Contra spectres the road to San Dionisio

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Reporter's Notebook

Daniel J. Glenn is an architecture student who recently returned from his third trip to Nicaragua where he worked as a volunteer for five months. This is the second in a series of articles for The Tech relating his experiences there.

By Daniel J. Glenn

At least two weeks ago, on April 4, 1987, my co-worker Sania Atkinson and I were standing on a desolate dirt road somewhere in Mataniqua province, Nicaragua. We had come to Nicaragua as part of a non-profit architectural group called Earth Shifter to begin a housing project. We were just northeast of San Dionisio and were a part of the housing project under construction by Groundwork Institute, a group from Berkeley, CA.

The road to San Dionisio was deadly still. Susan and I started to look around for a farmhouse to spend the night. It was Susan's first trip to Nicaragua, and I recalled that the report our friend gave us also discussed the new Code of Conduct that the contra leadership had prepared amidst accusations of human rights abuses. The contra sent copies of the Code to members of Congress just before the 1985 vote on $100 million of contra aid. Article 14 of that code states:

"UNO/FRD combattants shall conduct their military operations in such a way that the innocent civilian population is always protected. The UNO/FRD shall warn civilian populations regarding possible danger...[and] persons not involved in combat...are entitled to respect for their lives and their physical and moral integrity."

That new Code of Conduct helped convince Congress to give the contras the $100 million, but it did little to quell Susan's or my fears or the fears of rural Nicaraguans.

One of the most frightening tactics of the contra is the use of land mines. According to The New York Times (July 9, 1986) they began burying large numbers of them shortly after receiving the $100 million from Congress. On July 2, 1986, 34 civilians were killed when a bus hit one of these land mines. The dead included 12 children and 14 women. Eighteen members of one extended family were killed in the explosion.

The only survivor, Nicolas Castilblanco, a 47-year-old Protestant pastor, gave the following testimony: "I can speculate that not only the army is the enemy but also all of us because they kill us with this...To put (the mind) like that, for whatever person...that is a lamentable thing."

Now I am scared to go in a vehicle, but for necessity even do it. The population becomes nervous when they know they have to travel...one lives with fear, with nervousness. One knows that he leaves his house but not if he's going to return."

As Susan and I walked along on that moonlit night I couldn't stop thinking about the report. The document discusses 23 cases of sexual abuses that a witness stated were committed by the contra forces operating in Nicaragua. Each case was based upon sworn testimony of eyewitnesses and victims of "human rights violations." Before we left Managua we had double checked the report to make sure San Dionisio was based upon sworn testimony of eyewitnesses and involved in combat. The driver had told us, "it's just down a cement-mixer. The driver had said he was heading towards San Dionisio. According to the report, "the road to San Dionisio was deadly still."

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