvaez. The group's president, Violeta Delgado, said the group would take legal action in support of Narvaez. Some Sandinistas are convinced the allegations are part of a scheme by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) or by enemies in opposing political parties. "I want everyone to know this is not a conspiracy against the party," said Narvaez. "I remain a Sandinista militant, and I repeat this is a personal accusation against Ortega."

### *FSLN purges dissidents, supports Ortega*

The allegations came at a bad time for the FSLN. It has lost every election since 1990, and there is general agreement that the party is wracked by generational divisions as younger members call for a change in party leadership and strategy. Narvaez is a mid-level party functionary identified with the dissident reform movement. The FSLN convention in May was to have been a forum for discussing the party's future and for renewing its leadership. But after the Narvaez allegations, party leaders moved quickly to close ranks behind Ortega. In doing so, they began a purge of party dissidents with the clear intention of arriving at the convention with the present leadership solidly entrenched.

According to a report in the daily newspaper La Prensa, the changes include plans for an executive committee to replace the Direccion Nacional. An anonymous party source told La Prensa that the new committee will include FSLN stalwarts Doris Tijerino, Tomas Borge, and Monica Baltodano as well as prominent businessmen Ricardo Coronel Kautz, Herty Lewites, and Alejandro Martinez Cuenca. Ortega will head the committee. In addition, the Sandinista delegation in the National Assembly will freeze out of leadership positions anyone who does not support Ortega against Narvaez.

Among those who will lose their executive positions in the party are Victor Tirado, Bayardo Arce, and Rene Nunez. Henry Petrie and William Rodriguez, two leaders of the Juventud Sandinista (JS) which was at odds with Ortega before the scandal erupted were removed from their posts, supposedly for supporting Narvaez. "After all this, you certainly have to wonder if there is any more basis for the Sandinista Front," said Petrie.

Petrie also said that he knew of the allegations a year ago and that some members of the Direccion Nacional had been aware of them for three months before Narvaez went public but that no action was taken. Narvaez & husband accuse Ortega of threats A week after Narvaez made her allegations, her husband, Alejandro Bendana, told reporters that, as a result of the revelations, his family had been spied upon and threatened with death, presumably by Ortega supporters.

Bendana, former secretary general of the Foreign Relations Ministry and former ambassador to the UN, said Ortega had verbally abused Narvaez for the past seven years. Bendana said Ortega would frequently call him in the morning on government matters and call his wife in the evening with "all kinds of insinuations." Narvaez filed a formal complaint with the police against Ortega. Her complaint concerned the threatening telephone calls, not the sexual abuse. Narvaez said she had no evidence she could offer concerning the alleged abuse. Still, press reports in mid-March said Narvaez had hired a team of lawyers who will consider bringing criminal charges against Ortega for sexual abuse, incest, and rape.

As an Assembly deputy, however, Ortega enjoys immunity from prosecution, and as yet no motion has been introduced in the Assembly to strip his immunity. Partido Liberal Deputy Eliseo Nunez advised Ortega to resign. Because of the immunity, "if he doesn't resign, it would be an admission of guilt," said Nunez. In a recent public appearance, Ortega admitted internal problems in the party. Dissident sources told La Prensa that, in a meeting of the Direccion Nacional, Ortega offered to step aside and to support other candidates for his post as secretary general of the party during the May convention. [Sources: Reuter, 03/05/98, 03/07/98; Associated Press, 03/05/98, 03/09/98; The New York Times, Spanish News Service EFE, 03/11/98; The Miami Herald, 03/04/98, 03/12/98; La Tribuna (Nicaragua), 03/16/98; La Prensa (Nicaragua), 03/07/98, 03/08/98, 03/10/98, 03/11/98, 03/12/98, 03/16/98, 03/18/98]

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