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suffering in our own country! We are starving in our own country! We want the United States back! We want Somoza back!"

Even some supporters of the autonomy plan are critical of details of the proposal. Faran Dometz, the second-highest officer in the large and powerful Moravian Church of Nicaragua, helped draft the proposed law. He called the plan "too weak," saying it does not give the region enough legislative power and fails to ensure adequate representation of small minority groups such as the Rama Indians, who number fewer than 650.

"We're not going to romanticize this and say autonomy is going to solve all our problems, because many of our people don't believe it," he said. "We're going to have to see what happens and struggle to make autonomy meaningful. We have a lot of beautiful words on paper, but let's come down now and put it into practice."

**The fate of autonomy:** The road ahead may prove slow going, considering the skepticism of many coast residents. Some, like Daniel Gonzalez, a university professor and native of Bluefields, said the success of autonomy will depend on teaching people what it means. "Ultimately, the success of autonomy will depend on education," he said. "For autonomy to succeed, the people must learn how to take responsibility for their own lives."

For others, like Grey-Sloan, the fate of autonomy will depend on how it affects the economy. "Take the woman who bakes bread for a living," he explained. "It's not going to



A fishing boat docked off Bluefields. Experts say economic conditions will have much to do with the success of the region's autonomy plan.

be easier for her to bake bread if she goes to a Sandinista defense committee meeting. She's going to waste time, and when she gets home she'll still have to bake her bread. People see it in very practical terms. If the autonomous government can make a difference in the material conditions of the lives of people here, they will support it. That is what will determine the success of au-

tonomy."

Whatever the outcome, autonomy has already sparked interest around the world. American Indian leaders and other international observers have praised the Nicaraguan plan and say they are considering its use as a model for their countries.

"Autonomy is the only example of its kind in Latin America," Grey-Sloan observed. "No

other country has ever granted self-determination to Indians and ethnic minorities. Indigenous people from other countries have already said that this is going to serve as an example for them. Autonomy will serve to help other nations solve the problems of ethnic minorities."

Eric Bates is a freelance writer who recently returned from Nicaragua.



A funeral in El Cau, Nicaragua, this year for two militiamen killed by the contras.

## Amnesty: contras come home

go out and explain the amnesty to the contras in person. The government wants to ease fears in the contra ranks that returning rebels will be killed. It also hopes to woo mid-level *commandantes* by offering them political influence at home—even the right to form their own political parties.

The contras' Washington, D.C., office claimed the number of *desalzados* is "zero." Perhaps the Washington view is that someone who deserts can never have been a real contra in the first place. But the contras coming back in El Cua were no converts. Far from being Sandinista-lovers, they were cooperative but icy.

The response of the community to these newcomers was uncertain. The men stared, the women turned away, children clustered, unbelieving. Some of the little ones had been born since these men left the village.

The contras were the center of attention at the El Cua meeting for a practical reason. Sandinista security depends on everyone

knowing who they are. The amnesty procedure here consists of two days of debriefing with state security followed by presentation in some form or other to the public, immediately after which they are free to go. The following day one of the contras at El Cua went off to the fields on a horse with his machete and bucket.

**Reason to leave:** Unpaid and ill-trained, the contra foot soldiers' motivation has always been distinct from that of their military and political leaders. The first question you ask any *desalzado* is why he went.

Often his family had connections with the previous regime. Perhaps the family lost a lot of money—almost everyone in Nicaragua has. Or there was a cousin in prison, a contra brother killed. In 1984 the imposition of compulsory military service produced a wave of contra recruits. And then there's propaganda, always effective in areas with heavy illiteracy.

Many contras seem to have joined the reb-

els simply because it was what their friends were doing. "The contras got there before the Sandinistas," as one journalist put it. But a majority of *desalzados* were taken by force. Their growing numbers testify to the importance of kidnapping in contra recruitment.

Answers from ex-contras about their motives are usually vague. Raoul Rizo Castillo was silent when asked why he joined.

"Did you perhaps have relatives in the contra?"

"No, I went alone."

"Why do you think most people go?"

"Some are kidnapped, some *enganado*, misled. They said they were going to win. They were very confident. But they still haven't won anything."

The returning contras are more willing to talk about things such as the name of their *commandante* and task force, the number of expeditions they went on, what training was like, how many blond foreigners they saw. They feel these are safer subjects.

Yet in the front row at El Cua former contra Roberto Alonzo was not daunted. After the suggestion that the contras form their own political party he stood up and said: "First of all, I must tell you that we are lovers of peace. What I want to know is, the amnesty is very nice for me, but will it include the release of political prisoners?" The local Sandinista representative tried to explain the difference between someone who has committed acts punishable under criminal law—such as torture and murder—and someone who just got swept along in the flow because they were misled. He said the government planned to release the latter group.

**Reasons to return:** The second question you ask a *desalzado* is why he came back. Perhaps most significant is what is referred to in Nicaragua as the "strategic and military defeat" of the contra forces. They have been routed in conventional military terms. Contra morale is very low. The strength of the current Sandinista position lies in the fact

that they have both carrot and stick. They promise defeat and at the same time offer a way out.

Another factor is the population's shifted allegiance. Behind most early contra peasant recruits was a nourishing background of anti-Sandinista relatives and friends. But in response to growing contra strength the Sandinistas made development in the war zones a priority. The northern town of San Jose de Bocay, for example, was a smattering of huts in 1981. Since then, like most rural towns it has mushroomed with people displaced by the war. They meet in groups, they get educated, they join unions.

The contras have deliberately targetted these benefits in an attempt to negate their political impact. But six years of this has meant that even those peasants who never suffered from Somoza's national guard have now experienced concrete suffering from the contras.

At the same time the Sandinistas have learned to become more sensitive to the peasants' ways. Children aren't taught so much about Sandinista martyr Carlos Fonseca at school now. Farmers can get a private plot in the agrarian reform. But under the conditions of an integrated 1984 defense program, those who were given land were also given guns. The need for self-defense has forced even the crustiest hardliners, if not to participate, then at least to care.

To the extent that the Sandinistas have successfully transformed the motivation of previous contra supporters and fighters, the contras' return to their homes is a kind of victory. As American volunteer Mira Brown put it: "When the Sandinistas talk about getting people out of the contra, they are not talking about a physical process of removing people. They are talking about a political process of changing people. Their faith in people's capacity to change is immense."

Clare Foster is producing a film about U.S. policy toward Nicaragua.