

NICARAGUA

Miskitus from Nicaragua Speak about Peace

A delegation of Miskitus Indians from Nicaragua visited the U.S. from June 24 to July 5, 1988 to speak about the autonomy process and prospects for peace. Their trip was sponsored by OXFAM America, International Indian Treaty Council, and SAIC.

The delegation consisted of: Juan Salgado, Vice Coordinator of Kisan for Peace, Amalia Dixon of the Autonomy Commission, and Elasio Holmes Bennet, Political Secretary of Kisan for Peace. They came to attend the 13th IITC conference in Celilo Falls, Oregon. After that they came to the San Francisco Bay Area to speak at several events. They also went to Washington D.C. Their statements are summarized here:

Juan Salgado:

"We are very happy to be here with our Brothers and Sisters. We have faith that very soon we will have the autonomous government we have been fighting for. When we get our autonomous government, it won't be only for us. We believe we are supposed to fight for others, too.

"When we start to practice our real autonomy, it will be a shame for other countries who have ethnic minorities whose rights are not being respected—it will be shameful for those countries.

"We are a great Indian nation. We are strong. You have to learn to have that faith, and struggle with that faith, to overcome everything and get your rights in the state. I am grateful to you because, by attending this conference, I am learning a lot of things from you, too. Sometimes our Indians would rather run away from problems, would rather not recognize themselves as Indian, and would rather run away and integrate themselves as other minorities. That is not correct. Many times they hide because of the money. You lose your dignity as a nation this way. We have to fight together to receive justice and find peace in the world.

"Many of my people are here in the United States. Many of them have personal interests; they have forgotten their mothers, their brothers, their sisters. It is my feeling that, by being here today, we can learn to work together, to develop solidarity. That is my main purpose today.

"So, by sharing with everyone we can help one another; that will be easier. We shouldn't run away. No one has the right to take us from our land. It is something that belongs to us. We are talking about freedom, and they are supposed to give us freedom—real freedom for everyone, for all the people of this hemisphere. I have great hope that things will be the way we expect. We are not going to keep quiet; we are going to continue to struggle, because there are still some other things we need to do. We are not afraid.

"Autonomy means our full rights—our rights over our riches, our way of living, our system of life, our reality, our participation in the division of everything. We don't know anything about political parties. All we know is the way that we are accustomed to living and the rights that we have over our land.

Amalia Dixon on the history of Atlantic Coast autonomy:

"We notice that the Indian history all over the world is the same. We notice that economically you people are much better than us, but when we speak of rights you still have difficulties getting those rights to be recognized. So then we are the same people that suffer oppression, isolation, marginalization, exploitation.

"In 1821, Central America became independent—a big meeting was held in Guatemala. Then they decided that this would be the state of Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. But those people who went there didn't invite any Indian people, nor blacks who were living in each of those states.

So no one was present that would represent the interests of the ethnic groups in Central America. That is how, from the beginning, the Indian people that are in the Pacific region of Nicaragua, mixed with the Spanish, became mestizos and took power. Later it was invaded by the English and they continued living there until 1860. In 1894, the English people were pushed out of the region.

"This is known in our Nicaraguan history as the reincorporation of the Miskitu Atlantic into Nicaragua. In terms of rights, they were incorporating us without consulting us, without taking into consideration our feelings as Native people. How can we learn to love Nicaragua? I am not involved in Nicaraguan life. So I continue living according to my way and I look at those people in the Pacific coast as Spaniards, because they speak Spanish.

Later you see how general Sandino came in fighting against imperialism. In 1934, Somosa took over Nicaragua and started taking over the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, and more large American companies, lumber companies and gold mining companies went in throughout the region. They just came into Nicaragua to exploit the riches and that was that.

"Until 1950, the government went into our region saying that we were supposed to speak Spanish, the official language. . . . Just as someone was telling me that there are some programs in the U.S. also that you are supposed to speak English only? That destroys your culture. If you come to me and say that the language that I speak is not important, I am ashamed of being what I am. That is what happened with most of our people that learned to speak Spanish.

"In 1979, when the Sandinistas won the revolution, they went into our region. The first thing we said was: 'We want to be organized in our own system, in our own reality. The Sandinistas accepted and we organized Misurasata, that means Miskuitus, Sumus, Rama, Sandinistas unification. We are six different ethnic groups on the Atlantic coast; three are Indians—Miskuitus, Sumus, and Rama, then the Creole, mixed blood.'



Juan Salgado, Elasio Holme from Kisan por La Paz, and Amalia Dixon of the Autonomy Commission, speaking at KPFA radio in Berkeley.

photo- Marvin Collins

"We then asked the question: 'What are we going to demand from the new government, because if there is a revolution they say you can ask for your rights. So then Misurasata presented its demands and the Sandinista government said that O.K. that they knew that the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua has been isolated, marginalized. They said that they were going to recognize us and give us the full rights that we need. So that is how we saw Sandinistas—as coming into our community to treat us as equals. How would you look at the purpose? As something good, eh? For the first time, the Nicaraguan government was going to give us full rights, the same participation as in the Pacific region.' The problem was that this was the Sandinista's initiative and not ours.

"For the first time in Central America, in all America, the government is going to face up to ethnic problems. The Sandinistas never imagined that we were going to stand up and fight for our rights this time. They said we are coming to these people to give them full participation that they never had, so why will they fight against us? But we are tired of being under other peoples' ideas. We have full rights; we survived for five hundred years under other peoples' intervention. We, as Indians, took advantage of the revolution and said, "This time is the time we are going to fight against the Spaniards and show them that they have to learn to respect our rights. This time we demand that we are going to take possession of our riches.

"But the situation became more complicated because of Stedman Fagoth, coordinator of Misurasata. Fagoth is from rio Coco. Before he became Sandinista, he was a member of Somoza's security force. There, in the State Council, you have different political parties and the extreme right took advantage of Stedman's condition. Finally Stedman started to do things that the Indians did not know about.

"So when the Sandinistas came to find us, there were two problems for them: Indians demanding separation, the full rights in our region and Fagoth involved with the right wing. So that is when the Sandinistas arrested him and other members of Misurasata. For us, this action meant that they were the same Spaniards that never gave us our rights, so when we were fighting for our rights, they sent us to jail. That is when you saw the Indians making a big demonstration and finally the Sandinistas said, 'Let's see how we can negotiate.'

"But that was when Stedman went to Honduras and there Somoza's warriors took advantage of him and said, 'O.K., we know what the Indian problems are and we can give them some financial help, military training, everything the Indian needs. That is how we started to fight against Sandinistas.

"In 1982, the situation got so bad along the Coco river frontier that the people living there had to urgently evacuate. The Indians who stayed in Nicaragua continued trying to tell the Sandinistas that there was a mistake — that they should recognize their mistake. That there is a historical problem, and that they have to learn to recognize our rights.

"Finally, at the end of 1982, they started to recognize our problem. That was when the Sandinistas found out that we were not against the revolution, that we are revolutionary people. Ours is the type of revolution that depends on our mothers and fathers. It is the real revolution, the Indian revolution.

"In 1984, the Sandinistas started to make a lot of studies on what to do to solve the ethnic problem in Nicaragua. That is when they had discussions with Rubín Videa, our leader. In December of 1984, President Ortega declared that the solution of the Atlantic coast was an autonomous government. This is the response that the government is giving us because we demanded it, we fought for it, we lost a lot of lives.

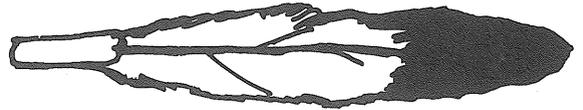
"Finally, we feel that we are learning to understand one another. We don't need to be killing one another. What we need is to sit down around a table and discuss our reality, respecting one another. We fought Sandinistas in the past but now we recognize that they are trying to understand and solve our aspirations.

"As my father usually says to the government: 'We want to see that you give us our rights and then we go on forgiving you, but we do not forget.'"

In 1985 the Indian people of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua signed a Peace Treaty with the Nicaraguan government, in Yulu, called now the "Capitol of Peace." The Indian people had been fighting for autonomy since 1979.



Miskitu refugees returning home to Leymus, Nicaragua on June 22, 1988. Since the beginning of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast "autonomy" process more than 25,000 people, under the aegis of ACNUR (U.N. Refugee Commission) have returned from Honduras.



Elasio Holmes: "It's been three years since we initiated the dialogue for Peace in the Atlantic Coast. We have specially accomplished the approval of the 'Statute for the Law of Autonomy' by the National Assembly. We agree 80 percent with what has been stipulated by this law, but we think that we still need to make reforms addressing the administration of our natural resources, and the demarcation of our territory.

"In these three years both sides—the Indian troops and the Sandinistas' militias have maintained the cease fire agreement. Many Indian troops have come down to the open to join the peace dialogues.

"But when we say Peace, we want Peace with dignity. Many Indians have died, and the war left many widows and many handicapped people. We want Peace with dignity accomplishing the objectives that we set up at the beginning of this struggle. We are never going to give up our arms. This sounds contradictory, because if we are talking about Peace, how can we still talk about keeping our arms?"

But we think that the arms we have are a guarantee for maintaining Peace in the Atlantic Coast. We have to make sure that our autonomy is respected, and we have to have something with which to defend our autonomy. We have to defend Peace.

"We also think that there is trust between the Sandinista government and us, because if the government permits the Indian people to keep their arms, without fearing tomorrow a coup, or a separatist movement in the Atlantic Coast, we think that that is an indication of trust. We are all seeking Peace.

"We don't think that there are ideological contradictions between the government and us. The Indian people struggle is for autonomy, land rights, rights to exploit our natural resources, to have our own way of government, to be able to make decisions as a people, to remain with our culture and our language, and the revolution talks about defending the same things."