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In Nicaragua Damages
Anti-Sandinista Effort****CIA Stresses Control, Unity
At Expense of Winning
Support of Local Populace****Impeding Weapons Delivery**

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua — Only three years ago, more than 100,000 Miskito, Sumo and Rama Indians on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast were rebelling against the government, offering the U.S. its most promising anti-Sandinista front.

Today, whole units of Indian warriors are giving up the fight. Indian leaders blame the U.S. for undermining their struggle. They charge that the Central Intelligence Agency supported only those leaders that it could control and forced them to unite with the U.S.-backed Contra rebels, who are hostile toward the Indians' traditional aspirations. Many Indian fighters have defected and are being armed and paid by the Sandinistas to fight the Contras; others sit despondently in Honduras and Costa Rican refugee camps.

"It would have been a totally different situation now if the United States had been wiser," says Capt. Ricardo Wheelock, the chief of Sandinista army intelligence. "The U.S. mistake was militarily pursuing a Miskito policy without understanding Miskito politics."

A Bigger Threat

The Sandinistas once considered the Indians a threat, but now "the police in New York have bigger confrontations than we have with the Miskito Indians," Capt. Wheelock says.

Washington's handling of the Caribbean coast Indian war is one of the big failures of the U.S. policy of backing the Contras. CIA and other government operatives—including some who are involved in the Iran-Contra arms transfer scandal—stressed Contra unity and overall CIA control at the cost of winning political backing within the country behind popular leaders. The CIA also didn't fully recognize that the Indians were struggling for autonomy for their region—something that both the Sandinistas and many Contra leaders oppose.

"Even though they are fighting each other, the Contras and Sandinistas agree on the suppression of Indian rights," says Bernard Nietschmann of the University of California at Berkeley, a leading U.S. expert on the Nicaraguan Indians and an adviser to one Indian political faction. "Indians are not about to fight for goals that are against Indian interests."

The breakdown of the Indian war effort is a serious blow to the anti-Sandinista cause. The Indians were the first to take up arms against the Marxist regime in Managua in 1981, and their home base in the isolated pine savannas on the east coast would be the easiest spot for anti-Sandinista forces to hold territory and form a provisional government.

Strategically Important

The region is also strategically important. Nicaragua's most important supplies of lumber, minerals and fish are there. The vital supply line with Cuba crosses the region as well. Defending such resources against a serious military challenge would disperse the Sandinista army, but that hasn't been necessary.

Inhabitants of the Caribbean coast, which was settled by the British in the 1600s and was unified with the rest of Nicaragua less than a century ago, have long felt animosity toward those they call "the Spaniards" of the Pacific coast. The Indian area's English past has left its people with a religion, traditions, features and names distinct from other Nicaraguans. For example, the two most popular Indian leaders are named Brooklyn Rivera and Steadman Fagoth. The Indians took virtually no part in the Sandinista insurrection that overthrew the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza, and they were among the most resistant to the revolution's changes. Relations turned particularly bitter when Sandinista troops forced thousands of Indians to migrate from the strategic Coco River in 1982.

Most Popular

Yet senior U.S. officials say that the CIA early on drummed out the most popular Indian leader, Mr. Rivera, because of his willingness at one time to negotiate with Managua and his refusal to give up his codes and communications network and work only through CIA-created channels. A senior administration official says that even after Congress provided for Mr. Rivera's organization, Misurasata, to get \$5 million in U.S. assistance last year, the CIA impeded the delivery of weapons to him. (CIA officials declined to be interviewed for this article.)

"The Indians want to fight—but freely, not under the leadership of any other organization," says Mr. Rivera, who is waiting in Costa Rica for a promised U.S. policy change that will bring him back into the active struggle. "The CIA cowboys want us to be their little Indians."

One of the officials responsible for U.S. policy toward the Indians concedes that "we have made mistakes," but he says that "now we are going to be smarter than we've been in the past." He says that the administration plans to support any Indian group that is willing to fight instead of just the faction that the CIA helped create in 1985.

But the change may be too late. The Sandinistas have done much to improve their treatment of the Indians. They have helped to rebuild villages they earlier destroyed, and they have begun social programs. These measures—along with military intimidation like the recent aerial bombing of several still-resistant areas—have convinced many Indians that peace with the Sandinistas is a better alternative than fighting for bad leaders who are leading poorly disciplined and badly supplied men.

Indians charge that one of the CIA's major blunders was to set up an Indian group, called Kisan, that excluded Messrs. Rivera and Fagoth, the Indian leaders with the largest followings. The CIA hoped to marry Kisan with the major Contra group, the Nicaraguan Democratic Front, but the relationship has been marred by fights over arms and money. In addition, without strong leaders Kisan hasn't been able to build a popular following. As a result, the Indian opposition force has withered.

Setting up Kisan "was a direct maneuver of the CIA to create an obedient Miskito group," says Jimmy Emery Hodgson, an Indian political chief and former Rivera ally who in January surrendered to the Sandinistas.

Marc Rangel, a native of Nicaragua's Indian region and the publisher of a newsletter on the Miskitos, says that the CIA's operatives "didn't know what they were doing, so they botched it." He explains that "Indians have always been a cohesive people who tended to trust their leaders. This is the first time they have had a divided message from above," he says, and he mainly blames the CIA.

Vietnam Veterans

Administration officials say that the CIA fielded more than 200 agents and contract workers to support the anti-Sandinista war. Many of them had military experience in Vietnam but lacked political savvy.

"These CIA men who failed in Vietnam, what can they do for us?" Mr. Fagoth complains. "They wouldn't leave us in peace to fight. The Sandinistas have consolidated their power thanks to the CIA. It's been a disaster. The CIA smelled of defeat; they were men of Vietnam."

Mr. Fagoth himself, however, accounted for some of the agency's problems. Early architects of the Contra policy latched on to him because of his daring, charisma and willingness to ally himself

with the former Somoza National Guardsmen who took up arms against the Sandinistas in 1981. Between 1982 and 1984, most U.S. aid to the Indians was channeled through him.

But according to Indian leader Roger Hermann, a former Fagoth ally, the U.S. made "a great mistake" forming such an exclusive alliance. No other Indian leader, for example, had access to the CIA station in Honduras. "This caused much friction," Mr. Hermann remembers, "because there were people, especially the young, who didn't want so much concentration of power in the hands of one man."

Mr. Fagoth's ruthless consolidation of power also created problems and cost him political support in Washington. In 1984, for instance, he shocked two U.S. Senate staff members on a fact-finding trip to the Caribbean coast by showing them a "death list" of 12 Indian leaders who were opposing him. He claimed to have finished off five of them already. Mr. Fagoth confirms this story.

Rumors About Fagoth

"Despite the rumors that I am a psychopath, a killer and a kidnapper, I'm the leader the people follow," Mr. Fagoth, 33 years old, said during a recent interview in Miami.

Mr. Fagoth says he consented to work with the CIA in 1982 because his Indian fighters needed arms, supplies and instructors. "When [the CIA] said, 'Accept our control,' I said, 'No, I am the boss.' They said my soldiers would die of hunger in that case."

His problems didn't stop then, he contends. In March 1982 the CIA asked him to sign a receipt saying that he was receiving 1,800 modern Belgian FAL assault rifles. Instead, he says, he received 30-year-old M-1 carbines. He also complained that the CIA wanted his men to fight a conventional war from bases in Honduras rather than the guerrilla war he wanted to fight inside Nicaragua.

But he says that he kept working with the agency because "they need me like I need them."

Mr. Rivera, the other major Indian leader, took a different course. He wants Indian independence, and he will team up with whoever appears to advance that goal. This has made him an unreliable ally for both sides. He supported the Sandinista revolution but switched to the resistance after concluding that the new regime wouldn't support Indian autonomy. Then he worked with the U.S. but refused to agree to the CIA terms Mr. Fagoth accepted.

In 1984 he began negotiations with the Sandinista government for regional Indian autonomy. After about six months, the negotiations broke down. The Sandinistas said that Mr. Rivera was demanding too much independence for a region that covers nearly half of Nicaragua and that he wanted too much of a leadership role for himself.

A Three-Day Meeting

Mr. Rivera then decided to rejoin the resistance. In May 1985, Fagoth and Rivera forces met for three days in Miami and forged an alliance called Asla, which means "together" in the Miskito language. They planned a general assembly in Honduras.

But Asla was short-lived. Robert Owen, an aide to Lt. Col. Oliver North, the National Security Council staff member who was fired for his role in the Iran arms-Contra financing scandal, was in Miami to keep tabs on the meeting. According to Alejo Teofilo, a former Fagoth ally, Mr. Owen told Fagoth followers that they would lose U.S. support if they brought Mr. Rivera into the fold. Mr. Fagoth says that Mr. Owen told him that he considered Mr. Rivera "dangerous," and a CIA agent known as "Jorge" later told Mr. Fagoth that Mr. Rivera would be kept out of Honduras.

Mr. Fagoth says that Jorge then gave him the equivalent of \$20,000 for his campaign to gain leadership of Kisan, the new Indian organization that the CIA was preparing to set up at an assembly in Rus Rus, Honduras, in September 1985. A CIA operative in Costa Rica named Max Morgan dispersed travel expenses to at least three anti-Rivera Indian leaders, while 10 leaders loyal to Mr. Rivera were denied funds, according to Mr. Hodgson.

But Mr. Fagoth's efforts to consolidate power apparently went too far for the agency. He was arrested by the Honduran army shortly before the meeting for kidnapping 12 of his opponents. He denies the charges and claims that he was taken at the instruction of the CIA. Whatever the case, the assembly to create Kisan was left without its two most popular leaders.

Some officials in the State Department, which has taken control of Contra policy, charge that the CIA discredited Mr. Rivera in order to protect its own chain of command.

Mr. Rivera has some support in Congress as a nationalist, and the State Department says that it wants to work with him. But Mr. Rivera is skeptical. "There is still a chance to reverse things, but not if the agency keeps pushing the same policy," he says. "We have been spending more of our time defending ourselves against the agency's actions than fighting against the Sandinistas. I am so sad because it is our people who suffer."