

Don't cry for Ron, Nicaragua

By William Gasperini

MANAGUA, NICARAGUA

Nicaragua welcomed the end of Ronald Reagan's presidency with joyful street rallies celebrating what may prove to be one of the most significant events for this beleaguered nation since the 1979 revolution itself. On January 20 people danced in street processions in the capital. Banners proclaimed "Reagan has gone—the revolution is staying" and "Bush has come, but he won't stop the revolution either."

It was not that thousands of Nicaraguans felt Reagan's departure from power meant Nicaragua's troubles were going with him. Instead Nicaraguans were simply proud at having withstood for eight long years the U.S. administration's incessant efforts to dislodge their government. "Reagan had vowed so many times the Sandinistas would be out of power before he left office," said college student David Baenz at one Managua rally, "and we have foiled his plan. I realize things may not change much under Bush. But at least we know we can take whatever comes."

Outlasting Reagan was, at best, a bittersweet victory, given the contra war's toll. With 50,000 people dead, thousands more wounded or maimed for life and over \$1 billion in damages, Nicaragua is preparing to mark the 10th anniversary of the Sandinista revolution with the future still highly uncertain. At the same time the change in U.S. administration and other political developments in the region offer some hope that the worst may be over.

Whither Washington? The biggest unknown is the course President Bush will take in his approach to Central America. In the coming weeks "diplomatic initiatives" are likely to come from both sides. Observers generally feel that the new U.S. president will be more pragmatic in his policies than was Reagan.

Nicaragua tried to send a positive signal the very hour Bush was being inaugurated, when the Sandinista government granted U.S. diplomats visas that had been denied after the expulsion of Ambassador Richard Melton last year. U.S. chargé d'affaires Rohn Leonard noted the move could lead to better relations, but refrained from offering any official U.S. reaction.

The Sandinistas are also ready to present a proposal for direct talks with Washington "at the opportune moment." Press leaks indicate Bush may have similar thoughts, even if just to convince Congress that the White House is serious about peace efforts. Nicaragua says it is willing to discuss Washington's security concerns, including a reduction in troop levels, but the U.S. is expected to

instead emphasize substantial political changes within Nicaragua.

In the meantime the contras are likely to receive more "humanitarian" assistance, although they appear finished as an effective military force. "Sooner or later you have to admit failure," said political analyst David MacMichael on a recent visit to Managua. "Ronald Reagan could conduct foreign policy based on ideology, but George Bush will have to confront reality."

Contras seek the limelight: Well aware that diplomacy will predominate in the months ahead, contra leaders have made two proposals to renew peace talks with Managua. But the proposals only highlighted the deep divisions within the rebel command. Hard-liners clustered around military leader Enrique Bermudez denounced moderate Alfredo Cesar's proposal for various political changes as a "sellout."

Although the contra directorate later met in Washington to smooth things over and at least claim unity, the rivalries surfaced violently in Honduras, where 12,000 rebels now languish in camps close to the Nicaraguan border. On January 7 high-ranking contra military commander

INSIDE STORY

Manuel Rugama was assassinated in a hail of gunfire in Tegucigalpa, reportedly by elements opposed to Bermudez.

Just days later Honduran President Jose Azcona Hoyo was in Washington discussing his country's "contra problem" with Ronald Reagan and George Bush, who reportedly declined to make any firm commitment on what would happen to the rebels.

Bush's appointments lend credence to the view that larger issues, such as the foreign debt crisis, will carry more weight in foreign policy in the years ahead. New Secretary of State James Baker drew up a debt-relief plan several years ago when he was head of the Treasury Department. And New York lawyer Robert Helander—likely to replace hard-line hawk Elliott Abrams as assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs—is also known to favor concentrating on such global matters. His appointment would likely reduce the U.S. obsession with Nicaragua.

More diplomacy: Another key regional player will be Carlos Andres Perez, who will become Venezuelan president February 2 for the second time. Known for his diplomatic skills, Perez has strong influence in both Washington and Central America, having been Venezuela's leader in the '70s, when he supported the Nicaraguan revolution.

Although his relationship with the Sandinistas has cooled somewhat, Perez is in a position to assist the regional peace process, perhaps beginning with discussions among regional leaders attending his inauguration (possibly including even Cuba's Fidel Castro). Perez's return to the political scene was partly behind the call by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias to postpone a new summit of the five Central American presidents, originally scheduled for January 15-16 in San Salvador. After having agreed on the date, Arias made a last-minute request to delay until February, saying it was necessary to see what direction the new U.S. policy will take in the region.

The summit agenda was originally expected to focus primarily on verifying compliance with the stalled 1987 Central American peace pact, especially Nicaragua's demand that Honduras cease providing refuge to the contras. But the new date may shift emphasis onto the issue of "democratization of Nicaragua," and allow Bush to make a first move. The democratization theme will likely prevail with or without a summit. Political pressures on Managua are sure to increase both internally and externally, as the Sandinista's opponents try to capitalize on discontent due to the steadily deteriorating economic situation.

Economic chaos: Last year ended with an inflation rate topping 20,000 percent, easily the highest in Latin America, and undetermined—but very high—unemployment. Exports continued a long decline reaching just about \$180 million—compared with over \$400 million in 1984—with imports at approximately \$900 million. Compounding the grim figures are the estimated \$840 million in damages caused by Hurricane Joan in October.

In the face of such economic troubles the government has announced major budget cuts in all sectors, most significantly in defense (29 percent) and the internal security ministry (40 percent). The central bank is also tightly restricting the money supply in a further move to contain the runaway inflation.

But the more difficult problem is declining production, which most economists blame as the chief cause of inflation. In a rare sign of cooperation between the government and private sectors, various "consultation commissions" have been meeting in recent months in each sector of the economy.

With the Sandinistas well aware of their vulnerability on the economic front, the government has apparently moved to prepare for what it expects will be a shift under Bush to a more covert strategy of promoting internal opposition activities. Authorities did allow a January 15 opposition march in Managua, the first since the rally last July in the town of Nandaime that ended in violence.

All but two of 15 opposition parties participated in the rally, from the far right to the Communists and Socialists, and the march passed without incident. The activity succeeded in attracting only 5,000 people, however, and disunity was evident as each group vied for attention in impromptu street-corner speeches where various leaders called for the Sandinistas' overthrow.

Just blocks away a crowd ten times larger was enjoying an all-star baseball game, perhaps indicative of the enthusiasm most Nicaraguans feel for the continuing political polemics.

William Gasperini is *In These Times'* correspondent in Nicaragua.



Left to right: Karman, Nick-Bisgaard, O'Donnell and Finley.

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Intensity and flow at *In These Times*

Marx wrote that "constant labor of one uniform kind destroys the intensity and flow of man's animal spirits." That having been said, let us introduce four new *In These Times* staff members whose varied backgrounds ensure that their animal spirits are in good shape.

Bill Finley is the paper's new associate publisher. He is the former general manager of Earth Theater, an arts-education troupe that toured the U.S. and Europe in the '70s. A reggae-rap musician and graphic artist, Bill has also acted on stage and film, and produced and hosted radio talk and music programs.

Peter Karman, who joins *In These Times* as an assistant managing editor, began in journalism with Hearst's *New York Mirror*, then worked on union newspapers, edited trade and travel magazines, served as news and information manager for Air France and most recently ran his own copywriting shop. He is a longtime *In These Times* contributor.

Kevin O'Donnell, the new co-business manager, joined the paper after teaching in Madrid and working for a U.S. Agency for International Development-financed project, the Costa Rican Investment Promotion Program.

Mary Nick-Bisgaard joins *In These Times* as copy editor after teaching English in Japan.

By Salim Muwakkil

THE SPREADING CRACK-COCAINE EPIDEMIC IS confounding drug experts, distressing law enforcement officials and fueling arguments of conspiracy theorists who insist that somebody wants to wipe out African-Americans. In less than five years this cheap, smokable form of cocaine has ousted heroin as the drug of choice in many American inner-cities. In the process, it has accelerated the decay of those communities.

Researchers are discovering that crack is among the most addictive substances they've ever studied; many contend that users become addicted after only one ingestion, although the process usually takes a few months. Drug abuse experts also report that crack addiction is more intractable than other substance addictions and that crack abusers are harder to help than any other substance abusers.

Not only is crack a new order of danger, but its peculiar properties seem to target those communities already reeling from an unending series of dislocations. Thus, the drug has found its greatest welcome among the African-American—and, to a smaller extent, the Hispanic—underclass in America's inner-cities.

Crime follows crack even closer than it did heroin, according to police officials. In Brooklyn, N.Y., for example, police say crack now is a factor in half of all felony drug arrests, compared with none in 1985, the year crack first appeared in New York City. Police officials in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Houston, Dallas, New Orleans and Miami blame crack for their cities' climbing murder rates.

Rock and role models: The development and successful marketing of crack has generated windfall profits for all of those along the supply pipeline. This infusion of capital helps fuel the alternative economy that inner-city youth find so attractive.

And why not? After all, their prospects for legitimate employment in anything but low-paying service jobs are slight to nil. For too many inner-city families, a son employed in

Crack has found its greatest welcome among the African-American—and, to a smaller extent, the Hispanic—underclass. "Crack addiction is most frequent in the communities where people feel less good about themselves," says one expert.

'The fast food of drugs' poisons the inner-city

the underground economy is the difference between making it and homelessness. These young drug operatives—typically black males—become community role models or recidivists in the criminal justice cycle. Sometimes they are both. Either way, the African-American community counts the loss of wasted potential.

Researchers are also discovering that women are more susceptible to crack than to other street drugs. In fact, officials at New York City's Human Resources Administration say that over the past two years crack use has led to a 225 percent increase in child neglect and abuse cases involving drugs. During the same two-year period, the number of New York City babies born with drugs in their urine rose 284 percent.

Recent studies have found that a wide spectrum of ill effects can result from fetal exposure to cocaine, and that retarded growth in the womb and subtle neurological abnormalities can result from even one exposure. The findings suggest that cocaine addiction is causing an epidemic of damaged infants, most of whom are born into families least able to provide the necessary remedial support.

What is crack? In its basic form crack is prepared by mixing cocaine, baking soda and water. However, additional ingredients—substances like procaine, vitamin B-12, etc.—often are added to the basic formula as crack dealers seek to distinguish their product from others. Methamphetamine (speed) has become a popular mixing agent in recent months, according to a counselor at a New York City drug abuse program.

Most experts agree that crack entered the U.S. through Miami and Southern California in early 1985, arriving in New York City by the middle of that year. By early 1989 it had made an appearance in all but a few states.

"Crack is so addicting because it delivers such a concentrated dose, such a rush of cocaine to the brain's pleasure center," explains Dr. Bruce Rounsaville of the Yale School of Medicine. He is a member of a research team studying aspects of the crack epidemic for the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

"The faster the cocaine level is absorbed into the bloodstream and delivered to the brain, the greater the euphoria," Rounsaville adds. "And the most efficient way to raise the cocaine level in the blood is to smoke it." Rounsaville lists several other reasons for crack's popularity: "It's potent, very cheap [as little as \$5 a vial], portable—and it's profitable."

The Yale researcher also attributes crack's popularity to cocaine traffickers' astute marketing techniques. Cocaine use was declining among the traditional middle-class buyers, so they had to create a new market. Crack fit the bill perfectly because "it's sort of like the fast food of drugs," he notes dryly.

Freebasing: Smokable cocaine preparations have been used for many years, he contends, noting Richard Pryor's widely publicized run-in with cocaine freebase. "Although

they are manufactured by slightly different chemical processes, there are few essential differences between crack and freebase," Rounsaville contends. "Freebasing cocaine is time-consuming and, as Pryor's experience demonstrated, dangerous."

Manufacturing crack doesn't take as long and is not as volatile as freebasing—freebasing cocaine requires a flammable substance like ether to purify the cocaine—but it requires a substantial financial investment for the purchase of enough cocaine to make the process profitable. However, the youthful age of most crack abusers has alienated many established cocaine dealers who prefer an older, more affluent clientele. Thus, urban street gangs have become the dominant crack distributors in most large cities.

Although he's fully aware of the drug's devastating consequences, Rounsaville still marvels at the cocaine producers' marketing savvy. "Cocaine is a commodity, like everything else, and there's a worldwide glut," he says. "They had to come up with something to rekindle the interest of its largest market—the U.S."

Others attribute far less benign motives to the drug's developers. "The crack epidemic seems to be more than just an accident," says Rev. Herbert Daughtry of Brooklyn, president of African Peoples Christian Organization and the founder of an anti-crack group in his home borough.

"Among other things, crack is being used by some people as a deterrent to our liberation efforts. Much like the British did in China during the Boxer Rebellion," Daughtry is one of many African-American leaders who discern a conspiratorial hand behind the spread of crack (see accompanying story). "However," he adds, "crack would find no ready market if we as a people had not been robbed of our sense of personhood."

And that's what we have to work on regaining."

There have been a few successful attempts to stem the tide of crack in some communities, but by and large it's been a losing proposition. Demand for the drug is too great, the supply too large and the profits too substantial. The virulent growth of the crack trade has overwhelmed traditional law enforcement tactics, and police in many cities can only mount holding actions with periodic sweeps of neighborhoods known to host crack dealers.

Crack cures? Scientists researching crack's biochemical nature are seeking therapeutic chemicals to help ease abusers away from their fierce addiction to the substance. According to Rounsaville, they've had some minor successes with certain antidepressant drugs. "Cocaine addiction manifests itself in psychiatric symptoms, like depression, rather than the physical symptoms of heroin addiction," he says.

"Our experience is that we can help people stay away from crack if we can help them develop a stronger sense of self-esteem," says John Pierce, media coordinator for Day Top Village in New York City and a former crack addict. "Once you get hooked, your entire life revolves around trying to recapture the feeling of euphoria you had when you first hit your first blast. Crack addicts say they're 'on a mission.'" Pierce says he was "on a mission" for more than two years before bottoming out. "I stopped because I told myself I had to."

Although Pierce acknowledges the drug's powerful physiological effects, he believes the true cause of addiction is a lack of self-worth. "To me it's a simple equation," Pierce says. "Crack addiction is most frequent in the communities where people feel less good about themselves."

Pierce's prescription makes sense and is concordant with the views of many others in the field of drug rehabilitation. But as yet another debilitating substance cuts a swatch through the African-American community, leaving battered lives and squandered potential in its wake, it's not clear if anyone is listening. □

Controversial black leader battles against crack

Sonny Carson is president of a group called Black Men's Movement Against Crack, a Brooklyn-based group devoted to strong-arming the crack epidemic out of the African-American community. Carson is a veteran of the black movement whose transformation from gang leader to community organizer was depicted in the cult film *The Education of Sonny Carson*. He is outspoken, some say intentionally outrageous, and he often comes down on the side of unabashed violence.

"Crack is the most vicious weapon ever mounted against us," Carson explains. "It's part of a genocidal war and we must be warlike in fighting it. Our organization, Black Men's Movement Against Crack, has one motto: death to all crack dealers. And believe me, brother, we're dead serious."

Carson says he was pushed on the warpath by the murder of his mother-in-law by a crack dealer in 1985, and he's decided to put his life on the line to end what he sees as a blatant attempt to kill the spirit of the black community. "Who

do you think arranged for all of this crack to get into the black community?" he asks. "Who arranged for those Colombian planes to land in Miami via Panama? You know who I'm talking about. Bush and Oliver North and the rest of them. Why are we so afraid to speak the truth? They want us dead, and all we're doing is sitting around and watching our communities die while their agents peddle death right under our noses."

Carson says that when he first started the anti-crack group the response was large, but support has subsequently dwindled. Several observers attribute that to Carson's intemperate tendencies. He says it's because most black males have "forgotten how to act like men. We've been relegated to the bottom of the heap for so long we've forgotten what it means to take responsibility for our communities. We've ceded them to our enemies. I'm going to fight the crack plague until my last breath is gone."

—S.M.