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Exodus of 4,500 Indians orchestrated by 'contras'



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AUKA, Honduras — Anti-Sandinista rebels orchestrated an evacuation of almost 4,500 Miskito Indians from Nicaragua in the past two weeks after clashes with government troops along the Coco River, refugees and relief workers said.

Leaders of the Kisan movement, a Miskito Indian branch of the "contra" rebels trying to overthrow Nicaragua's Sandinista government, may have delayed the arrival of refugees at U.N. reception areas to coincide with a planned U.S. Embassy-sponsored trip for reporters to the remote border zone in northeastern Honduras, the sources said.

The trip, scheduled for last Thursday, was called off because of bad flying conditions.

A U.S. Embassy spokesman in Tegucigalpa denied that the U.S. had any contact with Kisan. The spokesman, Michael O'Brien, suggested that muddy trails had slowed the refugees. "The Indians move at their own pace," he said.

Kisan's presence in the area, however, was open. The president of the rebels' non-military Council of Elders granted an interview at the reception area run by the United Nations in Auka, nine miles from the Nicaraguan border.

And reporters leaving Auka at night, escorted by a Honduran army sergeant, made a wrong turn that led directly into a Kisan camp within 15 miles of Nicaragua. The contras declined to be interviewed, saying they were holding a religious service. "You weren't supposed to see this," the Honduran sergeant said. Honduras officially denies the presence of contras on its soil.

One refugee, Guadalupe Taylor, a 24-year-old peasant from Saklin, told reporters he crossed the Coco River, which forms the Nicaragua-Honduras border, when fighting broke out early March 25 but returned to Nicaragua 12 hours later.

Then two commanders from Kisan came and said it was better to go back to the other side," he said. The refugees said two members of the Council of Elders walked the Nicaraguan shore telling Miskitos to go to Honduras.

The flight of the Coco River Miskitos, who have long been at odds with the Sandinistas, is politically sensitive now, with a scheduled vote by the U.S. Congress next week on a \$100 million package of aid to the contras.

Kisan leaders are portraying the fighting along the Coco and the refugees' flight to Honduras as the latest in a series of Sandinista abuses of Miskito rights.

According to refugees and relief workers, tension had been building for several months along the Coco. The tension came to a head March 25, when fighting broke out between Sandinista troops and Kisan guerrillas in the Nicaraguan town of Bilwascarma.

Residents forded the Coco to seek sanctuary, leaving behind a bumper bean crop due for harvest this month.

U.N. camps have taken in 3,240 refugees, and another 1,200 were expected at this village and nearby Srumlaya. Arturo Mengotti, coordinator of U.N. refugee programs on the Honduran Mosquito Coast, said yesterday.

The new arrivals brought to 18,000 the number of Nicaraguan Miskitos living under U.N. auspices in Honduras. Mr. Mengotti said another 6,000 to 8,000 lived on their own near the border. More than 100,000 Miskitos remain in Nicaragua.

From interviews with relief workers, Kisan officials and a score of refugees a story of the Miskito evacuation emerged:

Beginning in mid-1985, about 10,000 Miskitos were allowed to

move back to their Coco River homes from resettlement camps in the Nicaraguan interior, where they had lived for almost five years.

The Sandinistas had started talks with Miskito representatives. Hopes were high that the border area, which had been evacuated because of guerrilla attacks, could be repopulated.

By September, Kisan, a reconstituted rebel group composed of Miskitos who rejected negotiating with the Sandinistas, was patrolling the Coco area.

The rebels readily found sympathizers to provide them food. Miskitos along the Coco are embittered by Sandinista destruction of their homes, animals and crops during offensives against Indian rebels in 1981 and their years in the resettlement camps.

The Miskito-Sandinista conflict is part of a cultural confrontation that pits the Indians against the Hispanic majority. Many Miskitos, devout members of the Moravian church, also think the Marxist Sandinista leaders are godless.

Early this year, Fausto Vargas, president of Kisan's Council of Elders, clandestinely toured river villages. He urged residents to bring in a big harvest to feed the Miskito fighters.

Tensions rose. Kisan reportedly destroyed a bridge and ambushed a Sandinista patrol. Food supplies tightened, and the government military presence increased. Meanwhile, Miskitos started seeking refuge at U.N. camps in Honduras, about 100 a week beginning in mid-December.

Relief officials, hearing the refugees' stories of tension and hardships, made contingency plans for a large influx of Miskitos in May, after the harvest and before the rains, when the river is low and easy to ford.

With the Easter week fighting, however, Miskitos poured across the river, catching relief officials by surprise. Many refugees only heard the sounds of combat. Others reported seeing several hundred Sandinista troops.

Varying reports of casualties could not be confirmed. Relief workers said they had received no wounded. One source with access to intelligence reports said 13 wounded guerrillas were evacuated to an undisclosed hospital.

Once on the Honduran soil, the Miskito refugees were given political talks by the Council of Elders. It was not until almost a week after the fighting that refugees began to arrive in large numbers at U.N. camps only a few miles from the Coco River.

About 700 residents of upstream villages, where no fighting was reported, descended on one U.N. center. Nurses at three reception points said the health of the refugees was generally good.

Officials expect more Miskito refugees from the Coco, where at least 5,000 remain.