

The Miskito Indians of Nicaragua

The Minority Rights Group Report No. 79



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- To help prevent, through publicity about violations of human rights, such problems from developing into dangerous and destructive conflicts which, when polarised, are very difficult to resolve; and
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29 Craven Street London WC2N 5NT
01-930 6659

The Miskito Indians of Nicaragua

By Dr. Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz

Dr. Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz is Professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies at California State University, Hayward campus, and has lectured widely at other universities in North America, Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, as well as Europe. She is the author of six books and numerous articles on indigenous peoples, including a book on the Miskito Indians of Nicaragua published (in Spanish) in Mexico in 1986. She is director of the Indigenous World Association.

The cover photograph of Miskito women and children is by Lou Dematteis

Printed by Expedite Graphic Limited, Murray House, 3 Vandon Street, London SW1H 0AG.

ISBN No 0 946690 59 6

This report was first published in August 1988.

The report that follows has been commissioned, and is published, by the Minority Rights Group as a contribution to public understanding of the problem which forms its subject. It does not necessarily represent the collective view of the Group.

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THE UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from any fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.

Whereas it is essential, if a man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law.

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations.

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge.

Now, Therefore,

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims

THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4. No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5. No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6. Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7. All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8. Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10. Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11. (1) Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.

(2) No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

Article 12. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 13. (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.

(2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 14. (1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

(2) This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 15. (1) Everyone has the right to a nationality.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Article 16. (1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

(2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

(3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Article 17. (1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19. Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20. (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

(2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

Article 21. (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

(2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.

(3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Article 22. Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 23. (1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.

(2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.

(3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

(4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interest.

Article 24. Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25. (1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

(2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Article 26. (1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Article 27. (1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

(2) Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

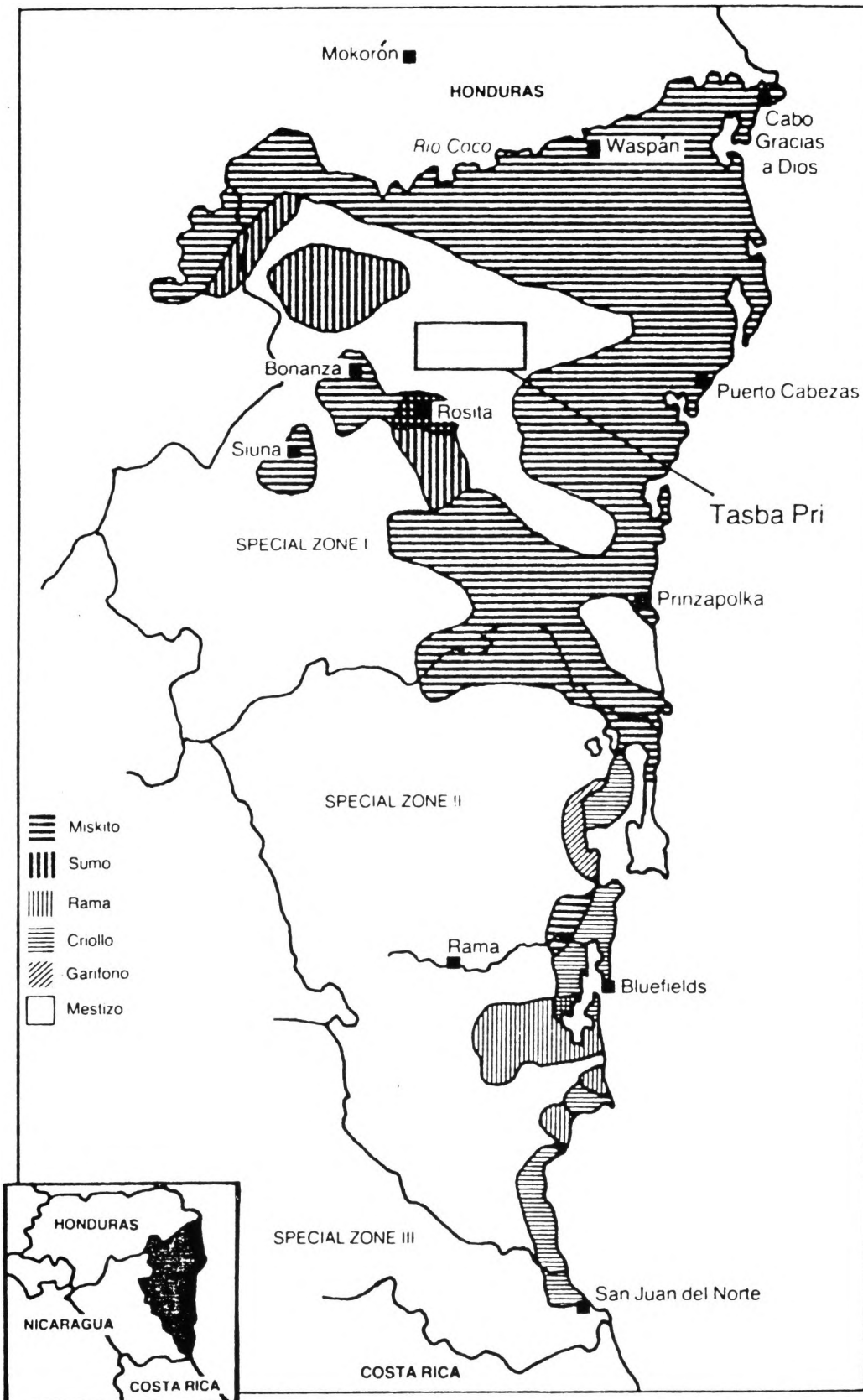
Article 28. Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Article 29. (1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

(2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

(3) These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 30. Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.



Ethnic Map of the Atlantic Coast (Mosquitia) of Nicaragua, from *Latin American Perspectives* 14:1 (Winter 1987) 44.

Introduction

Nicaragua is a small country with a low population density in all provinces. The majority of the some three million citizens of the Central American State are racially mixed, or *Mestizo*. The Nicaraguan *Mestizos* are the dominant national group unified by a common language, Spanish; a common history as a result of Spanish colonialism; and they are overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. Although they identify themselves as Hispanic or Latin American, they are mixed American Indian, African and European.

However, in Nicaragua there are also peoples who have maintained or developed specific ethnic and national identities distinct from the majority *Mestizos*. These peoples total approximately 10% of the population, and are located in the eastern half of the country.¹

Although a formal census has never been taken, it is estimated that the population of the eastern region, or Atlantic Coast, as it is called, number around 250,000.² Occupying more than half the national territory, the peoples of the Atlantic Coast make up less than 10% of the total population. *Miskitos*³ in Nicaragua number anywhere from 70,000 to 150,000, and there are at least 17,000, but perhaps as many as 40,000 *Miskitos* indigenous to what has been Honduran national territory since the international border was established by the World Court at its present location, the Coco River, in 1960.

Since 1981, there has been a dramatic shift in the *Miskito* population, with some 40,000 Nicaraguan *Miskitos* migrating to the Honduran *Miskito* provinces, either to escape the counter-revolutionary war taking place in their midst, or, in some cases, to join it. In Nicaragua, the *Miskitos* are concentrated in the northeast quadrant, but there are significant *Miskito* communities and claimed lands elsewhere in nearly the entire eastern half of Nicaragua (see Map). Also located in the northeast quadrant are some 5000-10,000 *Sumu* Indians. Around 3000 *Sumus* left for Honduras during 1982-83.

Another indigenous population in the eastern half of Nicaragua, the *Rama*, was greatly reduced under colonialism. Today, they number only a few hundred and live on a small island near Bluefields in the southeast. They have been affected tragically by the war, having been evacuated from the island a number of times. In the same area are several *Garifuno* communities, which make up the southernmost fraction of the 70,000 *Garifunos* who live along the Caribbean coast of Central America from Belize southward.⁴ (Davidson, 1976: 85-94).

In addition to these peoples, there is the English-speaking, Afro-American population. Although they refer to themselves collectively as *Creoles*, the Afro-Nicaraguan community developed from a number of immigrations of escaped African slaves, slaves of British planters on the coast and Jamaican immigrants. Their culture is similar to other English-speaking Caribbean communities, with whom they maintain close ties. The *Creoles* number nearly 30,000 and are concentrated in the city of Bluefields in the southern part of the Atlantic Coast. However, there are significant *Creole* communities in the entire region, and they intermarry with *Miskitos* and *Mestizos*. Generally, ethnic identity on the Atlantic Coast corresponds to the mother tongue.

There are approximately 80,000-180,000 Spanish-speaking Nicaraguan *Mestizos* in the region, most of whom have migrated from the Pacific zone during the past 40 years and reproduced their numbers. The overwhelming majority are located in the interior, particularly the mining region, where there has been considerable encroachment on *Sumu* farming lands (CIDCA, 1981). Most *Mestizos* in the eastern area are small farmers and ranchers or miners who do not function as a community in the manner of the other indigenous ethnic groups of the region. They are Roman Catholic in a region dominated by Protestants. This was the only sector of the Atlantic Coast population that participated in significant numbers in the insurrection against Somoza.

Given the historical and demographic factors that separate the two halves of Nicaragua, it is not surprising that the Sandinista revolutionary movement, which came to power in July 1979, had little initial impact on the coastal people. Although there were a number of zones of Nicaragua barely affected by the two decades of armed conflict and two final years of civil war, the Atlantic

Coast was the only uninvolved area which was distinguished by a number of distinct peoples, totally different from the population of the western region, the source of Sandinista leadership. On the other hand, *Miskito* leaders were involved in the international indigenous movement.

During the past decade, indigenous peoples of the Americas, the Arctic and the Pacific have turned increasingly to international law and fora for support and protective measures.⁵ Until this activity began on the part of the indigenous organizations, the question of 'minority rights' in international law had remained dormant since the demise of the League of Nations.⁶ The principal stumbling block faced by indigenous organizations relying on international law has been the jealously guarded right of nation-States to non-interference in their domestic affairs (Alfredsson, 1982: 113-114). Probably the most effective opening for indigenous complaints has been international human rights measures that have developed since the founding of the United Nations.

In the international context of a growing indigenous movement, demanding special rights within countries and the confirmation of those rights in international law, the revolutionary regime in Nicaragua came to power in mid-1979.⁷ Lacking an adequate legal and administrative structure following the 45-year dictatorship that ruled by decree, the new regime tended to embrace international law as the fundamental basis of domestic law. Furthermore, representatives of *Miskitos* of Nicaragua had been active during the 1970s in developing international initiatives in favour of indigenous peoples. Consequently, indigenous peoples involved with these activities looked with hope to the Nicaraguan revolution to establish precedents for positive State initiatives in relation to indigenous peoples.⁸

Initially, the new regime responded affirmatively to the demands of the coastal peoples (Burstein, 1982; Bourgeois, 1981; Dennis, 1981; McDonald, 1980; Ortiz, 1981, 1982). However, its attitude toward the peoples of the Atlantic Coast region, particularly the *Miskitos*, turned to suspicion with the beginning of the counter-revolution, which included elements of a coastal movement that saw a clear opportunity with the overthrow of Somoza to assert historical rights that had never been accorded a forum under former regimes.

As the new government tried to sort out the authentic historical demands of the coastal people, especially the *Miskitos*, from the counter-revolution on the sensitive border with Honduras, national security became the government's priority during 1981-1983. During 1982, many *Miskito* villages were relocated from the war zone, which provoked tens of thousands of *Miskito* to flee to Honduras, where many remain today.

In late 1983, the Nicaraguan government announced an unconditional amnesty for all coastal people who had taken up arms with the counter-revolution, and for those who went into exile, and they released most of those who had been imprisoned under the state of emergency imposed in 1981-82. Most of those affected by this decree were *Miskitos*. Then, in 1984, the government invited the armed *Miskitos* in exile to open negotiations, and, in December 1984, the government announced its support for autonomy for the entire Atlantic Coast of the country. In 1987, the autonomy law became a part of the Nicaraguan constitution.

These dramatic events have taken place in the midst of the upheaval of national social revolution, along with the struggle to maintain and consolidate power on the part of the Sandinista leadership, in the context of escalating counter-revolution. All these factors – the revolution; the presence of indigenous and ethnic minorities in eastern Nicaragua; the international indigenous movement; the counter-revolution; the taking up of arms against the Sandinistas by a segment of the *Miskito* people; the government's decision to relocate *Miskito* villages from the Honduran border; and the eventual commitment of the government to autonomy for the Atlantic Coast – combine to make contemporary Nicaragua a virtual laboratory for assessing the standards of indigenous rights and the standards and terms of autonomy. Certainly, the *Miskito* Indians of Nicaragua have taken centre stage in the international indigenous movement during the 1980s.

Judgments of the actions of the Sandinistas have been extreme, and nearly every event that has taken place since July 1979 is disputed, depending on the point of view. Therefore, the historical background becomes especially important in assessing the present situation.

Historical Background

The present situation of the indigenous peoples and ethnically distinct communities of eastern Nicaragua, the Mosquitia, can be understood only within the context of the historical reality of 450 years of British and Spanish colonialism, and the subsequent dominance by the United States of the region since the mid-19th century.

For two centuries, roughly the 17th and 18th, Spanish and British colonial interests were in conflict in the Caribbean region. The western Caribbean, or eastern shores of Central America, formed the frontier between the two competing colonial powers. The indigenous peoples of this frontier region were, of course, profoundly affected and transformed by the constant warfare. They became parties as well as victims of the long-term conflict between European powers and later American dominance (Dozier, 1985; Floyd, 1967).

The role of the Miskito Indians in the region was similar to that of the Iroquois Confederation in northeast North America in the competition for empire between the French and the British, as well as other situations, such as the Comanche alliance with the Spanish in northern Mexico during the 18th century (Ortiz, 1984: 206-207).

The Mosquitia became the frontier of the geographic separation created by the competition for empire between the British and the Spanish. The British ruled the western Caribbean, and prevented Spanish occupation and claims, through the King of Mosquitia. This indirect rule became more direct with the establishment of a British protectorate over Mosquitia from 1824-1860. But during the 1860s and 70s, the US administrations became increasingly interested in constructing and controlling an interoceanic canal through southern Nicaragua. The United States disputed British presence in the region, relying on the 'Monroe Doctrine', and supported the formation of a unified Nicaraguan State, which would include the eastern region, Mosquitia, and, of course, allow easier access to the United States.

Therefore, in 1860, the Treaty of Managua between Great Britain and the fragile Nicaraguan State transformed the Mosquitia from a British protectorate to the 'Mosquito Reserve'. This gave Nicaragua sovereignty over the autonomous territory (Dozier, 1985: 1414).

However, the 1860 Treaty, while recognizing an autonomous Miskito reserve, also reduced the domain of Mosquitia, and thereby, the domain of the Miskito King. The Treaty excluded nearly all the traditional centres of Miskito population, including the Coco (Wanks) River. The limits of the newly drawn 'reserve' were the Rio Hueso in the north and the Rio Maiz in the south (just above Puerto Cabezas to just south of Bluefields). All the inhabitants of the Coco River and the northern coastline between Cabo Gracias a Dios (the present-day border with Honduras) were excluded from rights under the treaty and fell under Nicaraguan direct rule (CIDCA, 1987: 41, 52).

This kind of demarcation could not have occurred had the Miskito people had their say. By the time the 1860 Treaty was promulgated, it was clear that the British merely wanted to retain a foothold, considering their stake in interests for the construction and control of a future inter-oceanic canal. They had for some time promoted English-speaking Creoles as rulers of Mosquitia, and they cared most about retaining control of Bluefields, a Creole-dominated town. Following the treaty signing, a conference was called by the headmen of Mosquitia. 41 headmen of 'the Mosquitos and of the mixed population' attended the convention, of whom 19 were from Bluefields. Only 11 of the 51 names attending the convention appear to have been Miskito. Out of the 52 who attended, the chief appointed 43 as members of the General Council to rule the Reserve. Of these, only three names appear to have been Indian (Olien 1983: 230).

Seemingly in contradiction to this 'creolization' of the Miskito kingdom, the council ruled that the Miskito king should be of 'pure Indian' descent (Olien, 1983: 232). It has been noted that:

'These Creoles . . . realized that the historical and legal foundation of the Mosquito government was the recognition of a special set of rights for Miskito inhabitants of the coast. By seeking a phenotypically Indian king, and denying his African admixture, they could deflect inevitable arguments on the part of the Nicaraguan State that the Mosquito government no longer served its original purpose.' (CIDCA, 1987: 41)

During the same period, other dramatic changes took place.

The Moravian church began missionary work in eastern Nicaragua in 1849 at the invitation of the Miskito King, an invitation initiated by the British. The congregational, democratic character of the evangelical Moravian church rendered it unthreatening to the loosely organized indigenous peoples. This church, revolutionary in its foundations in opposition to the Hapsburg Empire and in favour of national rights, became a church of exile. However, its evangelization brought profound transformations in the social, cultural and economic structures in the Mosquitia, as well as altering the population's relationship with the outside world.

The Moravians, bringing their own cultural norms and values, became influential in the structures of local leadership, first among the dominant Creole leaders, and later among the Miskitos. They created villages around their churches to attract permanent residences revolving around the church. Eventually, these became atomized communities embracing the ideology of Christian resignation to existing conditions and embracing the evangelical Christian belief in obedience to a superior God, realized through the local pastor. This ideology, along with introduced secular values of private property, made the coastal peoples more susceptible to exploitation by foreign commercial interests as time went by. The coastal people, especially the Miskitos, assimilated the Moravian culture, and the Moravians came to be the mediators between the Miskitos and the outside world, continuing this role even today, as the most important ideological influence on the Miskitos and on other peoples of eastern Nicaragua⁹ (Dozier, 1985: 64, 143, 145, 213).

Actually, the Moravians reported little success among the Miskito during the first 30 years of their mission. It was in the 1880s that there was a 'great awakening' and conversion of Miskitos, which tripled Moravian membership in a brief period (Wilson, 1975: 205). It seems that becoming Christianized defined social status quite early. The Creoles of Bluefields, who were the first to be converted, apparently came to regard the Indians as 'ignorant and almost unreclaimable creatures' (Mueller, 1932: 59). Christianization came to be equal with 'civilization', as in all parts of the world under European/American colonialism, imperialism and evangelism. By 1890, British political and economic presence and influence had evaporated from Mosquitia. North Americans controlled 90% of investments in all of Nicaragua, including Mosquitia (Laird, 1972: 25-31).

An even more traumatic change in political and cultural relations was in store for the population with the dissolution in 1894 of the Mosquito Reserve which had been established, albeit narrowing the historic territory, under the 1860 Treaty of Managua. Since that time, the Miskitos and other peoples of the eastern region of Nicaragua have struggled to regain autonomy. This action, referred to as the 'reincorporation of the Mosquitia' in Nicaraguan national history, remains an event greatly resented by the peoples of the Atlantic Coast (Dozier, 1945: 142-160).

The 'reincorporation', in reality a military occupation, did not take place without resistance. Nicaraguan troops occupied Bluefields, the seat of government of the Mosquito Reserve, in February 1894. Creoles in Bluefields revolted in July 1894 and attempted to restore the Miskito King by military action. They gained control of a portion of the area, and in Bluefields, the newly installed Nicaraguan officials were unable to leave the government building for two days, during which time the Miskito King reassumed authority over the region. This resistance to occupation was crushed, not by Nicaraguan forces, but by US Marines who launched their assault from their battleship, the *Marblehead*, anchored in Bluefields Bay. They quickly took military control of the region. Even though the Nicaraguan authorities were formally reinstated, they were not given actual power by the Marines until August (Laird, 1971: 37-38).

This did not end Creole and Miskito opposition to Nicaraguan occupation which contravened the 1860 Treaty of Managua. Within a month, a petition with 1800 signatures was presented by citizens of Mosquitia to the British Consul, stating:

' . . . we will be in the hands of a government and people who have not the slightest interest, sympathy or good feeling for the inhabitants of the Mosquito Reservation; and as our manners, customs, religion, laws and language are not in accord, there can never be a unity . . . We most respectfully beg . . . your Majesty . . . to take back under your protection the Mosquito nation and people, so that we may become a people of your Majesty's Empire.'

(Confidential Print No. 5647,

Further Correspondence respecting the Mosquito Reserve, Part V, January-June 1894, pp.89-104, London, Public Records Office.)

The petition received no response, but the peoples of Mosquitia continued their protests, thoroughly rejecting Nicaraguan occupation and asserting 'Mosquitian nationalism' (CIDCA, 1987: 45). The Creoles issued numerous protests on behalf of themselves and the Miskitos, referring always to the autonomy guaranteed by the 1860 Treaty. Since the language of the Treaty had conferred rights apparently only on the Miskito Indians, the Creoles argued in defence of their claim to be included under the Treaty:

'... it must be understood that natives are both Creoles and Indians alike, for all the Creoles before 1894 were born under the Mosquito flag, and are direct descendants of the Indians, since it can be proven that a great many so-called Creoles are full-blooded Indians, some can trace their Indian pedigree to their grandparents and none need to go further back to do so than their great-grandparents.'

(CIDCA, 1987: 45: A letter directed to US Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes in 1924 on behalf of Indians and Creoles of the Mosquito Reserve.)

Although it might appear that only the urban Creoles (of Bluefields) opposed Nicaraguan occupation, there was notable resistance on the part of Miskitos. The best documented case is that of Samuel Pitts of the Miskito town of Yulu. In 1898 he signed the protest letter against Nicaraguan occupation and in favour of reinstatement of the Miskito kingdom. By 1907, Pitts was calling himself the new Miskito king. The Nicaraguan army assassinated Pitts and dispersed his followers in 1907 (CIDCA, 1987: 46).

The Nicaraguan State, with support from the United States, had no problem in maintaining political/military control. However, political/military incorporation of the Atlantic Coast did not bring economic, social or cultural integration with the rest of Nicaragua. Instead, the region became marginalized, used for resource and labour exploitation carried out directly by foreign companies, mostly from the US and Canada. Gold mining, wood-cutting, banana production, chicle gathering, rubber, turtle and lobster sales, and other boom and bust enterprises exploited natural resources and brought unemployment, cash dependency, silicosis, tuberculosis, and other ills to the Miskito people, and ecological disaster to the land, waters, resources, and wildlife. With the creation of a cash economy and wage labour, subsistence agriculture and fishing declined and imported commodities became necessities. For the first time, the concept of 'unemployment' came into being for the Miskitos who sought wage labour. In good times, such as World War II when copper and rubber were needed, jobs were plentiful, but after, there were layoffs. The gold and copper mines required the use of mercury and the slush from the processing filled the streams of the region, particularly affecting the Sumus. Mercury poisoning remains a hazard in the area today (Helms, 1971; Neitschmann, 1973; Gordon, 1985). Perhaps even more crucial, the organization of labour along ethnic lines by foreign companies greatly affected social and historic relations in Mosquitia¹⁰ (Bourgeois, 1981: 24).

Responding to United States' domination of Nicaragua in general and Mosquitia in particular, including long occupations by US troops, a Nicaraguan nationalist, Augusto César Sandino, hero and name-sake of the contemporary Nicaraguan revolution, led a nationalist war of liberation from 1927 to 1933 against the US military and economic interests.¹¹ A major target of the guerrilla army was the Standard Fruit Company, which was installed in the Miskito region and had the largest number of employees in Nicaragua at the time, most of them Miskitos. One of the most important zones of the war was the Coco River, which since 1960 has constituted the border between Honduras and Nicaragua, but which then was simply the heart of Mosquitia.¹² Sandino found a welcome among the discontented Miskito workers, and they were led by one of their own, a Miskito General in Sandino's army, Adolf Cockburn, who was assassinated by the US Marines in 1930 (Macaulay, 1967; Jenkins, 1986). Sandino's movement ended with the exit of the US Marines and Standard Fruit, but also with Sandino's assassination by Anastasio Somoza, who used his position as head of the US-established National Guard to install himself as lifetime dictator, inaugurating the family dictatorship which continued nearly a half-century (Macaulay, 1967; Selser, 1981: 143; Karnes, 1978).

The unplanned extraction of natural resources with the use of cheap labour in Mosquitia continued up to the 1979 revolution. This was worsened by a deep economic depression that lasted from World War II to the present.¹³

Often it is assumed that the Miskitos and others in eastern Nicaragua were not repressed or oppressed by the Somocista era. This assumption tends to lead to a further assumption that life for coastal people was better under Somoza than today. Whatever the content and nature of the current conflicts, it is however doubtful that many voices would express a desire for return of Somocismo.

There is, on the other hand, a tendency to regard the peoples of the Atlantic Coast as a sort of 'fifth column' or at least unfriendly to the Sandinistas, and a further tendency to discredit these peoples. In fact, the peoples of the Atlantic Coast did resist the Somoza regime. Although much further research is needed, it might be postulated that the peoples of eastern Nicaragua were far more repressed and controlled, and, thereby, less able to resist, than the population of western Nicaragua.

During the 1960s, the Miskitos organized to stop the incursion of Somoza's State-owned forestry enterprise, INFONAC, which encroached on a large area of Miskito traditional land holdings. In addition to trying to petition through the legal system, Miskitos burned large tracts of forest land to prevent INFONAC from taking their pine wood and lands (Jenkins, 1986: 149).

During this period of protest, the Miskitos began organizing defensive cooperation which culminated in the formation of the Alliance for the Progress of Miskitos and Sumus (ALPROMISU) in 1972. In August 1974, John Keegan, representing the regional Catholic Relief Services, reported that '... non-Indian politicians, agency officials and the National Guard... reacted with fear and in some cases with violence.' (CIDCA, 1987: 53)

By this time, the dominant national Nicaraguan nationality, the Mestizo, commanded influence over politics in eastern Nicaragua. It is important to analyze the composition of this population. The Nicaraguan Mestizos in the eastern region come from two distinct economic groups. The first to arrive, whose descendents are presently there, were poor peasants in search of work. These migrants were attracted by the rubber production in the 1860s and then by banana plantations and mining. They became an important, if not predominant, portion of the workforce in the region. Prior to 1894, the only Mestizo elite was in Cabo Gracias a Dios, the administrative centre of the province by that name which was then a part of Nicaragua, but has been a department of Honduras since 1960. After the 1894 Nicaraguan occupation of Mosquitia, a Mestizo political elite emerged (CIDCA, 1984: 44).

Miskito-Sandinista Relations, 1979-1984

The first revelation of the Sandinista (FSLN - Sandinista National Liberation Front) programme for the Mosquitia and its peoples came in 1969, in its general programme from that year. From Section VI, entitled 'Reincorporation of the Atlantic Coast':

'The Popular Sandinista Revolution will put into practice a special plan in favour of the Atlantic Coast, which is plunged into the greatest neglect, in order to incorporate it into the life of the nation as a whole.

A. It will put an end to the criminal exploitation suffered by the Atlantic Coast throughout its history because of foreign monopolies, particularly Yankee imperialism;

B. It will prepare the suitable land of the region for the development of agriculture and cattle raising;

C. It will make use of favourable conditions in order to carry out the development of the fishing and forestry industries;

D. It will encourage the flowering of the local cultural values of the region which derive from the original aspects of its historical tradition;

E. It will put a stop to the odious discrimination against the native Miskito, Sumu, Sambos and Blacks of the region.'

(CIDCA, 1987: 70)

For its time, this programme was quite advanced. However, in July 1979, the pronouncement of the Junta of National Reconstruction, which took over the reins of government, shows that little study had been made of the indigenous question. Point 2.12 in its section on the economy mentions development of the Atlantic Coast:

'The population of the Atlantic Coast will be integrated into the development of the country. To this end there will commence in a co-

ordinated fashion a joint activity of the State agencies with the purpose of establishing service centres in strategic places in the region, which in co-ordination with the agrarian reform will offer the services of health, education, technical assistance, financing, and commercialisation.'

(CIDCA, 1987: 70)

Obviously, the FSLN had in mind concrete material aspects of the problems of eastern Nicaragua, certainly not to be denigrated, given the poor health and living conditions of the peoples there. However, as one theorist states:

'This preferential attention to the material aspects of the present and past problems of the Coast indicates the way in which the FSLN inherited, in its first years, the general lack of revolutionary thinking about the indigenous problem . . . [reflecting] the kind of socialist and Marxist thought dominant in Nicaragua during the 1960s, which was strongly impregnated with elements of positivism and liberal progressivism, closer in many instances to the rationalist determinism of the 18th century than to the dialectical analysis of history.'

(CIDCA, 1987: 71)

This same scholar observes that the historical developments are key, but, in his opinion, are overridden by 'the type of leadership which took charge of representing the Coast after the triumph of the revolution and the close ties it developed with the rightist opposition and the North American policy of confrontation with the revolution' (CIDCA, 1987: 76).

In fact, the new revolutionary government which came to power in July 1979 lacked experience and understanding of the eastern region and they initiated programmes that were totally unrelated and often antagonistic to the regional and cultural realities of Mosquitia. Yet, it cannot be denied that the new government operated with good will. They recognized the rights of the indigenous peoples to organize themselves and to select their own leaders to present their demands to the government. As a result, MISURASATA was founded in November 1979 at a congress of ALPROMISU, the already existing indigenous organization, begun in 1972. Soon after the founding of MISURASATA, the government granted it the right to carry out literacy programmes in eastern Nicaragua, in Miskito, Sumu and English, not without a long fight which left bitter feelings (Bourgeois, 1981: 36; McDonald, 1980; CIDCA, 1987: 130).

In mid-1980, the Ministry for the Atlantic Coast (INNICA) was established with regional offices in Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields and headquarters in Managua. The Minister appointed to head INNICA was not from the coast, and did not speak any of the coastal languages other than Spanish. More significantly, MISURASATA was neither consulted nor given a role within the new ministry. Most Miskito leaders regarded the establishment of INNICA as a way of undermining the status and role of MISURASATA and a means of lessening the influence of coastal people in the new revolutionary government (CIDCA, 1987: 131).

The following year, the government set up a research institute, CIDCA, within the Ministry for the Atlantic Coast, to carry out research and development projects. The centre was, and is, headed by an anthropologist, not from the coast, and included coastal people in only very marginal capacities, such as secretarial and translation. A number of foreigners worked as researchers.

Although INNICA was dissolved in 1982 when the entire country was reorganized into regions, CIDCA was neither dissolved nor changed in character. The dissolution of INNICA did not change the character of governance of the region, since its minister remained as head of the northern region of the Atlantic Coast, though a Creole Sandinista commander headed the southern region. It was not until mid-1984 that a person from the coast was put in charge of the northern zone.

The causes of Miskito alienation from the Sandinistas are hotly debated. But with the return of many Miskitos who took up arms against the government in 1981-82, their reasons have been clarified. One important Miskito leader who signed an accord with the Sandinistas in October 1985, Reynaldo Reyes (Comandante Rafaga) has expressed his reasons:

'The Sandinistas did not understand us, didn't respect our language and customs. It's not that they were repressive in the beginning, just insensitive. My people thought they were rude and arrogant. Their experts came in and tried to tell us how to use our land, how to farm, how to fish, when we have been surviving by our own ways for centuries. They didn't understand how we use our land communally, and they tried to divide it up and give us land titles - imagine the arrogance of 'giving' us our own land! It became embarrassing, as an Indian, to be associated with the Sandinistas. So I followed Steadman Fagoth and joined the counterrevolution in 1981.

When I look back now, I realize many things I didn't know then. We expected a lot of the Sandinistas and they did a lot that was overshadowed by their lack of understanding of our culture, our lifestyle, our language. In fact, we in MISURASATA were given a lot of power, resources, and autonomy. Just two months after the triumph, the now-President Daniel Ortega came to our Indian assembly in Puerto Cabezas. We already had an organization, ALPROMISU, set up in the early 1970s, that was suppressed by Somoza. The Miskitos wanted to revive the organization. We changed the name to MISURASATA, which means Miskito, Sumu, Rama and Sandinistas united. We set up our office in the best building in Puerto Cabezas and the government gave us four vehicles in that zone of very few vehicles. We had offices in every part of the Atlantic Coast, and a big house in Managua. We were free to organize and really do whatever we wanted. When the literacy project began in 1980, we demanded to control it on the Atlantic Coast and we won that demand. We carried out a Miskito and Sumu language literacy drive and cut illiteracy among our Indian people from 75% to 20%. Roads were built; electricity and sanitation facilities were installed; health centres were established and campaigns against malaria, polio, measles, enteritis and other prevalent diseases among us were carried out very successfully. Our people suffered a lot from the bad conditions working in the mines and the men died very young from black lung disease, leaving many young widows with children. The Sandinistas immediately provided life pensions to all widows of miners and began to improve the conditions in the mines.

We expected all this and much more of the Sandinistas even though we had never expected anything good from Managua before. Still, the old resentments and fears of the 'Spanish', as we call the Pacific zone Nicaraguans, were still there. A lot of rumours were heard about a counter-revolution forming and bad things about the Sandinistas. I believed some of the rumours that I now think were probably untrue - rumours about Sandinista repression against Miskitos. Now it is clear that Steadman Fagoth was using MISURASATA to organize for the counterrevolution, and no credit for any of the improvements in the region went to the Sandinistas, but rather to Fagoth. When the Sandinistas began to realize what was happening toward the end of 1980, they became suspicious of all of us, that is, of all Miskitos. Among their own people they could tell who was a contra and who wasn't, but with us, they didn't know how to judge, so for a while they treated us all like enemies. They began arresting MISURASATA organizers, and all this built up to bloodshed in the Miskito town of Prinzapolka in February 1981, when the Sandinista police tried to arrest some of our people in the church, and eight men were killed in the fighting - four of them and four of us. By that time, the whole leadership of MISURASATA, about 30 Miskitos, were in jail, including Steadman Fagoth. Our people protested, and they freed all of us except for Fagoth. But they even freed him, knowing he had worked for the Somoza secret police, in May 1981. He promised to calm the people down and to leave the country to study abroad on a fellowship for several years, but once he got out to the border, he crossed over into Honduras and joined the FDN, the Somocistas.

The reaction of the Sandinistas to all this was to suspect all Miskitos. No, they didn't kill or massacre us as Fagoth alleged, but we were closely controlled and watched. Many Miskitos were arrested on suspicion of being contras. The Miskitos began to hate the Sandinistas which made it easy for us who were fighting them to get the support of our peoples.

The Sandinistas recognized that they overreacted and drove our people to take up arms. We did not think in terms of overthrowing the Sandinistas and we did not know about the Reagan administration programme for that purpose. We just wanted to get the Sandinistas off our backs and to regain our traditional freedoms.'

(Interview by author with Reynaldo Reyes, June 1988)

In 1981, following the exit from Nicaragua of several leaders of MISURASATA along with thousands of followers, counter-revolutionary bands began to attack Miskito villages on the Nicaraguan/Honduran border. What provoked the exit of MISURASATA leaders and their attacks was the crackdown by the Nicaraguan security forces in February 1981. Having registered the threats of the newly elected Reagan administration, the government apparently overreacted to information regarding activities of MISURASATA in the eastern part of the country, believing it to be a result of a separatist movement.

Whatever the causes, the December 1981 attacks on the border Miskito villages caused the inhabitants to flee in all directions. The closest haven was across the river in Honduras, an area the Miskitos considered part of their traditional homeland.¹⁴ Here they were proclaimed 'refugees' by the Reagan administration and then by the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees. Here, too, they were practically defenceless captives to the CIA/ contra elements which used bribery, threats and persuasion to recruit young Miskito men, many of them children. The Miskito refugees were 'proof' of Sandinista repression.

The Nicaraguan government then made the controversial decision to evacuate the villagers on the border to resettlement camps some

50 miles south. The Miskitos from the border region who fled to Honduras had no idea it would be so difficult to return as the border became militarized and relations deteriorated between the Honduran government, which was cooperating with the US plan for counter-revolution, and the Nicaraguan government. These events received international media coverage, which resulted in conflicting images, especially in the US.¹⁵

During 1982 and 1983, massive kidnappings by counter-revolutionary forces took place in northeast Nicaragua. All individuals working with the Sandinistas, in military, civilian, or health activities, were targeted for assassination. Even more Miskito communities were relocated as a result of such attacks. All evacuations were highly publicized in the international media and assessed by some investigative groups to be forced relocation with the intention of destroying Miskito culture¹⁶ (Americas Watch, November 1982; MISURASATA Reports, 1982-86). However, the reality was more complex, as it became clear that families were divided on the issues, and, most importantly, personal loyalties and families/clan ties were more significant than political/military affiliation. The Sandinista military and security forces, having regularly detained and imprisoned coastal people for obvious infractions, became better educated to understand cultural/language/regional differences. By the end of 1983, it had become clear to the Nicaraguan authorities that the vast majority of the people in the region who had been implicated in the counter-revolution, mostly Miskitos, had been manipulated or were simply aiding family members involved in the counter-revolution (Barricada International, 1983-86).

At that point, the government declared a general amnesty for most Miskitos imprisoned or in exile. That juridical action marked a turning point in the government's comprehension of the nature of the counter-revolution in the Atlantic Coast region, as distinguished from the counter-revolution in the Pacific region, where the Sandinistas refused to negotiate directly with the contras. Since early 1984, efforts have been made by the Nicaraguan government to resolve the historical issues regarding eastern Nicaragua and the demands of its population. In mid-1984, the Sandinistas appointed a local leader as head of the northeastern Miskito region. Dr. Myrna Cunningham is a medical doctor and well-known throughout the region for her medical work and as a Sandinista partisan. Her role as a mediator became increasingly important as the government opened negotiations with Brooklyn Rivera in late 1984.

Reconciliation Efforts, 1984-1988

Taking advantage of the government's offer for talks, Brooklyn Rivera, leader of MISURASATA, returned to Nicaragua in late October 1984, after spending three years fighting the Sandinistas. He travelled for ten days on the Atlantic Coast, and, at the end of the trip, he agreed to open conversations with the government. The negotiations began formally in December 1984, in Bogota, Colombia, with a number of foreign government representatives and non-governmental organizations, mostly of indigenous peoples, observing. Following the first meeting, the government announced the formation of a national commission to study the question of autonomy for the Atlantic Coast. Although this action appears to have been a response to the demand for autonomy proposed by Rivera in the initial negotiations, Rivera denounced the initiative (Rivera, 1984).

During the winter and spring of 1985, two further negotiating meetings took place between the government and MISURASATA, despite Rivera's accusations that the government was trying to undermine his leadership by forming the autonomy commission. In the fourth round of talks in Bogota on 25 May 1985, Rivera walked out, charging inflexibility on the part of the government. Rivera insisted on negotiating the terms of autonomy for the Atlantic Coast, but the government refused to negotiate solely with MISURASATA, arguing that it did not represent fully all the Miskitos, much less the rest of the population of the Atlantic Coast.¹⁷

Brooklyn Rivera and his network of North American and European supporters have condemned the autonomy process that is presently taking place.¹⁸ However, the view of the Nicaraguan government and of many representatives of peoples in the region is that the autonomy process is a true response to an historical

demand, and although MISURASATA has a right to participate in its development, neither the organization nor Rivera himself can be the sole determining factor in the process.

Although the first stage of negotiations between MISURASATA and the government stalled after five months and were not revived for more than two years, they created a foundation for some reconciliation. During June 1985, the first displaced Miskitos from the Coco River border villages began returning to reconstruct their war-torn homeland. Nearly all Miskitos who had been displaced within Nicaragua were back in their original villages by the end of 1985. The government supported and aided their return, following cease-fire agreements with Miskito opposition field commanders inside Nicaragua. Security concerns, then, took a backseat to economic crisis. Nearly all the villages were destroyed by the war while others had deteriorated. Food was a major problem since boats and fields had been destroyed. The riverine residents have depended traditionally on fishing for half their food supply. Faced with having to restore their productive capacity, they were initially totally dependent on government handouts, a dependency they had not experienced even while displaced as they had become self-sufficient in a very brief period following relocation. Coupled with these basic limitations were serious, albeit long-term problems of transportation, both on water and land, for the government to supply the villages with food, medicine, tools, materials for survival and reconstruction. The government's strategy was to solicit international aid which also took time. Given that economic and war crises existed throughout the country, it took more than a year for the government to determine that the project should be an emergency priority. However, once the momentum quickened, thousands of Miskitos in exile began to apply for repatriation as well as returning spontaneously (*Refugees* 44: 27-30).

Just as the entire process was accelerating, security again became a concern. In late March and early April 1986, nearly 12,000 of the 14,000 Miskitos who had resettled on the Coco River began fleeing en masse to Honduras out of fear of renewed fighting. The armed Miskitos based in Honduras had easy entrance to the villages and began to spread the word that they were going to engage the Sandinista military based in the region. They had just received \$300,000 of the \$27 million granted by the US Congress in June 1985 (Omang, 1986: A16; LeMoyne, 1986: 2).

Despite this test of good faith, the cease-fire agreements between the government and various Miskito leaders and their followers (some 20 commanders and around 1000 fighters at the time) held. Both internal dissension within the Miskito opposition leadership, as well as the Iran-contra scandal which halted US assistance, allowed for relative security in the region through 1987.

During 1986, a number of indigenous and other non-governmental organizations, including the International Indian Treaty Council, MADRE, War Resisters' League, the Burlington, Vermont-Puerto Cabezas Sister City Project, and others, along with a number of celebrities joined a campaign initiated by Indigenous World Association, called 'Project Renewal' to deliver humanitarian assistance to the Miskitos displaced in Puerto Cabezas and returning to the border. This initiative culminated in the 'Thanksgiving Peace Ship' delegation, mostly North American Indians, to the region in November 1986 and the later arrival of hundreds of tons of medicines, clothing and tools. The initiative continued with numerous projects but became less crucial as international agencies developed much larger-scale repatriation and reconstruction projects.

In the improved situation, the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees initiated direct flights from the Mosquitia of Honduras to northeastern Nicaragua for returning Miskito refugees. This cut a 1500 km. trip (mostly by land through western Honduras and Nicaragua) to a 45 minute flight. By the end of June 1987, the plane had transported 520 refugees in 22 direct flights. With this success, the procedure became routine (*Refugees* 44: 27). Meanwhile thousands of Miskitos returned to their villages in eastern Nicaragua spontaneously and without UNHCR assistance. Without international assistance in receiving them and giving them a start in reconstructing their lives, the Nicaragua government would have been overwhelmed. By mid-1987, UNHCR and the International Committee for the Red Cross, with funds from a number of governments as well as from the European Economic Community, had established impressive emergency and development programmes in the region (*Refugees* 44: 27-30).

In this process of reconciliation, it is doubtful that either the negotiated cease-fires or repatriation would have been possible without two initiatives taken by the Nicaraguan government: Allowing the Miskitos to leave the internal refugee camps to return to their border lands and the proclamation of the right to autonomy in eastern Nicaragua. The nature of the autonomy plan as well as the process which produced it are debated and remain the central concern of Brooklyn Rivera and his followers.

Atlantic Coast Autonomy

1985 was a turning point in Nicaraguan government policy toward the Miskito Indians and the other peoples of the eastern region. The government recognized all organizations in the region as parties to the autonomy process. An effective cease-fire with Miskito combatants allied with the counter-revolution was concluded, which has proven effective. Four rounds of negotiations between the government and the most important exiled Miskito leader, Brooklyn Rivera, were set off by a meeting between Rivera and the Nicaraguan president, and took place from late 1984 to mid-1985. Perhaps most importantly, the Miskitos who had been relocated from their traditional communities on the border were allowed to return, setting off repatriation of Miskitos who had become refugees. Inaugurating that important year was the December 1984 announcement of the establishment of the National Autonomy Commission to study the feasibility and form that autonomy for the eastern region might take.

Rivera and his supporters, as well as a number of independent observers, have opposed the autonomy process as it has taken place, considering the end result as a 'false economy', and the process as no more than a top-down government initiative. Therefore, it is important to look in some detail at both the process and the resulting form of autonomy.¹⁹

Initially, the Autonomy Commission was made up of five members, only two being from the Atlantic Coast: Hazel Lau, Miskito, and a founding director of MISURASATA, and Ray Hooker, Creole from Bluefields. Both Lau and Hooker had been elected the prior November to the newly established Nicaraguan National Assembly. The other three members were: Galio Gurdian, an anthropologist and director of the semi-autonomous Atlantic Coast Research Centre (CIDCA); Manuel Ortega Hegg, also an anthropologist, working for the government; and Orlando Nuñez, a sociologist and head of the Agrarian Reform Research Institute (CIERA) of the Ministry for Agrarian Reform (INRA). The member of the National Directorate of the FSLN who had been responsible for the Atlantic Coast since 1979, Luis Carrion, was replaced by another member, Tomás Borge, the Minister of Interior (MINT), who became Coordinator of the National Autonomy Commission. Meanwhile, in both the northern and southern zones of the Atlantic Coast, spontaneous commissions on autonomy were formed representing all sectors of the coastal population. These commissions received official recognition in July 1985, and the members of the original five-member commission became advisers to a new consolidated body of eighty coastal representatives (Diskin, *et al.*, 1986: 39-43; CIDCA, 1987: 178).

However, prior to the official confirmation of the amplified autonomy commission, the five-member commission had written the initial document which became the basis for all discussions which led up to the autonomy legislation which took effect in late 1987. This document, 'The Right to Autonomy of the Indigenous Peoples and Communities of the Atlantic Coast', was published in May 1985, and was revised by the larger commission and published as 'Policies and Principles for the Exercise of the Rights of Autonomy of the Indigenous Peoples and Communities of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua' (CIDCA, 1987: 178-187). These principles form the basis for the autonomy law.

Regarding the process that took place between the publication of the principles in mid-1985 and the legislation on autonomy promulgated two years later, it cannot be denied that coastal participation in continual local, regional and national meetings was impressive. It is doubtful that a single community was neglected in the consultations which took place. The government also organized an international consultation in Managua which brought more than

100 anthropologists, sociologists, international law specialists, and dozens of representatives of indigenous peoples from North America, Mexico, Belize, Honduras, Guatemala, and Panama. This intensive consultation, which took place behind closed doors, elicited, on the one hand, solid support for the Nicaraguan government against intervention and for its initiative on autonomy, but on the other hand, rather sharp criticisms of some of the working principles. What is remarkable is that the final autonomy law differs very little from the initial set of principles. The attitude of coastal representatives appears to be that the principle of autonomy, that is, their *right* to autonomy is the most important aspect, and the terms of autonomy will develop through an organic process over time (Interviews, 1985-88). Indeed it is notable that a number of actual practices in place in the region since 1985 are far more radical than the terms of the autonomy law. An example of this is the fact that the Miskito insurgents who made cease-fire agreements with the government are allowed to maintain their weapons, ammunition and uniforms, and provide local security in a number of the Miskito towns. Their main centre, the town of Yulu, was designated as the site for the autonomy pilot project in 1986, a year before the law was in effect. In agreements between the former insurgents and the government, the Nicaraguan security forces may not enter the zone without their permission.

However flexible the policies and principles of autonomy may be, it is necessary to analyze them in terms of what they provide and that in turn must be measured against the demands of the coastal people in exile, particularly MISURASATA and the ultimate aspirations of the coastal people.

The most viable characterization of the autonomy plan is probably that it is extremely limited. As one government expert, a member of the original autonomy commission, has stated:

'One must distinguish between the limits of autonomy and its content. The plan has already set its natural limits in relation to the central government. Greater or lesser independence would determine its transformation into a separatist plan, or simply a greater degree of decentralized administration. (Ortega Hegg, 1985: 9)

This pronouncement, made at the beginning of the autonomy process, appears to have closed the door to any real debate over the ultimate law. Since autonomy is precisely a partial transfer of sovereignty from the central State, not simply decentralization of central government functions, all consultations and discussions which took place subsequently were not really about the form of autonomy but rather mechanisms of implementation of an already decided policy. This observation does not imply that future changes are impossible; indeed they are probably inevitable. In the meantime, the institutions established to implement the autonomy law, will form the basis for future changes.

The autonomy law is an attempt to balance national unity with the multiethnic/multinational character of the country. All eight of the preambular paragraphs of the autonomy law reveal this tension. Article III of the preamble ties the question with Nicaraguan and Latin American liberation struggles:

'[Whereas] the multiethnic identity of the Nicaraguan people is firmly inspired by the heroic achievements of American Indians, such as Cuauhtemoc, Caupolicán, Diriangén, Tupac Amaru [non-Nicaraguan Indian resistance leaders] whose cause was never abandoned, and the heroic deeds of Augusto C. Sandino who sowed the aspirations and determination of the indigenous people of the Coco River with their agricultural and mining cooperatives and who proudly proclaimed to the world: "I am Nicaraguan and I feel proud because in my veins flows, more than any other, Indian blood, and from which surges the mystery of being patriotic, loyal and sincere".'

(Law 28, 1987: 1)

[Unofficial translation by author]

Preambular Article IV ties national unity to institutionalization of multiethnicity:

'[Whereas] the revolutionary struggle of the Nicaraguan people, by constructing a new, multiethnic, pluricultural and multilingual nation, based on democracy, pluralism, anti-imperialism and the elimination of social exploitation and oppression in all forms, demands the institutionalization of the process of autonomy for the communities of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, therefore recognizes the political, economic, social and cultural rights of its inhabitants; guarantees equality in diversity; fortifies the national unity and territorial integrity of the nation; deepens the democratic principle of the Revolution and reverses in the most profound way the essence of the dependent and exploited society that we suffered in the past.'

(Law 28, 1987: 2)

In preambular Article V, autonomy is seen as enriching national unity and the national culture.

That national unity and territorial sovereignty are a major concern of the government is expressed in an initial operative article:

'The communities of the Atlantic Coast form part of the unitary State and are indivisible from Nicaragua . . . ' (Law 28, Chapter I, Article 2: 3)

The autonomy law provides that three specific areas, certainly fundamental to all indigenous peoples' demands, lie within the control of the autonomy governments: promotion of cultures and languages; land; water and forests. The languages of the region, as well as Spanish, are official languages (Title I, Chapter I, Article 5). Bilingual and multilingual education are guaranteed:

'[The inhabitants of the communities of the Atlantic Coast have the right to] education in their mother tongue and in Spanish, through programmes that include their historical patrimony, their value systems, the traditions and characteristics of their environment, within the national education system.' (Title I, Chapter III, Article 11.5: 6)

An entire chapter is devoted to land tenure:

'The autonomous region has the full capacity to acquire, administer and dispose of the land that is a part of its patrimony, in conformity with this statute and laws.' (Title IV, Chapter I, Article 35)

'Communal property, including the lands, waters and forests that have belonged traditionally to the communities of the Atlantic Coast [fall under the control of the autonomous governments] and are subject to the following dispositions:

1. Communal land is inalienable; it cannot be sold, donated, encumbered, mortgaged, and are inprescriptible.

2. The inhabitants of the communities have the right to work parcels of the community property and to the use of the produce of their work.'

(Title IV, Chapter I, Article 36)

Article 37 also recognizes all other existing forms of property in the region.

Although the regional administrations are given power over the land, as well as water and woods, other natural resources fall outside this authority:

'In the rational exploitation of mineral, forest, sealife and other natural resources of the autonomous regions . . . [the communities] will benefit in just proportion to their inhabitants through agreements between the regional government and the central government.'

(Title I, Chapter II, Article 9)

One important measuring rod for the relative extent of autonomy is the degree to which an autonomous regime controls its natural resources. Fundamentally, the Nicaraguan autonomy plan guarantees use rights to the inhabitants of the autonomous region.²⁰

The administrative structure required under the autonomy law divides the eastern half of the country into two regional governments, north and south, with administrative centres located in Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields. Each of these two autonomous territories would be governed by a regional assembly and an executive. These institutions will be responsible for guaranteeing the exercise of autonomy in the two regions. Each assembly will have 45 members elected by secret ballot. Although the law requires that each of the distinct indigenous and ethnic groups be represented in the assemblies, the mechanism for doing so is left to a system to be determined in the regions through their own electoral law. To stand for election, a person must have been born in the region, or be the child of a mother or father born in the region. The candidate must be 21 years or older and have resided in the region for at least a year before the election. For the non-native born, the residence requirement is five years (Title II, Articles 19-21).

Three problems can be identified in these provisions. The first, hotly debated during 1985, is the requirement for two autonomous governments rather than one. The coastal people expressed strongly their desire for one autonomous government, but reluctantly settled for two (Interviews, 1985). The government's rationale for insisting on two autonomous governments purports to be for logistic reasons – the difficulty of transport in the region and the lack of direct transportation by land or air between the north and south of the region. The government fears that one or the other of the two regions would tend to dominate and the autonomous government would be too remote from the local communities. However, it can be argued that the establishment of two autonomous governments will simply reinforce the geographic separation that has developed during the 20th century, and will weaken the potential of regional autonomy.

A second problem is the means of election to the highest representative bodies of the two autonomous regional governments. The lack of provision for ethnic balance and the reliance on proportional representation in terms of the general population could automatically assure hegemony of the Mestizo population, which the government claims makes up 65% of the total Atlantic Coast population. If this were the result, it would defeat the entire objective of autonomy. Not only would the entire indigenous Indian and Creole populations be threatened by the political dominance of Mestizos, the smaller indigenous communities would be eclipsed, such as the Sumu by the Miskito in the north, or the Rama, Garifuno, and Miskito by the numerically larger Creole population in the south. Obviously, the electoral law which emerges will be of critical importance in overcoming these dangers.

A third problem which affects particularly the Miskitos and Sumus in the north, is the requirement for one-year residency before standing for election. It is not clear why coastal natives residing in other parts of Nicaragua to work, or even who have been forcibly relocated to Maltagalpa and Jinotega provinces should be subjected to this residency requirement. Nor does it seem entirely fair that returning refugees from other countries should wait a year to run for office. On the other hand, the five-year residency requirement for the non-native born seems potentially problematic, given the colonization from western Nicaragua that has taken place in the past several decades. Initiatives of the government in 1980-81 to prohibit immigration to the Atlantic Coast appear to have been abandoned and no such prohibition appears in the autonomy law except for making adverse possession of communal lands illegal.

The powers of the regional assemblies are not great. Other than the power to resolve differences among community land claims, the assemblies would mainly be adapting national laws to the particularities of the regions. From their number they will select an executive council, to be made up of a president, two vice-presidents, two secretaries and two voting members (Title II, Chapter III, Article 27). The function of the executive body appears to be mainly for continuity when the assemblies are not in session. The assemblies will also elect 'Regional Coordinators' from their members. This official will correspond to the office established in mid-1984 of representative of the President of Nicaragua, which had been an appointed, not elected office. The duties of the coordinator include the naming of executive functionaries for regional administration, a sort of cabinet of ministers. The coordinator represents the region to the central government, and assures compliance with decisions of the regional assemblies (Title II, Chapter IV, Articles 29-31).

Some powers held by the regional governments are very important for the development of autonomy. One is their power of taxation, 'to establish regional taxes in conformity with existing laws', (Title I, Chapter II, Article 9), a very broad and flexible power of taxation. Another provision allows the regional governments to: 'Foment the traditional interchange with the nations and peoples of the Caribbean, in conformity with the national laws and procedures that are applicable.' (Title I, Chapter II, Article 7)

The latter was a great victory for the Creoles in the south who struggled very hard for its inclusion after several years of central government prohibition of such trade and interchange.

In a sharp departure from the practices of other American States in relation to indigenous populations, the Nicaraguan autonomy law allows: 'The members of the communities of the Atlantic Coast have the right to define and decide their own ethnic identity' (Title I, Chapter III, Article 12). A further departure is the provision for the preservation and promotion of native natural medicine in the health programmes (Title I, Chapter III, Article 11-8).

Coastal people have been opposed strongly to national conscription, in particular the Sumus and the Creoles. However, they did not succeed in gaining exception to conscription in the autonomy law. Further, the national military (EPS) and security forces (MINT) are in control of military and security affairs in both autonomous regions:

'In Nicaragua, the defence of the nation rests in the organized force of all the people. In the autonomous regions, defence will be directed by the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS) and the bodies of internal security and

order of the State; the inhabitants of these communities have priority in the defence of the sovereignty of these regions.'

(Title I, Chapter III, Article 14)

The final provision of the article appears to mean that local conscripts will have priority in being assigned to their own regions.

Apparently, changes in the autonomy law can be made only on the initiative of two-thirds of each of the regional assemblies in presenting amendments to the National Assembly for a constitutional amendment, although there is no explicit prohibition of the initiation of amendments by the National Assembly, or even its annulment in full. The single provision regarding amendments reads:

'Two-thirds of both regional assemblies must together solicit change in the present statute in conformity with the mechanisms established by the Political Constitution of Nicaragua, the General Statute of the National Assembly and its internal rules.' (Title V, Chapter I, Article 38)

Of course, as under practically all autonomy arrangements, the central government reserves full control over foreign relations, national security and national economic planning.

The autonomy law in Nicaragua provides for more than mere cultural autonomy, but a good deal less than what exists in some autonomy models around the world, such as Spain, Switzerland, the USSR, Yugoslavia, and Denmark (Greenland). In the discussions on autonomy carried out in the region from mid-1985 through April 1987 many criticisms, concerns and recommendations emerged which affected the final product and will undoubtedly allow for future changes.²¹

Observations of the Nicaraguan Autonomy Plan

Hazel Lau, a leader of MISURASATA who did not leave Nicaragua, elected member of the Nicaraguan National Assembly, and member of the National Autonomy Commission, commented on what principles autonomy should address regarding the Miskitos:

'We Miskitos associate autonomy with three concrete demands: the return to the Rio Coco, the unity of the Miskito family, and a lucid government policy which allows room to respond to the historical, social and economic demands of the Indian people within a framework of respect... The satisfaction of these three demands depends upon the peace process. We Miskitos cannot conceive of real autonomy without reaching a settlement with the armed forces of MISURA and MISURASATA... There is no division or confusion among the indigenous people; we have already defined what we want: self-government, rights to land and natural resources, freedom of movement, respect for our customs and languages, and most of all, peace.' (Barricada International, October 1985)

Another leader, Mary Bushey, commented in 1985 also on the importance of resolving the conflict between the armed Miskito groups and the Nicaraguan government:

'We have brought the document of basic concerns [the autonomy document] for consultations to the armed rebels and many of them approve of its contents. Their main worry is which army will operate in the zone. They propose that the government troops there be made up by the people from the region. MISURA and MISURASATA, made up of experienced combatants, familiar with the zone, would be willing to unite to form special contingents of the Nicaraguan army. They don't want to be under the control of arrogant officers from the Pacific.'

(Barricada International, October 1985)

Miskito fighters who have made cease-fire agreements with the Sandinistas claim that their authority comes from their communities, and that the government must come to trust that the people know what is best for themselves, and to trust the leaders chosen by the people.

Reynaldo Reyes, better known as Commander Ráfaga ('Rapid Fire'), is a Miskito leader and former chief of intelligence in the Miskito armed forces until he signed a cease-fire agreement with the Sandinistas in late 1985. He said:

'The war will not resolve our problems. We are caught between various cross-fires: the pro-war members of KISAN [Miskito combatants], the Somocistas of the FDN [contras], the CIA and even the Sandinistas themselves, although the real danger does not come from them, but rather from those who do not want peace.'

(Barricada International, 6 February 1986)

Ráfaga sees problems with the autonomy proposal, saying it perpetuates the domination of Mestizo Nicaraguans over the rest of the peoples of the Atlantic Coast:

'They say that there are 80,000 Miskitos, but we say there are 180,000 altogether. With the first figure, the Mestizos would be the privileged majority, but if we take the second, the situation changes, doesn't it?'

(Barricada International, 6 February 1986)

Another Miskito combatant who came to a cease-fire agreement with the Sandinistas sees problems with the willingness of the Sandinistas to share power and to trust the coastal peoples' leadership:

'That is the central problem. We may reach a satisfactory resolution with the government, but the FSLN must understand that there will always be a problem until it yields power.

For example, we make concrete proposals... when we make a proposal, they are horrified. They say: "But don't you see the consequences that would have on such and such an area? You are only thinking about your own interests, but we have to think about Miskito interests and also the interests of the Revolution."

They still underestimate us. They think that we can't see beyond our noses... they think we are confused and need political development... It's not that the Sandinistas do not want to respond to our demands, it's that they don't completely understand the problematic situation on the Coast. It's hard for them to understand, because the truth is, the problem the Coast people have is the FSLN.'

(Barricada International, October 1985)

Mary Bushey provides another concrete example about Miskito mistrust for the judgment of the Sandinistas:

'For example, the Miskitos say that they are living almost completely on State charity, that the government even gives them free food. Whatever the reason, it humiliates them: the Miskitos are a proud and self-sufficient people. The communities ask that instead of subsidizing them, the government provide them with some means of production. In one coastal community, a group of fishermen said that they needed fish hooks. The Fishing Institute has always told them that fish hooks are imported and that there is no foreign currency because of the economic embargo. The fishermen have protested to us: "We hear that those Ministers each have two or three cars that cost many thousands of dollars each. Yet they say they can't buy us fish hooks. Do hooks cost that much?"'

(Barricada International, October 1985)

The Creoles in the south have expressed concern over central government control over the autonomous governments. Johnny Hodgson, the Creole mayor of the city of Bluefields, carried on a considerable campaign, speaking for the Creole people, to allow for the legalization of the long-standing traditional commerce with Caribbean countries, especially Jamaica, something the Creoles succeeded in achieving in the autonomy law (Barricada International, October 1985; Law 28, Title I, Chapter II, Article 8-7).

While the Miskito combatants insist on coordinated defence of their communities with the Sandinistas, neither the Sumus nor Creoles want their people to be subject to national military service. Sumu leader, Timoteo Patron, of the Sumu organization SUKAWALA, states that:

'... one of the demands raised in the autonomy consultations is that our people not be called for military service and that the army leave our lands. We are but a small nation and if our young people die in the war, we will disappear.'

(Barricada International, 12 December 1985)

The Creoles believe that the regional autonomous governments should not have to enforce the fulfilment of military service (Barricada International, 12 December 1985).

The Sumus would like to see equal representation in the regional assembly by each of the peoples in the region, rather than proportional representation. The Creoles would prefer general elections for the regional executive, rather than election by the regional assembly. They would also prefer that the executive be a council rather than one person. The Creoles, as well as Miskitos, want one regional government for the entire Atlantic Coast, rather than two. They have agreed that they could accept two, but only as an initial, practical matter, and as long as the two would eventually be fused into one, as infrastructure and communication between the north and south are improved (Barricada International, 12 December 1985).

These early critiques of the initial autonomy proposals by coastal leaders had little effect on changing the final product in any significant way. However, a far more radical critique comes from Brooklyn Rivera. On 6 August 1987, Rivera's representatives

presented the critique, along with an alternative proposal, entitled 'Treaty of Peace between the Republic of Nicaragua and the Indian Nations of Yapti Tasba'. The MISURASATA critique describes the main distinction between the MISURASATA proposal and the Sandinista autonomy law as lying in the fact that its proposal is a *treaty*, that is, 'a proposed *agreement* [emphasis in the document] between the indigenous peoples of the Atlantic Coast region and the Nicaraguan government, as opposed to a unilaterally decreed statute that can be altered at will by the central government' (MISURASATA, 1987: 2).

The draft treaty is intended, its authors state, to enact indigenous self-determination:

'Indeed, the draft treaty is premised on the explicit recognition of the right of self-determination of the Miskito, Sumu and Rama, while stipulating that the right "shall be exercised within the framework of the Nicaraguan State" (Art. I.A.). The treaty would also confirm the territorial land and usufructuary rights of the Miskito, Sumu, and Rama over their ancestral lands (Art. I.c), while allowing *all* [emphasis in the document] current inhabitants of the region full use and enjoyment of the lands, waters and resources in accordance with local custom (Art. I.D.)

(MISURASATA, 1987: 2)

Article II of the draft treaty provides for a self-governing territory of the traditional lands of the Miskito, Sumu and Rama, with a delineation of the boundaries that includes the eastern half of Nicaragua. This article provides that a joint commission should be established to survey and establish the precise boundaries (MISURASATA, 1987, Annex, Article II).

The MISURASATA proposal would limit the central government's jurisdiction to specific spheres of powers related to purely national interest, that is, national defence, foreign relations, customs, citizenship and immigration, currency and the postal system (MISURASATA, 1987, Annex, Articles VI.A, VI.B, VI.C, VI.D, VI.E). All other powers would be reserved to the autonomous government, including powers over land tenure, natural resources, agriculture, fishing and hunting, the environment, education, civil and criminal offences, judicial courts, housing, taxation, security, religious institutions, political parties, labour unions and relations, commerce and development, social services, cultural affairs, the press, communications, airports and transportation, inheritance, and all other matters that are not specifically delegated to the national government (Article IV).

As the MISURASATA critique points out, the draft treaty does not outline the structure or nature of the regional government's institutions, but leaves this entirely to processes to be established by the peoples of the Atlantic Coast, stating:

'The indigenous signatories to the treaty would commit themselves to holding a constitutional assembly with the participation of all the Atlantic Coast communities, in order to establish the governing structures of the region. The regional constitution would then be subject to ratification by a two-thirds majority vote of the adult population born in the region.'

(Art. III.B) (MISURASATA, 1987: 3)

The MISURASATA critique disapproves of the emphasis in the Nicaraguan autonomy law on integration of the Atlantic Coast and lack of provision for authentic self-government. The document observes that the proposed regional autonomous governments under the Nicaraguan law 'effectively would operate as local consultative and administrative arms of the central government' (MISURASATA, 1987: 3). It criticizes the fact that even the more favourable provisions in the law require that they be carried out in accordance with national laws. The document proposes as a partially viable model for Atlantic Coast autonomy, the Greenland Home Rule statute, which allows the Greenland government control over all internal matters independent of the Danish government (MISURASATA, 1987: 3).

Soon after publishing this critique and the proposed draft treaty, the Central American peace agreement was concluded and, in January 1988, talks between Brooklyn Rivera and the government opened again after a 2½ year break. Rivera has put forward two documents as a basis for negotiations, one containing specific demands for Rivera's return to Nicaragua. Among those demands is government recognition of Yatama (the name of the united coastal opposition organizations, including MISURASATA) as the sole representative organization of the peoples of the Atlantic Coast. It also demands that the coastal radio station be transferred to Yatama control. The second document is the draft treaty. Clearly, Rivera does not expect to succeed in getting government agreement

to all the terms of his autonomy proposal. Although, the proposal probably does accurately reflect what the majority of Miskitos would want autonomy to be, it is doubtful that the other coastal groups would approve it as a whole. It does address a fundamental issue not adequately dealt with in the autonomy law – the specificities of Indian aspirations and rights as distinguished from other ethnic groups. As Andrew Gray, an anthropologist with the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) has stated in reference to the Nicaraguan autonomy proposals:

'On the Atlantic Coast there are several ethnic groups but not all are indigenous. The difference is that indigenous peoples have certain rights inherent in their lives because of their colonization experience. In the view of all those who accept anti-imperialism and decolonization, these rights must be recognized.'

Whereas Mestizos, Creoles etc. may not have these rights, it does not mean that they will be unequal citizens . . . so why deprive indigenous peoples of their fundamental rights because their neighbours do not want them for themselves?' (CIDCA, 1987: 192)

Another point, not made by MISURASATA, regarding the Nicaraguan autonomy law and discussions leading up to it, is the refusal to refer to the Miskitos, Sumus, Ramas, Creoles, Garifunos, as *peoples*. The term, 'community' or 'ethnic group' is consistently used. Indigenous peoples regard themselves as peoples and nations.²² The representatives of one Indian nation have criticized Canada similarly:

'When are people a people? . . . Is the threat of self-determination so great that we are no longer peoples because we invoke this basic human right which is so fundamental to the United Nations' concept? . . . If we are not peoples, who are we?

Does the word mean one thing in one place, and something else when indigenous peoples are concerned? Is this not discrimination . . . ?

This question must be settled now, because all we do here [in the United Nations] is moot if we are not recognized as peoples under international law.' (Grand Council of the Crees of Quebec, August 1987, UN Document E/CN.4/Sub.2/1987/NGO/9)

The Nicaraguan autonomy law, while certainly an advance, exhibits a lack of understanding of the indigenous issue, beyond the dimensions of racial discrimination and cultural/social/economic marginalization. Significantly, the autonomy law does not propose integration or assimilation at the ultimate goal. Although the initiative is an important step, it may not be sufficient. Various critics differ as to whether the new law is a step in the right direction.²³

Conclusion

A dynamic process is at work in the formation of autonomy for the Atlantic Coast region of Nicaragua, the historic Mosquitia, homeland of the Miskito people. The autonomy question usually emerges because of unresolved conflict, often armed, between distinct peoples who occupy particular regions of a country and the national government which claims and asserts jurisdiction over them. Autonomy is generally a conflict-resolution initiative, and seeks to prevent the worse alternative, from the central government's point of view, of a separatist movement. Therefore, the essential question about the Nicaraguan autonomy law is: Will it be sufficient from the point of view of the indigenous peoples of the region, particularly those in arms, primarily Miskitos?²⁴

Nicaragua and the Miskitos have been thrust into the forefront of the struggle of indigenous peoples for the basic human rights of indigenous peoples. The Nicaraguan revolution, occurring in the midst of an internationalized pan-Indian movement, in which Miskito Indians from Nicaragua played a role even before the new Nicaraguan government took power, has put Nicaragua in an historic position. The decision by the Nicaraguan government to respond politically to the demands of its coastal population, even though a great many of them were part of an armed opposition openly linked with United States-supported counter-revolutionary organizations, has opened the door to a potential regional autonomy that goes far beyond 'tribal sovereignty' in the United States and Canada or the reserve systems practised by other governments of the Americas in relation to their long-colonized Indian populations.

The results will have a profound effect on other Indian peoples, who are looking at the situation with hope, as well as on the

development of international norms regarding the protection of indigenous peoples as well as ethnic, linguistic, national and religious minorities in other countries of the world.

Although the Nicaraguan government has not perpetuated systematic gross human rights violations against the coastal population, as it has been accused, it is also clear that the peoples of that region have long been dissatisfied with Nicaraguan central governments, and they have mistrusted the Sandinistas equally, if not more.

Regarding the autonomy proposal and process, there have been sharp and concrete fundamental criticisms from the people it will affect, which have been fully publicized by the Sandinistas, both domestically and internationally. The government continues to negotiate with all coastal people in exile. However, the autonomy law itself is only a framework for a process based on continuing input from the indigenous peoples and ethnic communities of the coast, and from the Miskitos who remain outside the country.²⁵ As Reynaldo Reyes puts it:

'It is not a question of approving or disapproving of the particulars of the law itself. The law is general and simply formalizes our right to self-determination. Autonomy will be what we make of it. It is up to us - the peoples of the Atlantic Coast and we Miskitos have a big role to play, especially in the north.

(Interview by author with Reynaldo Reyes, June 1988)

Autonomy is a process, one that is taking place in Nicaragua in a tense situation in which the stakes are high. For the government, the process tests the depth of its commitment to the principles of

self-determination, and the protection of ethnic identities and cultures, which, for the indigenous peoples, is inseparable from their land and resources. For the armed Miskito groups, it tests their will to resist the manipulation of Somocista elements backed by American arms and dollars, and to use the negotiating table to resolve their legitimate historical claims without resort to force of arms.²⁶

The chances for achieving a negotiated solution to the legitimate claims of the peoples of the Atlantic Coast and the quality of autonomy for the region will continue to be severely limited as long as US policy supports counter-revolutionary action against the Nicaraguan government, whether through the semi-covert subterfuge of aid to the contra forces, or through the threat of direct military intervention. Such support tempts a resort to armed conflict whenever negotiations are stalled or unproductive, rather than prompting re-evaluation, compromise, and creativity in the negotiation process. An immediate solution of the armed conflict in the Atlantic Coast region could be achieved only if the United States ceases its interventionist policy and withdraws support for the counter-revolutionary forces, as well as ceasing its economic embargo of the country.²⁷

The structure of regional autonomy is being created and, over time, will provide a political means for resolving the historical conflicts and for removing the possibilities for counter-revolutionary exploitation of the situation. The Miskito people will continue to play a central role in future resolution.

¹ There are distinct Indian communities in the western half of Nicaragua as well, but they differ only subtly from the general Mestizo population. These are the communities of Subtiava, Jinotega, Sebaco, Matagalpa, Muy Muy, El Viejo and Monimbó. Altogether these Pacific region Indians number around 10,000, and are mainly distinguished as Indian by their maintenance of communal land tenure. They have not used their ancestral native languages, nor the widespread Nahuatl language in daily conversation for more than a century. These communities were involved in the insurrection against Somoza and are pro-Sandinista. See: Jaime Wheelock Román, *Raíces Indígenas de la Lucha Anti-Colonialista en Nicaragua*. Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1974: 49-118; INRA/CIERA, *Elementos Generales Sobre el Problema Indígena en Nicaragua*. Report No. 11. (September 1980) Managua: Ministry of Agriculture (INRA) 20-50.

² Demographic figures for eastern Nicaragua vary considerably, although there is little dispute that there are some 250,000-300,000 inhabitants, or 10% of the national population. In particular the Miskito and Mestizo numbers vary. The lower figures for the Miskitos are those of CIDCA, the Atlantic Coast Research Centre. In general, Miskitos claim a much larger population than the government acknowledges, and they believe there are fewer Mestizos in the region than the government and CIDCA claim. The Miskitos accord scant recognition to the international political boundary that divides the Mosquitia into Honduras and Nicaragua.

The origin of the Mestizo population in eastern Nicaragua dates back to the 19th century, but the great majority have migrated there since World War II. In 1927, it is estimated that only 5000 Spanish speaking Nicaraguans lived in the region. CIDCA estimates there are now 182,377, or 65% of the total east coast population. This is a crucial question in the construction of autonomy in the region. Unfortunately, the Nicaraguan autonomy law which became a part of the Nicaraguan constitution in September 1987, specifies the CIDCA figures as official – 182,000 Mestizos; 75,000 Miskitos, etc. (Law No. 28, Article II).

For a thorough analysis of the CIDCA demographic methodology and conclusions, see: CIDCA, 1987: 7-32. However, a March 1988 CIDCA map lists the Atlantic Coast Mestizo population at 130,000.

³ Various spellings have been used historically, and in direct quotations, are retained. The people prefer Miskitu. The appropriate plural in their language is Miskitu-nani, but English pluralization is used in this text.

⁴ The Garifunos, or Black Caribs, emerged from rebellious Africans who had been transported into slavery in the Caribbean and the Carib Indians of the island of St. Vincent who also resisted slavery, the two groups merging as a people. They were forcibly deported by the British Navy in the 18th century to the islands of the eastern Central American coast, from which they migrated to the continent. There are some 70,000 Garifunos along the 400-mile stretch from Belize to Costa Rica.

⁵ A body of documentation and literature has developed regarding the rights of indigenous peoples under international law. See: Ortiz, *Indians of the Americas*, 1984: 29-72; Alfredsson, 1982: 113-125; and ICIHI, *Indigenous Peoples*, 1987: 109-131.

⁶ See: Francesco Capotorti, *Study on the Rights of Persons belonging to Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities*. Special Report of the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities (E/CN.4/Sub.2/384/Rev.1) New York: UN, 1979.

⁷ Although there had been previous social revolutions in the Americas in countries with indigenous populations (Mexico, 1918; Guatemala, 1944-54; Peru, 1968; Chile, 1970-73), the Nicaraguan revolution was the first to occur at a moment when indigenous peoples had become relatively well organized and were able to articulate their claims beyond the frontiers of the States that claim jurisdiction over them. Equally relevant, the Nicaraguan revolution took place at the height of the legitimization (by President Carter) of international human rights law in the United States.

⁸ The Nicaraguan indigenous organization, ALPROMISU, founded in 1974, had been active in lobbying at the international level as a member of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP). Thus, the situation of the Miskito Indians in Nicaragua was well known to those indigenous organizations working on the development of international protection for indigenous peoples. When one of the leaders of ALPROMISU, which had become MISURASATA, Armstrong Wiggins, left Nicaragua in mid-1981, he joined with North American Indian organizations which had known him in his work. He remains the chief lobbyist for MISURASATA, based in Washington D. C. with the Indian Law Resource Centre. All the other original leaders of ALPROMISU, however, remained in Nicaragua.

⁹ Since 1906, when the US Marines occupied the region, the Moravian mission has been administered from the US headquarters of the church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. It is a member of the World Council of Churches today.

¹⁰ The companies organized labour along racial lines, as in other parts of Central America, with varying status from top to bottom according to race and language, always with the Miskito and Sumu Indians at the bottom. High-level personnel were primarily US citizens.

¹¹ Carlos Fonseca, one of the founders of the FSLN, in his tribute to Sandino, wrote: 'It is depressing to think that the principal proletarian concentration in the country, from the end of the 19th century onward, works in the remote Atlantic jungles of Nicaragua, making it difficult, if not impossible for those workers to establish links with their class brothers of the Pacific, traditionally the most active political zone.' (Fonseca, published 1984 from the 1969 ms.)

¹² It is of interest that Sandino, in negotiations with the Nicaraguan government for an end to the civil war, demanded only that the Coco River cooperatives among the Miskitos remain under his administration. It is also curious that the Atlantic Coast Research Centre (CIDCA) has paid scant attention and devoted little research to Sandino's role and Miskito involvement in his project. See: CIDCA, 1987.

¹³ Although subsistence farming and fishing by the Miskitos continued, they sought markets for their subsistence produce to satisfy the dependency that had been created by a cash economy. Malnutrition and even starvation were reported in the 1960s, especially among the Miskitos in the Coco River region. See: Helms, 1969, 1971.

¹⁴ In general, the Miskitos do not consider the division of the Mosquitia by an international border, through the 1960 World Court decision, as legitimate. Compare the former border (Rio Patuca) and the present one (Rio Coco).

¹⁵ The 'Red Christmas' attacks on the Miskito villages along the Coco River border in December 1981, followed by the Nicaraguan government evacuations of the civilians from the border, were accompanied by intense publicity in the United States and internationally. Between February and May 1982, *Newsweek* and *Time* published major stories with updates; the *New York Times* published editorials, news articles and guest commentaries; and practically all newspapers in the US carried UPI, AP and Reuters wire service releases on the subject. President Reagan, then-Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, and then-UN Ambassador, Jean Kirkpatrick, included the plight of the Miskitos in practically all of their speeches and press statements during the period.

¹⁶ This allegation as well as claims of Sandinista gross human rights violations against the Miskitos were exaggerated and amplified through the psychological warfare component of the Reagan administration. That the US government sponsored disinformation on the Miskitos is evident in the limited documents acquired by the author from the US State Department under the Freedom of Information Act. A similar request to the CIA was denied the author.

¹⁷ The names of indigenous organizations in Nicaragua and in exile are a source of some confusion as they have changed continually. The original organization, ALPROMISU (Alliance for the progress of the Miskito and Sumu) was founded in 1974, and was replaced in November 1979 by MISURASATA (Miskito, Sumu, Rama united with the Sandinistas). When the primary leader of the organization, Steadman Fagoth Mueller, joined the counter-revolution in Honduras, he renamed the organization MISURATA (dropping the SA for Sandinista) and then simply, MISURA. When Brooklyn Rivera left Nicaragua in August 1981, he first attempted to join Fagoth and his forces, but was rejected for being 'too Sandinista'. He maintained the name, MISURASATA, although some of the leaders of the organization who remained in Nicaragua attempted to continue it. Rivera joined the Costa Rican based contra organization, ARDE, which was funded by the CIA and led by Eden Pastora. ARDE disappeared in 1984. In August 1985, MISURA was restructured and excluded Fagoth, renaming it KISAN. During that time, a number of MISURA field commanders were making cease-fire agreements with the Sandinistas, and began calling themselves KISAN, pro-peace. Then, in June 1987, Rivera, Fagoth and others merged all previous exile indigenous organizations under one directorship and renamed it Yatima which means 'mother earth' in the Miskito language. Officially, the name, MISURASATA, was dropped, but is still currently used. In addition to the indigenous organizations, the Southern Indigenous and Creole Committee (SICC) had been founded in the mid-1970s and went into exile, allied with Rivera's MISURASATA in Costa Rica. Made up mostly of Creoles from Bluefields, it is also a part of the newly-formed Yatima. In mid-1984, MISATAN, a Miskito organization was created inside Nicaragua in a large Miskito assembly. Its formation was supported by the government, but took increasingly critical and independent positions after 1985. Finally, the Sumu organizations, SUKAWALA, which had been founded in the mid-1970s, but ceased to exist in late 1981, was reconstituted in mid-1985. All the Miskito-initiated organizations have claimed Sumu membership and participation, but the Sumus appear to prefer their own autonomous organization.

¹⁸ Such pronouncements may be acquired from MISURASATA/Yatima offices in Costa Rica, or from the Indian Law Resource Centre in Washington D. C.

- ¹⁹ Neither the Nicaraguan government nor any government is presently obligated under international law or the practice of States to recognize autonomy for peoples within their recognized borders, but the autonomy proposal in Nicaragua can be measured against autonomy arrangements of other States. For a survey of these practices see: Hannum and Lillich, 1980.
- ²⁰ This follows the Latin/Roman law concept of natural resource rights as belonging to the sovereign, with use rights granted to communities. For the distinction between Anglo-American and Spanish-Latin American property laws, see: Ortiz, 1980. In the international symposium on autonomy, held in Managua in July 1986, many participants, including the author, recommended greater Atlantic Coast autonomy over natural resources.
- ²¹ To its credit, the official organ of the ruling FSLN in Nicaragua, *Barricada*, published these criticisms, some of them quite sharp and profound. Since October 1985, each monthly issue of the international edition, published in several languages, and distributed throughout the world and domestically, has carried coverage and critiques of the autonomy process.
- ²² Dr. Myrna Cunningham, the indigenous presidential representative in the northern Atlantic Coast, consistently uses the terms, 'peoples' and 'nations' to refer to indigenous populations around the world, including the Miskitos. She relates the following story: In 1985, during autonomy consultations in a Miskito village, she asked an elder Miskito man if he preferred the term 'people' or 'ethnic group' in reference to the Miskitos. He replied that he preferred neither, because the Miskito are a nation. Dr. Cunningham, unlike some Nicaraguan government officials, does not appear to find the designation threatening. (Interviews, 1985, Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua)
- ²³ In particular, functionaries and pastors of the Moravian church report very positively on the autonomy process. They state that it is a first step, in the right direction, and, most important, the Miskito population is energetically and enthusiastically participating in the process. (Telephone discussion with Margaret Wilde, 30 December 1987; Speech, Norman Bent, Miskito Moravian pastor, 28 January 1988, San Francisco, California)
- ²⁴ The autonomy claims of the indigenous population, especially those demands related to natural resources and land rights, are much stronger than demands asserted by immigrants of varied ethnic origin who have settled, or were forcibly located in the Mosquitia. This raises the important and complex question regarding the Nicaraguan autonomy law: How will the autonomy of the indigenous peoples be addressed in the context of the broader reality of regional autonomy?
- ²⁵ In April 1986, a national conference on the Nicaraguan constitution was held in the US at the New York University School of Law with participation of nine Nicaraguan political parties and the Sandinista FSLN party. A workshop on Atlantic Coast autonomy was included with a number of North American Indian and indigenous advocates participating. The Nicaraguan government has held a number of international consultations and delegations from the Atlantic Coast have travelled to many parts of the world to study different autonomy arrangements.
- ²⁶ Some North American Indian officials and organizations, as well as a few European and North American anthropologists and other scholars have regarded the Nicaragua/Miskito situation as a test case or even perhaps an easy victory for international indigenous rights in terms of setting a precedent. (See: *Cultural Survival Quarterly* and *Akwasasne Notes*, issues from 1981-present for articles and interviews reflecting this view.) A number of these individuals are advisers to Brooklyn Rivera and allegedly have pressured him to take extremely radical and inflexible positions in negotiations with the Sandinistas or to not negotiate at all. (See documents from the South American Indian Council - CISA - 1985-86; Diaz-Polanco, 1986)
- ²⁷ Regarding the contra-Sandinista cease-fire concluded in late March 1988, Ray Hooker, Creole leader from Bluefields cautioned against optimism if the US continues to try to destabilize and overthrow the government. He sees the problem as the US creation of leaders through bribery and promises of power. Even if the present contra leaders have made agreements, there are always others who can be presented as leaders to continue the contra war. (*New York Times*, March 29, 1988:4). There is abundant evidence to support Hooker's fears about the contra war in general and specifically the Miskito involvement. Two reliable, well-informed journalists based in Costa Rica report details of bribery and death threats against Moravian negotiators in the Rivera-Sandinista negotiations, naming the US officials involved. (Honey and Avirgan, 155). This author has gathered similar information from 1981 onwards regarding the key role played by US intervention in gaining the participation of Miskitos in the contra war.

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¹The Internationalist; ²New Society; ³Times Lit. Supplement; ⁴Belfast Newsletter; ⁵Irish Post; ⁶International Affairs; ⁷Sunday Independent; ⁸S.Asian Review; ⁹The Friend; ¹⁰Afro-Asian Affairs; ¹¹E. African Standard; ¹²Sunday Times; ¹³New Community; ¹⁴The Times; ¹⁵Information; ¹⁶The Observer; ¹⁷Irving Horowitz; ¹⁸The Guardian; ¹⁹Peace News; ²⁰The Freethinker; ²¹The Spectator; ²²The Geographical Magazine; ²³New World; ²⁴Melbourne Age; ²⁵The Economist; ²⁶Neue Zürcher Zeitung; ²⁷Resurgence; ²⁸Feedback; ²⁹Time Out; ³⁰Evening Standard; ³¹Tribune of Australia; ³²The Scotsman; ³³The Financial Times; ³⁴New Statesman; ³⁵The Nation; ³⁶Bernard Levin; ³⁷BBC World Service; ³⁸International Herald Tribune; ³⁹Education; ⁴⁰Times Ed. Supp.; ⁴¹The Middle East; ⁴²City Limits; ⁴³South; ⁴⁴Choice; ⁴⁵S. Asia Research; ⁴⁶New African; ⁴⁷Voluntary Action; ⁴⁸India Weekly; ⁴⁹The Jerusalem Post; ⁵⁰Race Relations Abstracts; ⁵¹Third World Affairs; ⁵²Tarzie Vittachi; ⁵³Lord Lyell in House of Lords debate; ⁵⁴Workaway; ⁵⁵Prof. Lemarchand; ⁵⁶Prof. Banton.

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Caught in the Crossfire

Six years after the dawn of what promised to be a new era in Nicaragua, following the overthrow of the Somoza regime by revolutionary forces, the Miskito Indians' ancestral lands became a bloody battleground. The Miskitos found themselves caught in a tragic crossfire between the Sandinista army and the US supported counter-revolutionaries.

The indigenous Miskito, the largest Nicaraguan ethnic minority, have traditionally lived in the nation's north-eastern quadrant including territory on both sides of the Honduran/Nicaraguan border. Some armed themselves and fought to control their land. Honduran based counter-revolutionaries or contras crossed the border and attacked Miskito villages, while the Nicaraguan government removed many Indians from their homes for their protection. Whether as the result of fleeing the contras or forced relocation, many Miskitos were reduced to refugees.

Following a ceasefire between the government and the Miskitos, a constitutional provision granting some autonomy to the Indians was enacted. The law, which falls short of Miskito demands, contains promise within disappointment. While the constitution provides less autonomy than such laws in Spain, Switzerland, or Denmark, the future may bring a regional autonomy that goes beyond the tribal sovereignty of Indians in the US and Canada. The hopes raised by these developments amidst the counter-revolutionary war make Nicaragua a proving ground for the rights of indigenous peoples.

The Miskito Indians of Nicaragua, the new Minority Rights Group Report No. 79, carefully examines the tension between maintaining national independence against foreign intervention and the demand to insure minority autonomy. It reveals that although the cause of Miskito self-governance and the national independence struggle have been historically intertwined, they are not identical. The report charts the development of the independence movement and the autonomy campaign from the days of British colonial rule to the present. It offers essential reading for anyone interested in minorities and indigenous people and present day issues.

ISBN 0 944690 59 6



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