



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Nicaraguan Christians campaign for peace during Contra War, 1983-1989

1983

to:

1989

Country: Nicaragua

Goals:

To defend the sovereignty of Nicaragua and end the violence between the national army and the contras army.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 070. Protest emigration (hijrat)
- 139. Noncooperation with conscription and deportation

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 139. Noncooperation with conscription and deportation

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches › Via Crucis (Way of the Cross)
- 046. Homage at burial places
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 034. Vigils
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

- 015. Group lobbying
- 020. Prayer and worship

Methods in 6th segment:

- 015. Group lobbying
- 020. Prayer and worship

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions › By churches in the US
- 013. Deputations
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Peace

Group characterization:

- Nicaraguan lay people and some of their clergy
- religious groups from the United States

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

First Mennonites, then Father Miguel D'Escoto, then Father Gregorio Martínez

Partners:

Witness for Peace, Council of Protestant Churches of Nicaragua (CEPAD)

External allies:

United Nations, Church Communities in the United States

Involvement of social elites:

Costa Rican president, Oscar Arias; El Salvadoran president José Duarte; Guatemalan president Vinicio Cerezo, Honduran president José Azcona, Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Christian Base Communities
- Miguel D'Escoto

- Witness for Peace

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- CEPAD
- Gregorio Martínez

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Central American Presidents
- United Nations

Segment Length: 14 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Contra Armies and Government Sandinista Armies

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Refusal of recognition

Campaigner violence:

Not Known

Repressive Violence:

Arrests, but little documented direct violence against the protesters

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

4 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaigners wanted to end foreign intervention in their country and end the violence. While the government eventually agreed to no longer accept foreign “aid”, it still took many years for the organized violence to end in Nicaragua

Many of the groups involved in this campaign, especially Witness for Peace and the Evangelical churches, were actually strengthened during this time and went on to make many peaceful contributions to the world

The campaign had had widespread support from the Christian Base Communities since the beginning but was able to encourage their direct action in the movement and convince other religious groups to join as well.

On July 19, 1979, the Nicaraguan revolution succeeded in overthrowing one of Latin America’s most long-lasting dictatorships: the Somoza dynasty. Leading the popular uprising was the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) – a leftist

revolutionary movement that had been fighting against the Somoza government for the previous 19 years. Throughout Latin America, the Sandinista Revolution brought cheers and euphoria. The early years of the revolutionary government brought dramatic improvements in the lives of poor Nicaraguans. For example, during five months in 1980 a massive crusade reduced overall illiteracy from 52 to 13 percent, infant mortality plunged from 121 per thousand live births in 1978 to 63 in 1987, and by 1985, more than 120,000 families had gained land through agrarian reform.

However, with the 1980 election of U.S. president Ronald Reagan, euphoria gave way to polarized political debate, which gave way to an ugly war. The “Reagan Doctrine” took over policy decisions with the goal to support “freedom fighters” to “roll back Soviet influence” anywhere in the world. The administration’s policy toward Nicaragua was to bleed the country into submission, or, as Reagan put it, to make the Sandinistas “cry uncle.”

An opposition army, the contras, emerged in Nicaragua, supported largely by the U.S. and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The contras wreaked havoc on the civilian population and on the Nicaraguan economy, and were fought by the Sandinista army. As the war went on, groups of Christians turned to nonviolent methods in order to refuse cooperation with the war and efforts to enlist them on one side or the other.

As the contras grew stronger the Sandinista government decided in 1983 that it was necessary to conscript young men for the army. A number of Mennonite youth received exemption from service or arranged for “alternative service”. However, because the arrangements were informal, regional authorities were able to apply them differently or not at all. Some Mennonite youth fled the country or hid from the recruiters, and a small number served jail sentences for refusing to carry arms.

An “Evangelical Insurrection”, Nicaraguan Foreign Minister and priest Miguel D’Escoto called this growing movement, which was spreading through the Christian base communities and the ranks of poor and faithful Catholics. The movement became a realm of action where Christians could make a unique and nonviolent contribution to defending the lives of their people and the sovereignty of their country. Some religious leaders were arrested for speaking out against the government for peace, but were often quickly released when thousands of citizens organized rallies calling for their freedom. In general, the leaders of the movement were speaking out not against any one group (either the contras or the government) but rather against the violence itself.

In 1985 Father Miguel D’Escoto (still the foreign minister) conducted a month long fast to draw attention to the crisis in Nicaragua and to encourage everyday Christians to become involved and make a unique contribution to the defense of peace. His decision to fast grew out of his unique position as both a priest and a high government official. He had proposed specific nonviolent actions over the years, including actions for religious leaders to undertake against injustice and for social change. However, Nicaragua’s Roman Catholic hierarchy largely ignored his suggestions.

As the principle architect of foreign policy in Nicaragua and a disciple of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., D’Escoto worked on several fronts for peace, even as his government simultaneously engaged in war. He went to the capitals of the world to exert all of his diplomatic leverage against the Reagan administration and was the chief proponent of a suit Nicaragua brought before the International Court of Justice. (In June 1986, the justices ruled overwhelmingly that the U.S. war against Nicaragua was illegal.)

Early in 1986, during Lent, former Sandinista guerrilla fighter and current Roman Catholic pastor, Gregorio Martínez, launched a peace march. Beginning in Jalapa, near the country’s northern border with Honduras, Martínez organized a fifteen-day Via Crucis (“Way of the Cross”) religious pilgrimage to recall the sufferings of Christ on his last day. The procession wound more than two hundred miles to the capital of Managua and was joined by thousands of people who left their villages to march a mile or for several days of the journey. Each day as they commemorated the suffering of Christ, the marchers also recalled how their fellow Nicaraguans had also suffered. Marching past the sites of massacres and ambushes the pilgrims prayed and sang – hoping to touch God with Nicaragua’s cry for peace. They also prayed for the “deceived peasants” who they believed had been tricked into joining the contra armies. The contras had already killed eight of Martínez’s grandchildren and three of his sons and five of his grandchildren were in la defensa (the national army). He was marching so that they, and all Nicaraguans, could have peace.

On February 28, two weeks after he began, Martínez entered Managua with twenty thousand people walking behind him.

That night there was a mass in Managua to conclude the peace march. Father D'Escoto gave a controversial sermon; he criticized the church hierarchy for keeping silent and staying away from the movement despite repeated invitations to join. He denounced the country's highest Catholic leader, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo. In the view of D'Escoto, Obando y Bravo's pro-contra activities had made him a "traitor to the people of God."

By mid-1986 a majority of the country's Protestant denominations, organized in the Council of Protestant Churches of Nicaragua (CEPAD), began a Campaign of Fasting and Prayer for Peace and Justice in Nicaragua that lasted several months. The campaign brought together Protestants of different traditions for a series of prayer vigils in small communities and larger cities. It culminated in an all-night vigil in Managua in October of 1986, in which over 100,000 Christians, most of them Pentecostals, prayed for peace.

The religious campaign gained strength from the unarmed power of the poor. Growing rapidly in the Catholic base communities, the movement continued, gathering support from North America, Europe, and elsewhere in Latin America. In the U.S. thousands fasted, prayed, and demonstrated against U.S. policy in Nicaragua. Many churches and other faith-based organization condemned relentlessly the immorality of U.S. armed intervention.

In 1983, a U.S. Christian-based group, Witness for Peace (WFP) established itself in Nicaragua. Motivated by religious conviction and opposition to their country's presence in Nicaragua, WFP maintained an active presence in the war zones of Nicaragua and brought U.S. citizens there for both long and short periods. By living and praying with Nicaraguans suffering from the war and returning to the U.S. to tell their stories and provide systematic documentation of the violence, WFP members sought to make the human cost of the war more visible back in the United States. D'Escoto himself attested to the importance of Witness for Peace to those interested in developing an authentic Nicaraguan nonviolence.

In 1987, the leaders of the nonviolent campaign witnessed a new attempt at dialogue by the Catholic bishops and the Sandinista government. With the growing popular movement against the violence in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas agreed to discuss the resistance they were witnessing. With a tentative détente emerging from that dialogue, the movement's leaders decided not to plan any major public activities that might jeopardize the progress the two sides of the dialogue might make.

The Esquipulas II (also known as the Central American Presidents' Peace Plan or the "Arias Plan") was signed by the five Central American presidents in August of 1987. This historic peace agreement negotiated cease-fires in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, ended the use of territory of one country by guerrilla groups threatening their neighbors, granted amnesty for insurgents, and demanded an end to all foreign aid to irregular forces. The peace process proceeded cautiously and slowly and in March 1988 the Sandinista leadership opened a dialogue with contra leaders. Both sides agreed to a 60-day cease-fire to begin April 1. Negotiations quickly broke down on the national level (though both sides said they would not mount new military offensives), but at the grassroots level, in many areas of the countryside, efforts for dialogue continued. Local and regional reconciliation commissions encouraged acceptance of the new government's amnesty and guaranteed protection to ex-contra combatants and fostered face-to-face dialogue between enemy military units.

By August 1989 the Sandinista government agreed to alter the electoral law to allow opposition parties to run in elections. In exchange, the opposition called for dismantling the contras. The five Central American presidents, meeting that same month, called for the contras to lay down their arms and return home before the elections. The elections were held that next spring in an electoral process closely observed by the United Nation, which sent a 300-person team to monitor the votes. When the votes were tallied, it was determined that the Sandinista-led government had lost the national elections. UNO, a diverse coalition of fourteen opposition parties had won. New president Violeta de Chamorro promised a change in government by ending the violence that had occurred during the Sandinista rule but not by dismantling many of their social gains such as land reform.

With Chamorro's inauguration on April 25, 1990, contra troops began moving into designated "security zones" to hand over their arms to the United Nations and to return to civilian life. Although the violence did not come to an immediate halt, it was an

important step in the process. It had been the combined effort of diplomatic and legal means with nonviolent action and theology that had made the ending of the violence in Nicaragua not only an idea but also a realizable goal.

Research Notes

Influences:

Nonviolent action and marches of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1); Calls for peace and cease-fires in other Central American countries, specifically El Salvador and Guatemala (2).

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Additional Notes:

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Nicaragua War and Turnover Timeline <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/27/world/turnover-in-nicaragua-nicaraguan-decade-war-ruin-and-turnabout.html?pagewanted=1>

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