

An inside look at Nicaragua

Tales of suffering and sorrow

(Editor's Note: Jeff McMahon recently spent a week in Nicaragua. This is the first in a series of stories on that country.)

By JEFF McMAHON
Staff Writer

SOMOTO, Nicaragua — They care little for philosophy and ideology, for words like democracy and Marxism, for the spread of communism or the balance of

brown feet coated with gray dust. The children gather and pose without smiles in front of the cameras of visiting North Americans.

It seems every campesino has a story to tell of the father, mother, brother, sister or child lost to the war. Many carry scars of bullet holes, some bear one less arm or leg.

"The contra have no piety. They caused us a lot of suffer-

about an attack," Sanchez says. "We wouldn't sleep in our houses, fearing the attack. We slept in the fields. We were dirty, we suffered spider bites — we had an epidemic of discomfort.

"We felt like people who were seen as less, but we feel we are much better off here. All we had before in our villages was human suffering. Since we've come here, we haven't been attacked any more," she says.

Some people in the camp want to return to their villages, but Sanchez won't consider returning as long as the war continues.

"Because the counterrevolution has no compassion for us, we can't be there. We're too scared. We're not a people that can fight them. We're defenseless," she says.

Jose Lopez Lagos lifts his pant leg to show the scar where a bullet pierced his shin.

On July 20, 1984, the contras attacked Lopez Lagos' village of El Cairo and sprayed the front of his home with machine gun fire.

Lopez Lagos was hit in the shin and hip, his son of 24 was killed, his daughter of 8 was hit in the back, and his son of 6 was shot in the forearm. The child's arm now ends at the elbow.

"Everything I've told you is not something I read in *Barricada* (the government newspaper) (See "NICARAGUA, Page 1)



Lozandro Polanco, the Sandinista guard of the Hermanos Martinez resettlement camp in Northern Nicaragua, stands with his daughter and granddaughter in the yard of their home.

Sun-Star photo by Jeff McMahon

"Here the revolution has cared to have my children learn to read and write. It's tremendous to think my children could read and write. I'm very grateful to the revolution for that."

— Santalucia Sanchez

power.

They are the campesinos of Nicaragua, the ones who till the soil, labor in the factories and carry guns for the presidents.

They live in wood and mud shacks in the barrios of Managua and the thousand tiny villages of the Nicaraguan countryside. Their babies sit naked on the dirt floors of their homes, noses running, crying for food and comfort.

Older children chase each other through the streets, their

ing," says Santalucia Sanchez, a middle-aged mother who speaks for the people of the Hermanos Martinez resettlement camp in Northern Nicaragua.

The 42 families in the camp once lived in villages along Nicaragua's northern border with Honduras. The Sandinista government moved the families in 1984 following repeated attacks on their villages by the contras, who operate out of Honduras.

"From 1982 on, our brothers involved in the defense couldn't sleep. They were all nervous

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Above, Wilfredo Lopez, an officer with the Sandinista physical protection unit, stands beneath a portrait of national hero Augusto Cesar Sandino at the Palacio Nacional in Managua. Left, Managua children sit in a rustic cart used for transporting goods at the Mercado Oriental open market.

Sun-Star photos by Jeff McManon

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per). It's not something someone told me. It's something we felt with our lives, something we saw with our eyes," Sanchez said.

She gestures toward the school building built in the resettlement camp by the Sandinistas, where the children receive schooling in the first through fifth grades.

"Here the revolution has cared to have my children learn to read and write. It's tremendous to think my children could read and write. I'm very grateful to the revolution for that," she says.

Most of the Nicaraguan poor in the countryside and in the overpopulated streets of Managua say they are happy with the revolution and the Sandinista government. Life has improved since the fall of Dictator Anastasio Somoza, they say.



Women grind corn into masa, a paste used to make tortillas, in a shop in the Central Nicaraguan town of Dario.

The revolution has brought them land, schools, medicine. Polio, which once ran wild in Nicaragua, has been eradicated.

But many have serious complaints — starting with required military service for teens beginning at age 16, though in

the war-ravaged areas teen-agers of any age are a rare sight.

Mostly the people are tired of the war, tired of fighting one enemy after another, tired of losing sons to defend what little they have.

And they are tired of hunger and poverty, conditions that have not changed in the eight years of revolution.

Many ask visitors to take a message to the United States that they need help — food mostly. But they never ask for themselves, always for their children.

As Sanchez speaks in the camp community center, an old man stands in the doorway wearing a plain green uniform and holding a Soviet automatic rifle. He is Lozandro Polanco, the guard of the camp.

"I would like to stay here and take care of what we have," he says.

Too old to fight in the war or work the fields, Polanco is the only man who stays in the camp during the day to protect the women and children.

Polanco lived in the village of Comwapa in 1983 when the contra attacked, killing his brother and 5-month-old niece. They kidnapped his daughter and four grandchildren and took them

back to Honduras.

Once Polanco went to Honduras to find the children, but he returned without discovering where they were.

"It hurts you a lot when it's your children," he says.

Polanco shows the visitors the new school and medical clinic built by the Sandinistas. He points out the lush tobacco fields with their modern irrigation system and walks to his home of wood planks and adobe, where he proudly shows his two tobacco plants and the hen he keeps for fresh eggs.

Inside the dark hut, his grandchildren sit on the floor with a thin puppy. There is no furniture except for a rustic clay stove. A few bundles of corn cobs hang from the ceiling.

Polanco speaks proudly of his dream to return to Honduras to find his daughter and four grandchildren and to bring them to his new home.

US and Nicaragua — a history of confrontation

In Nicaragua, where brothers fight against brothers and the homeland is being invaded by an army of its own people, the enemy is not perceived as Nicaraguan.

The Nicaraguan people have a clear understanding of where the contras came from, who finances them, and who gives them orders.

As a result, President Ronald Reagan is a frequent subject of conversations and graffiti. The people resent the U.S. intrusion, but do not seem not surprised by it.

For almost two centuries the history of Nicaragua has been a history of wrestling with the United States.

When Nicaragua gained independence from Spain in 1821, the new nation became the object of power struggles between the two superpowers of the time, the United States and Great Britain.

The U.S. set its sights on Nicaragua as the site of a U.S.-controlled canal between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, and U.S. corporations saw Nicaragua as an untapped source of bananas and coffee, gold and silver, and cheap, uneducated labor.

The struggle between the superpowers left Nicaragua in turmoil until William Walker, a U.S. citizen, invaded the country with a private army and established his own republic in 1855.

The Central American nations united to try to drive Walker out, but he was finally crushed only with the help of U.S. entrepreneur Cornelius Vanderbilt, who resented Walker's interference with his Nicaraguan business.

Nicaragua next came into conflict with the

United States when Jose Santos Zelaya became president in 1894. Zelaya fought U.S. intervention in the country, refused to sign trade agreements with the U.S. and began negotiating with Britain and Japan to build the trans-isthmian canal.

In 1909 two Nicaraguan revolutionary leaders united with United States troops on the East Coast of Nicaragua. Financed by U.S. businessmen, they swept Zelaya from office.

The U.S.-supported revolutionaries put a provisional president in power, but in 1912 the Nicaragua



guans revolted against him, and the U.S. sent Marines to maintain order in Nicaragua.

U.S. Marines occupied Nicaragua for the next 20 years. Many Nicaraguans opposed the U.S. intervention and fought a guerrilla war against U.S. troops and the U.S. supported government.

The leader of the guerrillas was Augusto Cesar Sandino, a farmer and mining engineer who repeatedly led attacks against U.S. Marines and escaped unscathed into the countryside.

As it became increasingly costly to maintain the Marines in Nicaragua, the U.S. began looking for ways to replace them with a native force.

Their answer was the Guardia Nacional, and the man chosen to lead the Guardia was Gen. Anastasio Somoza. The U.S. trained the guard and withdrew its Marines from Nicaragua.

With the Marines gone, Sandino agreed to stop fighting. He was invited to meet with Somoza and sign a peace agreement, but while travelling Sandino was stopped by the Guardia and shot.

Somoza quickly consolidated his power and became president of Nicaragua in 1937. For the next 42 years Somoza and his two sons ruled Nicaragua, maintaining power through rigged elections and the murder of opponents.

In the streets of Managua and the Nicaraguan countryside the hatred of Somoza and his Guardia grew. The Guardia became known worldwide for the grip of terror in which it held the people of Nicaragua. Rape, torture and arbitrary murder became commonplace at the hands of government troops.

The Somozas were close allies with the United States, protecting U.S. interests in Nicaragua and benefiting from unflinching U.S. support.

In 1961 Carlos Fonseca founded the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), a guerrilla organization devoted to the cause of Sandino, and began attempts to oust Somoza and end U.S. intervention.

The Sandinistas found support among the campesinos and grew in number. Somoza responded with torture, massacres and bombings of the slums that generated many of the revolutionaries.

Somoza's actions alienated more and more Nicaraguans, other Latin American nations and eventually the United States. President Carter severely criticized Somoza for human rights abuses, weakening his international support.

The revolution triumphed in 1979 when Somoza fled to Paraguay with more than \$100 million

from the national treasury. He died years later in a bazooka attack on his armor-plated Mercedes.

The war left the country in shambles. Nicaragua had lost 50,000 people. One-fifth of the population was homeless and 40,000 children were orphaned.

Before they fled to Honduras, Costa Rica and Miami, Somoza's Guardia destroyed roads, bridges and factories. The dictator left behind a \$1.5 billion debt.

The victorious Sandinistas established the Government of National reform, a five-person junta composed of two Sandinistas and three members of other parties.

Relations between the U.S. and the new government quickly became strained. The junta delayed long-promised elections until 1985, fearing the country's many factions would turn violent and destroy the revolution.

Restrictions placed on U.S. economic aid led the Sandinistas to seek help from the Soviet Union and Cuba. Two non-Sandinista members of the junta resigned, claiming the government's policies were straying too far to the left.

In 1980 President Reagan was elected, and the Sandinistas tightened control in their country, increasing censorship and prohibiting opposition political rallies.

The Reagan administration moved quickly against the Sandinistas, cutting off aid and accusing the Nicaraguans of supporting leftist rebels in El Salvador.

In 1982 the CIA and thousands of members of Somoza's Guardia joined in Honduras and Costa Rica to begin the counterrevolution against the Sandinistas. The new army quickly took the name "contras." More than 40,000 Nicaraguans have died in the five-year war with the contras.

In 1985, 63 percent of the Nicaraguan people voted for Sandinista candidate Daniel Ortega in the internationally-supervised presidential election.

— By Jeff McManon