

### **Contra attack on Waslala, Central Zelaya. April 3, 1984.**

Waslala is a town of some 2,100 people on the recently completed all-weather dirt highway which provides the only overland access from Managua to Puerto Cabezas on the Atlantic Coast. It is the center of a far-flung municipio with a total population of about 26,000, 160 kilometers from Matagalpa and 300 from Puerto Cabezas, a key point on the advancing eastern frontier of Spanish-speaking mestizo *campesino* settlement. The landscape thereabouts is mountainous and covered with a dense vegetation which requires hard work to clear a plot for farming; and the rains are so heavy during nine to ten months of the year that the few access roads are generally impassable. People live in tiny hamlets or on isolated farmsteads, often an hour's walk from one to the next. Many of them live entirely off the land, eating little more than tortillas, beans, plantains, and an ersatz coffee made with toasted corn and water. They suffer greatly from malnutrition, as well as from diseases now rare in the rest of the country, such as malaria and the terrible "mountain leprosy" or leishmaniasis.

Some 3,000 FDN contras operate regularly in this region, moving back and forth along a belt running down from the Honduran border through Jinotega to San Jose del Bocay and Bocaycito to Waslala and Rio Blanco. These men are always on the move. It is an eight- to ten-day walk to Honduras along the mountain trails, and they stop only to sleep since their one permanent base was destroyed by the Sandinista Army. They do not control any territory, but they are continually resupplied by air, and they are able to regroup and disperse quickly thanks to the excellent communications systems with which they have been provided by the CIA. This contra army

is divided into "task forces" of 200-300 men, and sometimes divides into smaller bands for coordinated attacks upon a particular target. Often some thirty of them will set up an ambush along the highway, aiming in particular at destroying government vehicles and killing government personnel. Others will descend on outlying peasant communities to recruit those willing to join them and spread terror among the rest.

The Sandinista revolution has only begun to make its impact on this isolated region, primarily through the work of the Land Reform. A dozen agricultural self-defense cooperatives have been set up, but so far they include only some 400 families. Peasants have been organized into a section of the Sandinista National Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG). Some work has been done in basic literacy and public health. An adult education program is underway, but it is severely handicapped in its operations by the campesinos' fears that the contras will kill them if they go to classes. Several primary schools have ceased to function in outlying communities because of the killing and kidnapping of teachers; those who survive have been brought into the larger towns for protection.

Waslala was a mere frontier hamlet before the early 1970's when the FSLN guerrillas began operating in the region, and Somoza's National Guard established a garrison and base for counter-insurgency operations there. Sandinista Comandante Omar Cabezas' guerrilla memoir, *La montana es algo mas que una inmensa estepa verde* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1982, chaps. 11 & 12) recalls the months he spent in Waslala doing clandestine reconnaissance of the Guard garrison there, in preparation for an FSLN attack in January 1975. (Cabezas also provides vivid descriptions of the

hardships of life in Waslala, including his own bout with leishmaniasis). The National Guard base was built atop a large hill, and soon the Guardsmen had brought their families and friends to settle there. Small shops were opened, and the town began to grow. The peasants who came in to buy and sell goods were treated well at first, and came to associate their limited prosperity with the presence of the Guard. It was not until things began to go badly for the Somoza regime in late 1977 and 1978 that the repression of the populace began in earnest.

With this background, it is easy to understand why there continues to exist some social base for the operations of the FDN contras in the region around Waslala. Most of the contra leaders are former Guardsmen who served there; and many of them are well known to the peasants by name. Among the more notorious are Fernando, the Reverend (a Protestant minister), the Mountain Tiger, the Devil, and Uncle Sam. Residents say that they believe there are also some South Americans with the contras, to judge by the accents in their speech, as well as Nicaraguans from the cities. But many of them, including at least two hundred from the Waslala area itself, are ordinary Nicaraguan peasants.

There are many reasons why peasants join the contra. Some are relatives or friends of ex-National Guardsmen, coming from communities in which Guard recruitment was a tradition. All live in conditions of great poverty and cultural backwardness, and many have only recently begun to see the benefits which the revolution intends to provide to all. Some are runaways from justice; some have personal feuds with a neighbor to pursue. Some are presumably driven away by the zeal and rigidity of some newly awakened

Sandinista militants.

The few radios in the Waslala area pick up the FDN's Radio 15 de Septiembre and Radio America from Honduras, and Radio Impacto from Costa Rica, as well as the omnipresent Voice of America, more easily than they do the Nicaraguan stations. They all are plied daily, therefore, with disinformation -- that the Sandinistas aim to kill them, to kidnap their children and send them to Cuba, to steal their land and their livestock and so on -- above all that the contras are winning the undeclared war. Contra propaganda is especially concerned to take advantage of the deep religiosity of Nicaraguan country people, portraying the Sandinistas as atheistic communists and enemies of God. The contras claim to be waging a "holy war" in defense of God and country; and they distribute posters such as one with a photograph of the Pope seeming to endorse their struggle.

Campeños are also, moreover, persuaded to join the contras for sheer financial gain. The FDN and ARDE pay salaries of 5,000 to 8,000 cordobas (US\$180-300) a month, more than half the salary of a top Sandinista government official. That is a princely wage for a Nicaraguan campesino, who may earn 1,000 cordobas a month at agricultural day labor.

This situation has been given a new dimension by the Sandinistas' draft law, introduced in the Fall of 1983. Registration for military service is now a legal obligation for all Nicaraguan men between the ages of 18 to 24; and a good many campesinos (traditionally reluctant to do anything anyone forces them to do) have decided that they would rather serve the contras for money than the Sandinistas as a patriotic duty. What these young men have

overlooked is the fact that very few peasants from outlying areas have yet been drafted into the army, which recruits most of its members from the cities and relies heavily for front-line defense on the local organization of peasants through the territorial militia. As of April 1984, most of the eligible peasant youths of Waslala had not yet registered for the draft; and only about twenty men from the municipio had been taken into the Sandinista Army.

People in Waslala are frightened. They know that there is a network of *orejas* (informers) who tell the contras everything; and they won't talk with strangers if they can avoid it. Many are also reluctant to have anything to do with the government, and especially with the health, education and land reform programs, because they know that to do so can cost them their lives. Travellers in the region never know when they may run into contra bands on the roads and trails, and be stopped for questioning. The campesinos say they can always tell who are the contras, even when they are wearing Sandinista uniforms as they sometimes do, because they carry heavier arms and more provisions than the *compas* or Sandinista troops and militia, and because they always seem to be nervous and uneasy.

The contras' treatment of campesinos varies greatly from band to band and day to day. Some will behave quite courteously, seemingly anxious to win people over to their cause, and pay for any food and cattle they take. Others are willfully violent and will kill the peasants or their children for no apparent reason, or rape young women and carry them off to cook for them. Often they kidnap young men to use as "mules" carrying heavy packs through the mountains. When these men are exhausted or sick, the contras

sometimes leave them with their families to recover, but then often return for them the next time the band passes near the village. Some men have been forced to serve the contras as many as three times in this fashion.

The treatment of government employees and leaders of the Christian base communities by these same contras is, however, uniformly brutal.

Several eyewitnesses from the town of Waslala report that the contras operating in the region receive logistical support from aircraft which fly in from Honduras, violating Nicaraguan airspace. A nun from the parish missionary team reported that on various occasions since August 1983, she has seen four-motor aircraft flying slowly at low altitudes and dropping large crates by parachute into remote mountain areas. The last supply flight she saw was in February 1984; but village people with whom she has spoken had seen them as recently as late March.

A soldier on guard duty in Waslala spoke of having seen these supply flights, as well as a silent-flying black "mystery plane" apparently engaged in reconnaissance, on several occasions during his patrol activities in the mountains. According to commander Henry Alberto Serrano of the Army's Simon Bolivar Battalion, the supply flights occur about twice a week. "We have seen the flights drop supplies, some of which we have captured from the contras. We have captured M-14 rifles, M-60 machine guns, blankets, boots, backpacks, canteens and other supplies with United States markings. Also, we have captured white, green and orange-colored parachutes," he noted.

Waslala, seen as a strategic point for the general contra offensive against

northern and eastern Nicaragua in the Spring of 1984, suffered a well-coordinated massive attack by some 1800 troops beginning at dawn on April 3, when they fanned out along 30 miles of highway running both ways from the town. According to a local security officer, their objective was to take the town and declare a "liberated" territory from which to send out a call for international military assistance.

The immediate area had been subject to frequent smaller-scale contra attacks for a period of several months previously. "The contra attempted to cut off Waslala from the rest of the country," he said. "They cut down telephone and electricity poles leading into Waslala, burned five trucks along the highway interrupting traffic for several hours, destroyed the bridge between Waslala and the eastern town of Siuna (at El Guabo), and tried without success to destroy the bridge on the Yaosca River between Waslala and Matagalpa to the west."

As the several bands totalling some 1,000 men converged on Waslala via mountain trails that morning, one came upon the house of the UNAG leader, a 23-year-old campesino who promoted the land reform program in the hamlet of El Achote. They pulled him out of his house with his wife and their eleven month-old daughter and began cutting off his limbs one by one until he died. Then they beheaded the baby and shot the young mother, leaving her for dead as they put the family's house to the torch. The woman dragged herself into the forest after the contras had gone, and was found there later that afternoon -- near death from shock and the loss of blood. She was taken to the hospital and managed to tell this story to the pastoral team from the Catholic church in Waslala, but has since retreated into insanity.

At about 6:30 that morning, as the men of Waslala were heading out to work in their corn and bean fields, several hundred contras began attacking the town with artillery fire and mortars. Only forty government soldiers were stationed in the town at that time; but the militia rallied quickly. The contras were firing from positions from which they could not see their targets (the hospital, the army base and government offices); so most of the mortars fell in vacant lots and did not destroy any buildings. Local observers remark that this is very characteristic of contra attacks -- that they fire wildly and waste a lot of ammunition, whereas Sandinista troops are apt to use their ammunition sparingly, aiming carefully and usually hitting the mark.

One contra column attacked the army outposts on the northern edge of the town, in the barrio Claudia Chamorro, taking and using civilian homes as positions from which to launch their mortars and small rockets and direct their automatic weapons fire. Visitors a few days later found the walls of these houses pockmarked with the scars of bullets and flying shrapnel. According to soldiers and civilians from the neighborhood, about 350 contras engaged this section of the town during the seven-hour battle, trying to gain control of a hillside position overlooking Waslala.

On the western edge of the town, near the Waslala River, the tactical objective was the local hospital. According to its director Dr. Dina Rodia, 29, three mortar rounds hit very close to the hospital buildings. Later on another 350 contras tried to cross the river and capture the health complex but were repelled.



The third point of attack was the large hill, El Papayo, the site of a truck ambush earlier that morning, on the eastern edge of the town. A local militia member who participated in the defense of El Papayo said that about two hundred contras had fought for seven hours to gain that high ground before being driven off.

The contras tried to advance up the hill to Waslala itself several times, but the defenders there were in good positions and managed to hold them back. Then, at about 1:00 in the afternoon, the contras held their fire to give the impression that they had run out of ammunition. The contras advanced up the hill in eery silence, and when they were in full sight, the troops opened fire on them, killing four of the contra leaders and another fifteen or sixteen men instantly. It was then that the attackers decided to retreat.

For civilians in the neighborhoods under attack, that was a morning of sheer terror. Maria Castilla Pineda, 72, was at home in Claudia Chamorro: "When the battle began, I threw myself on the floor of my bedroom. A large band of contras came right up behind my house and began to fire at the town with all those big weapons. Bullets were flying all over the place. I could smell the gun powder. Some shrapnel came into the house, " she said, pointing out the holes in her wooden walls.

Rosa Amelia Gutierrez sought refuge in her bomb shelter with her two grandchildren. She held up the tail-piece from a small rocket projectile. "This landed in the tree above the shelter. It blew apart half the tree, but thank God it did not hurt us." A nun from the parish team spoke of people "fleeing their homes in terror, coming here to the church for refuge, as the

contra violence exploded all around them. Many mothers were desperate with worry for their sons who were already out in the surrounding fields harvesting the bean crop" when the attack began at 6:30 a.m.

Teófilo Mejía, 24, a small farmer living on the outskirts of Waslala who served the community as a member of the volunteer police force, was eating breakfast with his wife, Maria Rivera Amador de Mejia, and their four children. Mrs. Mejia had recently given birth and was not well, but she continued to manage a small bakery out of their home. "When we heard the first mortar shots by the contra, we all took refuge in our bomb shelter," said Maria Rivera to visiting Witnesses for Peace.

"About 300 to 400 contras came up the small rise to our house; and after searching through all our belongings they came and pulled us out of the bomb shelter. When they found my husband's volunteer police uniform they began to beat him up and said they were going to kill us all."

Teofilo got on his knees and pleaded with the contras to let his wife and children go free.

"My husband said they could do what they planned with him, but to show mercy for the women and children. So they let us go -- but as we fled into the woods, they threw a grenade at us. It wounded me slightly on the shoulder, but thank God, none of the children were hurt. Then, as we hid in the woods, we could hear my husband scream, and we knew they were torturing him. About 12:30 p.m., we heard an explosion. We saw smoke rising and knew that they had torched our house.

About an hour later, as the contras were retreating, they stopped at my mother's house (located a quarter-mile from the Mejia farm) and kidnapped my two younger brothers, Jose Antonio, 13, and Emilio Ubaldo, 14, as well as my sister, Reina, 16. Neither my parents nor my brothers nor sister were involved in any popular organization or in

politics. They were kidnapped 22 days ago, and we have not heard of them since.

After the contras left the area we went to find my husband. We found him lying in front of our totally burned house. They had cut off his arms with a knife, [plunged bayonets all through his body,] and smashed his head until it was not recognizable. Then they used a big knife to cut a large cross in his back”

she said, her voice trembling. Maria's mother continued: "Now that the contras have killed or kidnapped all our menfolk and our young daughter, we probably won't be able to plant our fields this spring. The members of the volunteer police force came and harvested the early bean crop last week. That helped us out a lot." Maria wept softly as she spoke of her four children: "The five-year-old asked for some money to go to the drug store and buy some medicine to bring back his daddy." Then, after a few moments of silence she said, "All I ask of you is that you pray for us."

At nearby San Miguel, the retreating contras dragged another campesino out of his house, a man who had nothing to do with the Revolution. He said that they could take anything they wanted, and that no matter how thoroughly they searched the house they would find no weapons.

Then one of the contras, a man he knew, came up and put handcuffs on him, claiming he was a Sandinista policeman. The man and his wife asked why he was saying that when he knew it wasn't true. It seemed to them that this was a case of taking revenge for a personal grievance by denouncing someone to the contra. The man was dragged off, and a little later his wife heard a shot and imagined that they had killed him. She hid with her children in the forest, and next day took them to Waslala.

When the army made its way to San Miguel three days later, it found the bodies of five campesinos, impossible to identify because their faces had

been disfigured by tortures, their eyes gouged out, and they had all been beheaded. The woman identified her husband's body by the clothes he had been wearing, and was able to take back no more than his hat. Now she faces life as a widow with five children too young to understand what has happened to them.

In the barrio Claudia Chamorro, once the contras had come within two hundred yards of the town's defensive positions, their leader was killed in combat. He was a tall blond man called "El Yankee" (presumably because of his appearance) who spoke Spanish like a Nicaraguan. While an accurate count of contra casualties was not readily available on the scene, at least nine dead contras were counted and another dozen were presumed killed. One of their leaders died in the assault on the hospital, two more in the effort to take El Papayo hill, and another at the same time in an attack on the Yaosca river bridge several miles to the west. The local Waslala militia and army personnel suffered 19 killed and 15 wounded. According to parish records, a total of funeral masses were held for 30 victims of the attack from Waslala and the surrounding villages; another source estimates 37 civilians were killed.

Contra task force attacks are often timed in such a way as to suggest strongly that the invaders have been provided with good intelligence by sympathizers living inside the targeted settlements. When this attack occurred, the town was defended by only forty EPS soldiers in addition to the local militia. Another four hundred soldiers were on patrol in the region, but the first reinforcements did not arrive until noon of that day. Once the remaining regular troops reached the town next morning, they set out immediately in

pursuit of the attackers.

El Achiote is a small farm village located about three hours by footpath from Waslala. The people there had faced an occupation by some 300 contra troops on the afternoon of April 1. The villagers had spent a troubled night while the contras rested, not knowing what to expect. The next day, reports Julia Paiz, "they took my two grandchildren, Gregorio Martinez, 16, and Teodoro Perez, 13, tortured them and slit their throats. We found their bodies with many torture marks all over them." Another woman of 20 in El Achiote (requesting anonymity due to her fear of reprisals), reported that her husband, 25, had been captured the same day as Julia Paiz' grandchildren. The three were cousins. He was bound with a rope and led to a grove of trees where he saw that his cousins had already been killed. "My husband told me that they beat him, jabbed him in the chest with knives, and cut his arms and fingers with sharp rocks. He held his breath then, so the contras left him for dead." The young woman reported that her husband was now out of the hospital and slowly recovering, but too afraid to talk or go back to their village. Her story was corroborated by her husband's uncle, and by the parish priest who had performed a burial mass for the two murdered boys.

When the local villagers learned of these murders, many fled into the mountains for safety. Antonia Gómez Hernández, 45, mother of six children, told interviewers, "We were afraid, so we hid deep in the forest. The contras had come and threatened us many times before this; and this time we knew they were going to carry out those threats. We took our children and a little food and we hid."

The contras left El Achiote on the evening of April 2 in the direction of Waslala, where the battle described above commenced at 6:30 the following morning. Then, having been driven off by the Sandinista army and militia units, they broke into small groups and retreated through the mountains, some passing through El Achiote once more. In a rage of frustration and destruction, they pulled 19 civilians out of their homes and shot them on the spot. Then the contras burned down eleven houses in the village square, the school house, and the kitchen behind the village chapel. Considering themselves "defenders of religion," they did not burn the chapel itself.

"By April 5," Antonia Gómez continued, "we were hungry from hiding in the forest. We estimated that the contras had by now travelled far north towards Honduras, so we came out of hiding." Survivors of the El Achiote attack, now living as refugees in Waslala, seemed anxious to talk about their experiences to the North American visitors from Witness for Peace. They expressed the hope that if the American people knew what the contras were really like, they would stop funding them.

Coffee farmer Tiburcio Ramírez, 40, wondered why the hard-working rural poor of Nicaragua were being made to fight the battles of others. "We want peace. We want to be able to work," he said. Another refugee spoke of the experiences of his neighbor: "The contras carried off three of Juan's children: a 16-year-old daughter, two sons of 14 and 12, and a son-in-law. He followed them for three days, but was helpless to do anything. To this day, he doesn't know what happened to them. The contras also tried to burn his house, but the flames wouldn't catch." Another couple reported having had their new sewing machine destroyed and their house set on fire. They

had lost everything.

In the course of their attack on the area surrounding Waslala, the contras burned three village schools to the ground. All of these schools, the only centers for education in their remote rural communities, had been built and supplied with teachers since the triumph in 1979 of the Sandinista Revolution.

In addition to the events described for El Achiote, the villages of El Guabo and Kubali suffered the burning of houses, kidnappings and murders by the contra forces. In El Guabo, the Rodolfo Amador Gallegos school was totally burned. The teachers' desks and some forty benches, as well as books, papers and various educational materials were systematically destroyed; only the cement floor and base wall remained useable. "Now the children have no place to study. The teachers are afraid to stay in the village," lamented one mother (who spoke on condition anonymity for fear of contra reprisals). "We received the construction materials from international friends; and we organized volunteer work crews to build the school," she added. (The school in El Guabo had been constructed in 1982 with materials provided by the European Economic Community). "We are afraid to rebuild it," continued the mother. "But, when we do, we'll use palm thatch so that it will be cheaper to replace if the contras come back and burn it down again."

The peculiar connection which the FDN contras make between Christian piety and counterrevolution was manifest once more during this retreat, when they spared an image of the Virgin and a portrait of Jesus in the chapel at Kubali, with several hundred candles burning before them--and extra

candles for the people to light later, saying that they were certain that God was with them in their struggle.

This propaganda avails them little with most Catholic campesinos, who are well aware that the parish missionary team ministers to them, and carries out its program of religious education through the training of Delegates of the Word to work with the Bible-reading Christian base communities, without interference of any kind from the local Sandinista authorities. Most citizens even in Waslala have seen that the Sandinista government works with its all-too-limited resources to promote the health, literacy and economic well-being of the rural poor. They are accustomed to observing in practice that "Between Christianity and Revolution there is no Contradiction," as the popular slogan goes. But among some of the more isolated Catholic campesinos, and among many of the region's numerous converts to Pentecostal or Fundamentalist Protestantism, the image of contra "godliness" seems nevertheless to have had some effect.

Following their defeat on April 3, most of the contra force seem to have left the immediate area of Waslala. A few remained behind to harass outlying communities, threatening farmers and Delegates of the Word and killing livestock. Kidnappings and isolated acts of violence continued at least through Holy Week; and on April 22 and 23, twelve people were taken from their homes in the village of Santa Rosa. At least 210 in all seem to have been kidnapped during the month of April.

Commander Serrano reported that the Army was in pursuit of these bands, and that their objective was to "find, encircle and combat" them. He also



said that the EPS had engaged a contra band in a 24-hour battle at the village of Algodón on Good Friday. People from the outskirts of the town, still traumatized several days after the April 3 events, were coming in to sleep in the church every night.

Waslala's people have responded to these tragic events with determination. The regular army and local volunteer militia defenses have been improved, and people from isolated farms have moved in to the more defensible populated areas. The parish priest reports a notable increase in participation in religious observances; and that the experience of the attacks, though it drove some merchants and other leading citizens to move away from Waslala, seems to have drawn the poor together in a spirit of sacrifice for the common good. Religious observance in this context seems like a celebration of life; and faith increases rather than fading away.

The Witness for Peace observers who visited Waslala just three weeks after April 3 were obliged to hitch a ride from Matagalpa, "since the only bus was leaving – maybe --at 2:30 a.m. We caught a ride on a large construction transport truck that drove in a small convoy, bringing materials and workers in to repair some of the damage the contras had done during that first week of April." When the hitch-hikers arrived, they found that the town still had no electricity or telephone service, and that the destruction of bridges and of the scarce vehicles plying the route between Waslala and the rest of the country had imposed severe hardships. In the "dry" month of April, traffic was able to make its way laboriously around the damaged bridges through riverbeds; but it was feared that once the rains began in earnest Waslala would be cut off completely for long periods.

Nevertheless, there were many signs of life. "People were trying to rebuild their lives, proud of their accomplishments, holding on to their hopes." An example of this was the hospitality house in Waslala, funded by the Swiss government. Before it was built, farmers who came in to sell their produce on market day had been obliged to sleep on the ground or on porches; and they often went hungry because they were too poor to buy food. Now they had a dry place to sleep for the equivalent of U.S.\$50 a night, and could get a balanced meal for \$.15.

Next year, the community was hoping to build a new adult education center with the help of the Swiss and Italian governments. People in outlying villages were at work rebuilding their burned houses and hoped soon to be able to reopen their schools, though church observers pointed out that they were badly in need of food, clothing and medicine merely to survive. Members of the new farmers' and livestock raisers' cooperatives were meeting to get their plans for production back on track, and tightening up the preparedness of their self-defense militia units.

The Witnesses for Peace were hospitably received by the parish pastoral team at the Catholic church in Waslala, and once the word got out that they were there, people began to line up at the church to tell them their stories. It was clear to the visitors that these were people who were "suffering at a very deep level, due to the contra violence and to the significant disruption of their community life and their connection to the land. The people seemed to carry a burden of quiet desperation as they were forced to abandon their small farms, faced this late April with the prospect that they would not be able to plant their corn when the rains began in May. To traditional Central

American farmers, the psychological depth of this tragedy is perhaps even greater than the economic hardship it implies. Their entire way of life is rooted in the cycle of the corn plant. To miss a year of planting the milpa is like missing a year of one's life."

As the Witnesses for Peace watched how these people, many of whom had just begun getting some improvement in their lives, faced the violence which had been wrought among them, always focused on the positive, constructive projects in their communities, "it occurred to us that the contra must consider it a crime, even a sin, for the people to have hope." Their actions seemd designed especially to "thwart any community growth, and to dash people's hopes to the ground. Yet the resiliency and the determination, so evident in most people, demonstrated that hope is indeed eternal, and that the truth of community and love are invincible."

[Based on testimonies gathered by Witness for Peace and by staff from the Centro Antonio Valdivieso and the Central American Historical Institute with the help of the parish missionary team in Waslala, and an article in *Barricada* 3/19/84. The attack on Waslala seems not to have been otherwise covered by the press in either the U.S. or Nicaraguan.]