

Nicaragua sees bloodiest clashes yet after months of protest

By Bill Van Auken
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Nicaragua saw its bloodiest clashes yet over the weekend, after nearly three months of protests, as security forces and armed government supporters moved to forcibly dismantle barricades erected by protesters.

The most violent clashes took place south of the capital of Managua in the towns of Diriamba and Jinotepe, where 35 people were reported killed. Another three died in the northern province of Matagalpa. Among the dead were protesters as well as several members of the police and paramilitary government supporters.

The government laid siege to the towns at dawn on Sunday, bringing in bulldozers to clear barricades from a key road linking Managua to the country's south and the Costa Rican border. Security forces employed rubber bullets and live ammunition to quell the protesters.

Nicaragua has been gripped by nationwide protests since April 18, when President Daniel Ortega of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation announced pension cuts and increases in social security contributions dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

Initial demonstrations by students were met with deadly force and, as the protests have continued, their focus has become a demand for the ouster of Ortega and Rosario Murillo, who is both his wife and vice-president.

According to human rights groups, the number of people killed in clashes since April has risen to more than 310. The government has acknowledged only 47 deaths.

The protests and barricades have largely crippled Nicaragua's economy. After the government forces demolished the barricades in Diriamba and Jinotepe, some 350 cargo trucks were able to pass after being stuck for a month.

An incident that took place in Diriamba on Monday may have more far-reaching effects than the bloodshed on the barricades. A group of Catholic bishops and priests led by the auxiliary bishop, Monsignor Silvio Jose Baez, and the Vatican's representative in Managua, the

Apostolic Nuncio Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag, went to mediate a peace in the besieged town and secure the release of a group of protesters, journalists and clerics trapped inside a local church.

Upon their arrival in Diriamba, the group was surrounded by pro-government sympathizers, many of them wearing ski masks, who denounced the clerics as "assassins," "coup supporters" and "pedophiles." The pro-government elements then forced their way into the church, roughing up the priests and bishops and wounding one with a knife.

The Catholic Church's Episcopal National Council of Nicaragua (CEN) has been mediating talks between the Ortega government and the opposition Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy, a coalition of business interests together with student organizations, unions and other groups, some of which received funding from US government sources.

After the incident in Diriamba, Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes, president of CEN, declared, "What sense does it have to continue with the dialog, if the streets continue to be filled with blood?"

Last week, the CEN submitted an undisclosed proposal to the Ortega government that was thought to include moving national elections scheduled for 2021 up to next year.

Ortega explicitly rejected any such change in the electoral calendar in a speech delivered to supporters in Managua Saturday—his first public appearance in a month. "You can't just change the [electoral] rules overnight because of a group of coup-plotters," he said.

The US government, meanwhile, has steadily ratcheted up pressure on the government, imposing sanctions last week on three officials, including Francisco Díaz, a deputy chief of the national police force, whose daughter is married to one of Ortega's sons.

The penalties are designed to "expose and hold

accountable those responsible for the Nicaraguan government's ongoing violence and intimidation campaign against its people," a State Department spokeswoman said in a statement.

The State Department has also ordered all "non-essential" US diplomatic personnel to leave the country and has issued a travel warning against US citizens visiting Nicaragua.

Washington has been noticeably reticent until now about denouncing the state violence in Nicaragua, reflecting the amicable relations that it had forged with the Ortega government.

A leader of the FSLN guerrilla movement in the 1970s, Ortega had played a leading role in the toppling of the US-backed dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza in 1979, subsequently emerging as the head of a Sandinista government that Washington attempted to overthrow by means of a dirty war waged by a CIA-backed Contra terrorist army. After years of war and deprivation, the Sandinista government was voted out of power in 1990 in an election that was grossly manipulated by Washington, including through threats that if its chosen candidate, Violeta Chamorro, failed to win, both the war and an economic embargo would continue.

Ortega returned to power in 2007 on the basis of a right-wing pro-business economic program and an embrace of Christian Evangelicalism. He also forged close ties between the Nicaraguan military and the US Southern Command, which included joint military exercises and training programs.

At the same time, he and his wife monopolized an ever-greater share of both political and economic power, emerging as the richest people in Nicaragua and drawing comparisons between themselves and the old Somoza dynasty.

Ortega's government was supported by both the major business associations in Nicaragua and foreign capital. It proved effective in suppressing the struggles of a restive and impoverished working class, including some 120,000 workers toiling in free trade zones for poverty wages.

The US attitude toward the Ortega government has increasingly been influenced by the ties it has established with both China and Russia. Trade with China has increased rapidly, even as Managua maintains ties to the government of Taiwan. The Ortega government also granted a license in 2013 to a Chinese investment firm to build and operate a canal across the country, linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and serving as a rival to the Panama Canal. Thus far, the project has remained stalled.

At the same time, Ortega forged military ties with Moscow, purchasing some 3,000 surface-to-air weapons and 50 tanks, while entering discussions on buying fighter aircraft. Russia has also set up a military training center in Nicaragua and plans are in the works for joint military exercises. Moscow has also set up a satellite-monitoring station in the Central American country.

In his 2018 statement to the US Congress, SOUTHCOM chief Admiral Kurt Tidd posed Russia's involvement in Nicaragua as a strategic threat, providing Moscow "with persistent, pernicious presence, including more frequent maritime intelligence collection and visible force projection in the Western Hemisphere."

"Left unchecked, Russian access and placement could eventually transition from a regional spoiler to a critical threat to the US homeland," the admiral warned

Even as it sought to maintain close ties with Ortega, Washington has invested heavily in his even more right-wing and openly pro-US imperialist opposition. The National Endowment for Democracy has funneled \$4.1 million into the country since 2014 to finance 54 separate opposition groups. USAID, meanwhile, had a budget for Nicaragua in 2018 of \$5.2 million, most of it going to "civil society" operations.

US imperialism increasingly sees Latin America as a battleground in its "great power" conflicts with Russia and China. In Nicaragua, it aims to advance this agenda by replacing Ortega's reactionary bourgeois government with an even more pliant US puppet regime.

Whether such a regime would prove any more capable of containing the social upheavals that have rocked the country, however, is by no means clear.

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