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25 March 1985

ATROCITIES IN THE NICARAGUAN CIVIL WAR

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Introduction

Abuses have been committed by both sides in the Nicaraguan conflict, as would be expected in any war. Most civilian deaths and injuries are reported from areas of heavy fighting.

[redacted]

[redacted] insurgent attacks on military and government vehicles, and on economic targets such as agricultural cooperatives, frequently result in civilian casualties. US human rights groups have reported that their investigations corroborate such charges.

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[redacted] the Sandinistas, for their part, frequently abuse civilians and prisoners. In addition, [redacted] the regime

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deliberately mixes civilians with military personnel, a practice that almost guarantees casualties to non-combatants. The Sandinistas maintain a civilian presence at military encampments, staff civilian cooperatives with militia personnel, and send civilians as passengers in military vehicles.

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The following memorandum examines, in turn, Contra and Sandinista abuses

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[redacted]. The charges and countercharges of atrocities by the two sides that have appeared in the international press and have been examined by human rights groups are commented upon in either a specific or generic sense, [redacted]

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[redacted]. Chronologies of human rights abuses [redacted] and related information accompany the narrative discussions. [redacted]

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[redacted]

Contra Abuses

Overall, [redacted] abuses by the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) are neither as widespread nor as clearcut as recent press stories and human rights groups contend. In some cases, Sandinista disinformation has been used to tar the FDN image. [redacted]

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Recent human rights reports,¹ based largely on interviews with eyewitnesses, detail numerous abuses by the anti-Sandinista insurgents. These include murder, rape, and inflicting casualties on civilians during the course of actions in three broad categories: attacks on economic targets such as agricultural cooperatives, attacks on vehicular traffic, and forcible recruitment and kidnappings in the Atlantic coast region. [redacted]

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Attacks on economic targets. The reports' strongest case focuses on Contra attacks on agricultural cooperatives. Although many of the casualties occur during resistance by militia or armed civilians, the reports present some credible accounts of civilian deaths and injuries by insurgent shelling, summary executions of captives, and some cases of rape. Such abuses, when they occur, probably reflect the poor discipline characteristic of irregular forces. The continued popularity of the FDN in the northern areas of the country--evidenced by the flow of volunteers to Contra ranks--suggests that abuses are not so widespread as to be a serious detriment to the insurgent cause. This situation contrasts markedly with El Salvador, where a guerrilla force of 9-11,000 has had to turn to massive forced impressment to maintain steady numbers in the field. In Nicaragua, with less than three fifths of the population of El

¹Reed Brody, "Attacks by the Nicaraguan 'Contras' on the Civilian Population of Nicaragua. Report of a Fact-Finding Mission, September 1984-January 1985, March 1985; Americas Watch, "Violations of the Laws of War by Both Sides in Nicaragua, 1981-1985," March 1985; Washington Office on Latin America, "Statement of Donald T. Fox and Michael J. Glennon," March 7, 1985. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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Salvador, a guerrilla force almost 50 percent larger still enjoys such popular sympathy that it cannot provide sufficient arms or training to all those who rally to its cause. [redacted]

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Attacks on vehicular traffic. The FDN repeatedly has warned that it considers all government vehicles fair game, especially since construction equipment and communications vehicles are involved in military support activities. Even private trucks often carry armed civilians or militia, and military vehicles routinely have civilian passengers. Consequently, insurgent ambushes often cause civilian casualties. [redacted]

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Forcible recruitment and kidnappings. The reports' [redacted] on forcible recruitment and related kidnappings is the weakest

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[redacted], The largely Indian population of the Atlantic coast, by Managua's own admission, is alienated from the regime--because of harsh Sandinista repression as well as the region's traditional resentment of the Pacific coast inhabitants. [redacted]

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[redacted] most of the refugees from this area have left voluntarily, in many cases to join the Misura insurgent group operating out of Honduras. For example, one of the human rights reports repeats Sandinista charges of a Misura massacre and mass kidnapping at Sumubila, even though Managua's account has been discredited in the US press.³ [redacted]

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We do not believe that crimes by anti-Sandinista insurgents constitute a deliberate policy to terrorize civilians. On the contrary, the FDN leadership has attempted to prevent abuses by disciplining field commanders who allow such behavior. A number of the known insurgent abuses were the work of one Contra leader, Comandante Suicida, who was tried and executed by the FDN for his excesses in 1983. [redacted]

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Journalists [redacted] report that the insurgents single out government political leaders in occupied areas for intimidation and occasional physical abuse. In addition, Nicaraguan officials frequently claim that the insurgents have kidnapped citizens. We have been able to confirm some of these reports. [redacted]

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[redacted] We believe that, in large part, the Sandinistas use the term "kidnapping" to cover

³Joshua Muravchik, "Manipulating the Miskitos," The New Republic, August 6, 1984, pp. 21-25.

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for desertions from their ranks and civilians escaping with guerrillas. [redacted]

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Eden Pastora's forces in the south have stated publicly that their policy is to execute non-Nicaraguan combatants captured with the Sandinistas, but we doubt that any have been taken. In fact, Pastora has made a practice of turning Sandinista captives over to the Costa Rican Red Cross. [redacted]

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Most of the reports of Contra abuses [redacted]

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are circumstantial [redacted]

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[redacted] Some of these stories are fabricated by Managua as part of an ongoing disinformation campaign to discredit the insurgents and influence public and Congressional opinion in the United States. For example, the regime's false claim in December 1982 that the insurgents shot down a MI-8 helicopter carrying some 70 Indian children was propaganda. [redacted]

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[redacted] an Indian council publicly attributed it to overloading. Similarly, the regime's allegation in December 1983 that the Contras had kidnapped and killed US Bishop Schlaeffer also proved false. Schlaeffer, who subsequently appeared in Honduras, said he had voluntarily accompanied a group of Miskitos fleeing Nicaragua and that the refugees had been bombed and strafed by Sandinista forces during their march. [redacted]

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Even when reports of insurgent abuses originate elsewhere, the regime is quick to exploit them for its own advantage.

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[redacted] the Sandinistas publicized claims that the Honduran military had evidence linking the FDN to 18 unresolved killings in Honduras. Senior Honduran military officials denied the story, and the Honduran Human Rights Commission said it had no such information. Managua also picked up a story from the US media on statements by former FDN officers concerning Contra abuses. We believe these individuals are among those officers expelled from the FDN for abuses and now trying to take control of the organization. [redacted]

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Attached is a chronology-- [redacted] --of reported abuses by anti-Sandinista insurgents since mid-1983. [redacted]

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[redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

[Redacted]

Chronology of Contra Abuses

16 March 1985

The pro-Sandinista press reported that Contras killed seven persons, including an armed militia member, in an ambush of a Construction Ministry vehicle near La Posolera and mutilated the bodies. Managua claimed that 16 construction workers had died at the hands of the Contras this year. [Redacted]

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[Large redacted block]

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4 March 1985

The pro-Sandinista newspaper reprinted a West German press item citing a Mexican expert's charge that the Contras were poisoning the water along the Nicaraguan-Honduran border with "Agent Orange." [Redacted]

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1 March 1985

[Redacted] with a peasant whose son had joined the insurgents four months previously. The peasant said he spread the story that his son had been kidnapped by the Contras, hoping to avoid government repression. [Redacted]

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Late February 1985

[Redacted] a Contra recruit said his former Sandinista frontier guard unit had murdered two peasants and then blamed the insurgents. [Redacted]

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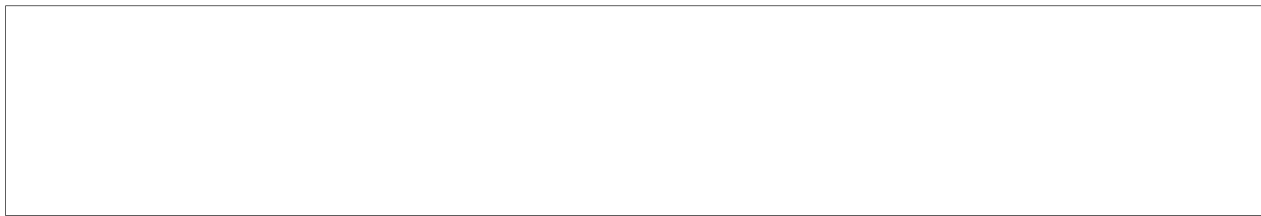
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25 January 1985

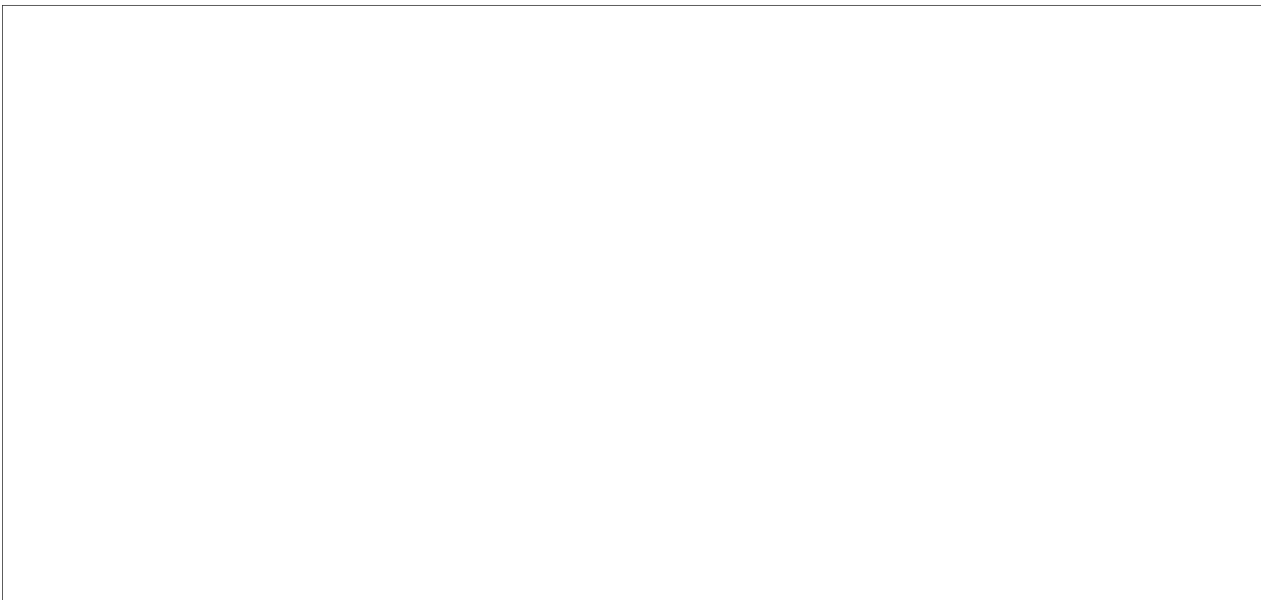
The pro-Sandinista press reported that insurgents kidnapped four medical workers, including an official of the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua, on Rama Key.

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8 January 1985

The pro-Sandinista press reported that insurgents killed 13 civilians in ambushes near San Juan de Limay in Esteli Department.

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21 December 1984

The pro-Sandinista press reported that Contras attacked a Red Cross ambulance, killing a patient and wounding four attendants.

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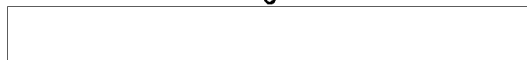
20 December 1984

The pro-Sandinista press reported that insurgents had kidnapped 21 peasants in Jinotega and Nueva Segovia Departments.

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4 December 1984

In one of the incidents featured most prominently in the human rights reports, the pro-Sandinista media reported that guerrillas ambushed a truck and killed 21 or 22 volunteer coffee pickers, bayonetting some of the wounded and burning others alive. According to US Embassy reporting, US journalists who interviewed the survivors said at least half the people on the truck were armed. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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24 November 1984

A Sandinista official publicly claimed that more than 850 coffee producers and workers had been killed by guerrillas during the previous two years. [redacted]

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20 November 1984

The pro-Sandinista press reported that insurgents killed five peasants, including a four-year-old child, in northern Zelaya Department. [redacted]

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16 November 1984

Managua claimed that Contras killed five civilians, including three young girls, on a cooperative in northern Zelaya Department. [redacted]

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30 October 1984

The progovernment press alleged that insurgents killed six children and wounded three others in an attack on a government agricultural cooperative. Farm workers--all members of the militia--ran to trenches for safety, but the children apparently failed to escape the house where they were sleeping before it was hit by mortar fire. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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[redacted]

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[Redacted]

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26 October 1984

The government radio claimed guerrillas attacked a peasant family in Chontales Department, killing four--including two children--and wounding three other children. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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1 October 1984

The progovernment press reported that insurgent forces ambushed and killed the director of the Central American Hydroelectric plant near Jinotega. Two days earlier, the insurgents were said to have raided a small farm in Chinandega Department and killed three children. [Redacted]

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23 September 1984

A Sandinista Army truck carrying civilians to visit relatives at a local military base was ambushed by insurgents, with five dead and 19 wounded. Press accounts indicate civilians joined the convoy when their bus broke down enroute to the facility. [Redacted]

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12 September 1984

A Defense Ministry communique claimed that seven farmers were kidnapped by insurgents and that the body of one was found near his home in southern Zelaya Department. [Redacted]

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5 September 1984

According to US Embassy reporting, MISURASATA insurgents kidnapped three Sandinista officials, including a woman, and released all of them in late October as part of a prisoner

[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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exchange. A MISURASATA official admitted that one of the insurgent captors had attempted to rape the female official but was prevented from doing so by his superior. [redacted]

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1 September 1984

A government telecommunications vehicle, which the local press said included civilian hitchhikers, was ambushed by insurgents in northern Zelaya Department. [redacted]

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[redacted] that civilians repeatedly are warned by the insurgents not to ride in government vehicles, which are considered fair game. [redacted]

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25 August 1984

A Defense Ministry communique alleged that guerrillas shoot and then slit the throats of captured peasants. Other press reports stated that insurgents shot and beheaded a peasant mother and her two children. [redacted]

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19 July 1984

[redacted]

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[redacted] including executions and slitting of throats, and did not appear to take many prisoners. [redacted] an FDN ambush of a civilian truck in mid-July killed mostly peasants, and also noted the apparent assassination of a former militia member and his family. [redacted]

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[redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

4 May 1984

Then-junta leader Daniel Ortega announced 1,884 civilian casualties--including 747 dead and more than 1,000 "kidnapped"--between January 1982 and March 1984. These figures supposedly included only state employees and cooperative members. [redacted]

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18 December 1983

The pro-Sandinista press reported that insurgents killed 14 persons, including some children, during an attack on a cooperative in Nueva Segovia. The rebels allegedly sacked the cooperative, burning homes and grain supplies. [redacted]

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October 1983

The Sandinistas claimed that as many as 46 persons--mostly civilians--were killed in an FDN attack on the town of Pantasma. [redacted]

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13 August 1983

An ARDE "War Bulletin" communique claimed that ARDE tried a Sandinista prisoner accused of killing five peasants and burning their homes. The Sandinista was turned over to locals for execution. In a later meeting with US Ambassador Stone, insurgent leader Alfonso Robelo failed to confirm the killing but indicated that he would investigate. [redacted]

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May-December 1983

FDN officials told the press that one insurgent commander went on a rampage in May 1983 after learning that his wife had been killed by the Sandinistas. He carried out killings of pro-regime civilians and executed some 40 Sandinista prisoners. The commander--Comandante Suicida--and his associates subsequently were tried by an insurgent courtmartial and executed late that year. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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[redacted]

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Sandinista Abuses

[redacted] the Sandinistas have engaged in persistent abuse of civilians and prisoners since coming to power in 1979. Although some of these reports originated with anti-Sandinista groups, [redacted] 25X1
[redacted] refugee debriefings, independent press 25X1
accounts, and even public admissions by government officials. [redacted] 25X1
[redacted] 25X1

Reports by human-rights groups, the Organization of American States, and the Department of State detail many abuses by the Sandinista regime.⁴ Documentation of the mistreatment of the Miskito Indian population, for example, is extensive. Although the record focuses mainly on the violation of basic rights associated with the forced relocation of the Miskitos to resettlement camps in 1982, evidence of brutality by government forces continues to accumulate. [redacted] 25X1

The regime has engaged in arbitrary arrests and abuses of citizens believed to be counterrevolutionaries or anti-Sandinista sympathizers. [redacted] the 25X1
torture and general mistreatment inflicted on inmates of the Puerto Cabezas prison system. These reports include eyewitness and secondhand information of beatings and executions. [redacted] 25X1
[redacted] tell of killings and other crimes against civilians in 25X1
various parts of the country. Although some incidents apparently reflect government attempts to intimidate the population, in other cases the regime has sentenced officials guilty of serious misdeeds to prison terms. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] the regime has 25X1
resorted to assassination to eliminate several opponents. Soon after coming to power, the Sandinistas reportedly kidnapped and murdered former National Guard officer "Comandante Bravo" in Tegucigalpa. In the fall of 1980, according to [redacted] 25X1
[redacted] the public confession of one of the participants, a number of 25X1

⁴Americas Watch, "The Miskitos in Nicaragua, 1981-1984," November 1984, and "Human Rights in Nicaragua," April 1984; Organization of American States, "Report on the Situation of Human Rights of a Segment of the Nicaraguan Population of Miskito Origin," 1984, and "Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Republic of Nicaragua," 1981; and US Department of State, "Broken Promises: Sandinista Repression of Human Rights in Nicaragua," October 1984.

[redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

South American leftists assassinated former President Somoza in Asuncion in an operation planned and financed by Managua. [redacted]

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[redacted] We believe Managua also is responsible for four assassination attempts against insurgent leaders, including the bombing that wounded Eden Pastora, the former Sandinista comandante who now heads the Sandino Revolutionary Front. In addition, the Sandinistas sometimes execute captured insurgents [redacted]

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[redacted] the Sandinista Army has inflicted substantial casualties on civilians through indiscriminate artillery and rocket fire in an effort to interdict insurgent infiltration routes in northwestern Nicaragua near the Honduran border. Press accounts and [redacted] that the Army currently is evacuating civilian families--while forcing them to leave their livestock, crops, and other possessions--from this area to create free-fire zones. [redacted]

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In addition, [redacted] the Sandinistas deliberately mix civilians with military personnel, a practice that almost guarantees casualties to non-combatants. The regime maintains a civilian presence at military encampments, staffs civilian cooperatives with militia personnel, and sends civilians as passengers in military vehicles. [redacted]

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Attached is a chronology of the most credible, specific, and/or verifiable reports of Sandinista abuses against civilians and prisoners since 1982. [redacted]

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[redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

Chronology of Sandinista Abuses

11 March 1985

The pro-Sandinista press reported that a Nicaraguan Interior Ministry official was sentenced to 30 years for murdering five persons in southern Carazo Department last November. [redacted]

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9 March 1985

According to the US Embassy in Managua, a former Radio Impacto correspondent said that his recent 47-day imprisonment included 33 days of solitary confinement in an unlighted cell and a three-to-four-day period during which he was denied food and water and interrogated four times a day. [redacted]

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6 March 1985

A Nicaraguan asylum seeker, released after more than two months in prison, claimed he was abducted from the Costa Rican Embassy in Managua in December 1984 and subsequently mistreated physically and psychologically by Sandinista officials. [redacted]

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March 1985

US press accounts cited Sandinista admissions that some 7,000 residents were being removed from areas near the Honduran border so the Army could treat all persons in those areas as hostiles. [redacted]

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21 February 1985

According to the US Embassy, a prominent Nicaraguan attorney and Social Christian Party member stated that, following his arrest on 6 February on the unexplained charge of causing a public disorder, he was held incommunicado in a dark cell and interrogated about his relations with US Embassy staff. [redacted]

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12 February 1985

[redacted] Sandinista military personnel reported the placement of some 600 foreigners, including 200 Americans, in coffee and sugar cane fields in areas of Contra operations because any harm to them would cause adverse international publicity for the insurgents. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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[redacted]

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12 February 1985

UN officials announced that a Nicaraguan UN employee had died following his arrest in Nicaragua after a dispute with Sandinista officials over expired travel documents. The UN is conducting an investigation. [redacted]

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10 February 1985

Nicaraguan Interior Minister Borge publicly admitted that citizens had been jailed on the basis of gratuitous reports or rumors of counterrevolutionary activities, that authorities had interfered with local religious workers, that farms had been confiscated without justification, and that several killings by police were under investigation. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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25 January 1985

The progovernment press reported that, between June 1984 and January 1985, the Popular Anti-Somocista Tribunals--irregular courts that do not provide full due process to defendants--sentenced 418 persons to prison terms. Only 25 persons were acquitted. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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12 January 1985

According to the US Embassy in Managua, a Sandinista military counterintelligence officer requesting asylum reported that physical and psychological torture was used to gain information from Contra prisoners. [redacted]

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9 January 1985

[redacted] the Nicaraguan Government has been testing imported medicines on political prisoners. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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[redacted]

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January-February 1985

[redacted] in early 1985 the Sandinista leadership instituted a new policy toward the Miskito Indians, continuing severe repression--including aerial bombings and artillery fire--of the Indians south of Puerto Cabezas while improving treatment of those closer to the Honduran border. [redacted]

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January 1985

[redacted] a Nicaraguan refugee said he found a mass grave containing the mutilated bodies of some 50-60 political prisoners, some of whom he had seen alive in the Sandinista prison at Esteli some months previously. The refugee also claimed to have been tortured while an inmate in the same prison from mid-1983 to mid-1984. [redacted]

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[redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

13 December 1984

[redacted] the regime was aware its policy of sending 11- to 14-year-olds to help in the tobacco harvest placed them in jeopardy and might accrue propaganda benefits to the government if any of the children were killed by Contra action. [redacted]

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December 1984

The US Embassy in Managua cited reports of the arrest and torture of a youth for refusing to participate in mandatory Sandinista demonstrations. [redacted]

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4 November 1984

Unidentified assailants attempted to kill ARDE political leader Alfonso Robelo in San Jose by tossing a grenade-style device into his car, according to press accounts. The US Embassy reported that this was the fourth attempt on the lives of ARDE leaders in Costa Rica. Guerrilla chief Eden Pastora, then with ARDE, was seriously injured and four journalists were killed when a bomb exploded at an ARDE base in La Penca on 30 May 1984. Both Robelo and Pastora were targets of attacks last summer. [redacted]

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22 September 1984

[redacted] some Nicaraguan officials in Jinotega and Matagalpa Departments had been arrested or removed from office because of arbitrary arrests, torture of prisoners, and illegal confiscation of property. [redacted]

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[redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

July-August 1984

[redacted] a resident of the Bluefields area reported that Sandinista authorities had killed a man and his five sons, all of whom were accused of being Contras.

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[redacted]

6 June 1984

[redacted]
[redacted] Nicaraguan soldiers executed an Indian woman and her three children after destroying their village. The woman's husband reportedly was suspected of being the leader of the anti-Sandinistas in the area.

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[redacted]

13 May 1984

[redacted] a Sandinista Army unit burned several homes in the village of Makantaca in northern Zelaya Department. The Defense Attache commented that government forces had destroyed a number of small towns in Zelaya and Chontales Departments to prevent their use by the Contras.

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[redacted]

[redacted] 25X1

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[Redacted]

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31 January 1984

[Redacted] inhabitants of Esteli believed that nine anti-Sandinista insurgents said to have been killed in a mine explosion were in fact prisoners who had been unloaded from a military truck. The locals, who buried the dead, alleged that the Sandinista military rigged the explosion as a coverup for their execution. One individual had a slit throat, and none of the dead had uniforms or weapons. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

19 January 1984

The US Embassy in Tegucigalpa indicated that in early January Sandinista forces killed some eight Miskito Indian refugees in Honduras and tried to blame the incident on the Hondurans. Tegucigalpa officially protested the incident, and the US Embassy found the evidence persuasive. [Redacted]

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18 January 1984

Escapees from a relocation camp claimed that Nicaraguan soldiers subjected residents to imprisonment and torture. Some 17 individuals were said to have been publicly executed during 1983. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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22 December 1983

According to the US Embassy in Costa Rica, several Nicaraguan refugees claimed they had fled repression and torture by the Sandinista Army. They reported firsthand accounts of decapitations, mutilations, and rape. Local preachers and youths resisting conscription apparently were the prime targets. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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6 October 1983

Three members of the European Parliament who visited a Sandinista prison reported that five political prisoners had been subjected to physical and psychological abuse. [Redacted]

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28 September 1983

The US Embassy reported that a motorist who did not yield the right of way to a Sandinista comandante's motorcade was shot and killed by a member of the official's protective detail. Church officials strongly criticized the government for the incident. [Redacted]

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16 September 1983

A British correspondent in Nicaragua, [Redacted] said that Miskitos in the Puerto Cabezas area were being arrested and shot without trial. The source suggested that this activity was selective, however, and did not occur on a large scale. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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September 1983

[redacted] in September 1983 two Miskitos in Barra Rio Grande were denounced as counterrevolutionaries, tortured, and murdered by Sandinista Defense Committee members. One, an elderly Indian, was dragged behind a power boat until drowned. The body of the other was found by townspeople, who reported that skin had been removed from his feet, his eyes were gouged out, and his ears and tongue cut off. [redacted]

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September 1983

[redacted], officials of the Christian Democratic International believed the Sandinistas' international prestige had been damaged by growing evidence of abuses such as the mass assassination of opponents. [redacted]

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8 July 1983

According to the US Embassy in Costa Rica, Indian refugees complained of heavy-handed treatment by the Nicaraguan Army. They reported that village members were shot, beaten, and imprisoned. [redacted]

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29 June 1983

A bomb exploded prematurely in a car in downtown San Jose on 29 June, killing a Sandinista infiltrator and severely wounding another Nicaraguan. The bombing may have been part of an aborted Sandinista plot to kill key members of ARDE. [redacted]

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April 1983

According to US Embassy reporting, the privately run Permanent Commission on Human Rights in Managua claimed that, during the first quarter of 1983, the Sandinista regime was responsible for 78 disappearances, 10 deaths, and the detention of 378 new political prisoners. [redacted]

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[redacted] 25X1

[redacted] 25X1

[Redacted]

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22 February 1983

A member of the Conservative Party told US Embassy officials in Managua that Miskito Indians charged with "counterrevolutionary activities" had complained of being tortured and physically abused while in detention. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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24 January 1983

[Redacted] 10 captured insurgents in northern Chinandega Department were tied to posts and used for target practice by Sandinista soldiers. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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SUBJECT: Atrocities in the Nicaraguan Civil War [redacted]

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DDI/ALA/CAS [redacted] (25 March 1985)

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[redacted]

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