

# Nicaragua

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## Query:

What illegal armed groups exist in Nicaragua? What is the FUAC? Who are its leaders? What are its origins?

## Response:

The Andrés Castro United Front (FUAC, Frente Unido Andrés Castro) was, until its virtual annihilation in the summer of 2001, the last of the larger armed groups (with well over 100 members) operating in the Nicaraguan hinterlands. Its primary base of operations was in the municipalities of what Nicaraguans call the Mining Triangle (Triángulo Minero). That is the area between the mining towns of Siuna, Rosita, and Bonanza, in the remote mountainous wilds of the country's Caribbean watershed. With the FUAC's demise, the situation has improved somewhat, but inhabitants of that area continue to be subject to the actions of smaller bands with varying loyalties, who fill the vacuum left by the absence of a meaningful government presence in the region.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During the 1980s, Nicaragua's ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN, Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional) fought a civil war against US-supported counterrevolutionaries (contras) that began to wind down following the signing of a Central American peace agreement in 1987. The political conflict then moved from the battlefield to the ballot box. In 1990, the FSLN lost the presidential election to Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, who headed a broad coalition (UNO, Unión Nacional Opositora) that included former contra leaders.

The leaders on both sides moved quickly to secure their own interests, often leaving their followers on the sidelines. The Sandinistas took advantage of the remaining weeks before the inauguration of Mrs. Chamorro to transfer state assets into the hands of top party figures. This action has come to be known as La Piñata, after a popular game in which children poke a paper bag with a stick in order to get an avalanche of candy (Walker 2001, 82).

Contra leaders similarly sought the return of properties seized after they had fled the country, and generous compensation for properties that could not be retrieved.

In both cases, many of the rank-and-file who had actually fought in the civil war, and who had no independent means of earning a living, were left to fend for themselves. The former contra guerrillas had little to begin with other than what they received from the CIA. They were soon joined by former Sandinista soldiers and officers who were likewise dropped from government payrolls as the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS, Ejército Popular Sandinista) was pared down to a fraction of its former size. The army's troop strength

declined from 86,810 in January 1990 to 16,200 in 1992, leaving more than 70,000 out of work (Rocha 2001).

The manner in which the size of the army was reduced between 1990 and 1992 led to widespread dissatisfaction in the lower ranks. Some – particularly higher ranking officers – got land and pensions; others did not. Just under 6 percent – all having the rank of captain or above – got grants of land (Rocha 2001).

In March and May 1990, the government of President Chamorro signed agreements with Contra representatives in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. The agreements brought the Contra war to a formal conclusion, and promised grants of land to the campesinos (peasants) who were laying down their arms. Some did in fact get lands; many did not. As of November 1990, only 3,000 of some 20,000 demobilized contras had received the land they had promised. Of those who did, many had problems obtaining titles. The net result was to create conflict and insecurity in the remote parts of the country where the demobilized combatants were settled (Rocha 2001, Rogers 2001).

That caused demobilized combatants from both sides to return to that which they knew best, taking up arms and heading for the hills. Former Contras formed bands of Recontras, the most prominent of which was Frente Norte 3-80. Former Sandinista soldiers formed groups of Recompas (Sandinistas commonly referred to each other as *compañeros*, or *compas* for short). Other groups, known as Revueltos, were, like scrambled eggs (*huevos revueltos*), a mix of the two (Rogers 2001, Walker 2001, 79).

The Recompas chose names reflecting a revolutionary ethos, such as Bolívar, Ernesto Che Guevara, Camilo Ortega. The Recontras tended to choose English names like Mike or Jackson, or more fearsome names such as Terror, Ciclón (Cyclone), Bravo, Puñalito, Viernes 13 (Friday the 13th) Pantera (Panther), Culebra (Snake), Mano Negra (Black Hand) Indomable (Tameless). Though both groups killed and kidnapped, sowing terror in remote areas, the Recompas were the only groups that claimed to have any political ideology, as reflected in their names (Rocha 2001).

The area of the country that has suffered most from the depredations of armed groups has been the north central region, both because it is a geographically remote mountainous area, and because socioeconomic conditions are the worst in the country. According to a study carried out last year by the Secretary of Social Action, as many as 90% of the inhabitants of Nicaragua's north-central region are living in conditions of extreme poverty. In this area of the country, which is home to a majority of the nation's indigenous population, most of the people have limited or no access to potable water, adequate housing, employment or health and educational services. Given this socioeconomic reality, it is hardly difficult to understand why civilian life may not look so appealing to many career soldiers whose resumes include war, and whose only current means of economic survival is stealing, kidnapping, extortion, and the trafficking of drugs and weapons (Rogers 2001).

## ORIGINS OF THE FUAC

By 1992, the formation of rearmed groups was in full swing. On March 5, some 500 Revueltos peacefully occupied the town of Ocotal, near the Honduran border (Rocha 2001).

That same year, Edmundo Olivas began organizing the Andrés Castro United Front (FUAC, Frente Unido Andrés Castro), adopting the nom-de-guerre Camilo Turcios. Olivas had long served the EPS in the front lines of the Contra war, and was promoted to the rank of captain shortly before the Sandinistas lost the 1990 election and the Chamorro government began drastically reducing the size of the military. He was disillusioned upon discovering how well the officer corps lived by comparison with the rank-and-file. After getting laid off, he began organizing, telling journalist Angélica Fauné:

"There is a lot of division and resentment for the manner in which the armed forces dropped us. The criteria by which layoffs were made were very arbitrary. A few persons made the decisions, without taking into account years of service, merits, or capabilities... We believe the institution has repayed us badly, that we did not deserve such treatment after serving our country and revolution. The governments have let us down too. The proof is that we are without work and housing, unable to offer our families a decent life, and an education for our children" (Rocha 2001).

Olivas made common cause with the National Coordinating Committee of Retired Officers (CNOR, Coordinadora Nacional de Oficiales en Retiro), a group similarly resentful of the manner in which the EPS made its layoffs. He named his organization after Andrés Castro, a patriotic hero who resisted a 19th-century invasion led by US adventurer William Walker with nothing but stones. His own pseudonym, Camilo Turcios, was a cross between Camilo Ortega and Oscar Turcios, two Sandinista icons martyred during the guerrilla efforts of the 1970s. This was a not-so-subtle swipe at the comfortable Sandinista leadership, whom he described as a new bourgeoisie. Because the FUAC originated from the EPS, and because of its strong critique of the Sandinista leadership, there was a lot of bad blood between the two groups, and negotiations aimed at achieving demobilization in 1997 did not succeed (Rocha 2001).

The FUAC did not, however, seek to effect change at the national level. Instead, it confined its focus to the Mining Triangle, as an armed pressure group to achieve better conditions for impoverished inhabitants of the region. The remote Siuna area had been used by the EPS as a forward base in the war against the Contras during the 1980s. Many demobilized members of the EPS settled in the region. But as the national government began ignoring both the region and its inhabitants in the 1990s, the FUAC stepped in to fill the void, and was able to attract recruits from the local population. The FUAC's demands were focused on delivery of basic services – water, electricity, credit, land, and improved transportation – to its members and social base. It also helped defend rural cooperatives in the region, both from criminal bands and from Recontras. The cooperatives had been the target of Contra attacks in the 1980s because of their having been founded by the Sandinistas. In the 1990s, the FUAC defended them from attack by the Frente Norte 3-80, again compensating for the government's failure to provide protection (Rocha 2001).

The Peace Commission (Comisión de Paz) established by the government in 1997 recognized that the FUAC enjoyed substantial public support in the region, saying that "sectors of the population indicated their desire to participate in the process by presenting their petitions." It recommended that the government send a delegation to Siuna "to consider the petitions and engage in dialogue with the people" (Rocha 2001).

In December 1997 an agreement was reached. The FUAC would disarm, in return for which the government of President Arnoldo Alemán would provide basic services to inhabitants of the Mining Triangle. At the disarmament ceremony in Labú on December 27, however, the army showed up with special troops armed with silencers. The FUAC responded by seizing the Peace Commission members as hostages. The hostages later reported they had been treated very poorly – they were denied food, and FUAC members pointed guns at them and threatened them with grenades (Rocha 2001).

Though that crisis passed, the government did not keep its side of the agreement. It did not set up a public transport system with 15 buses, as called for in the agreement. Unlike the settlement with the Frente Norte 3-80, under which the government of President Violeta Chamorro had provided the Recontras with secure title to land and with technical assistance, the land assigned to the FUAC members was already occupied by former Contras. That caused the FUAC leadership to seek to rearm.

Before they could do so, however, the three principal leaders were killed under suspicious circumstances. Tito Fuentes bled to death following an ambush beside the cemetery in Siuna. Edmundo Olivas (aka Camilo Turcios) was led into an ambush by a former FUAC member who asked to meet with him. He and his driver were shot to death with one or

more AK-47s on a busy highway to Boaco, yet police did not arrive on the scene until eight hours later. A third leader, known as Damián, was killed when his radio exploded. All of the murders remain unresolved, though the circumstances suggest the possibility of covert action by the military. Deprived of much of its leadership, the FUAC was reduced to a remnant of between 35 and 100 members, led by José Luis Marengo, a former Nicaraguan army captain (Rocha 2001, EFE March 2000, Xinhua 2000, EFE June 2001).

In June 2001, the FUAC ambushed a police patrol in northern Siuna. A police captain was killed, and ten other police officers were seriously wounded. In October, the daily newspaper La Prensa reported that the army and police had killed seven FUAC members, including José Luis Marengo, in an operation code-named Trojan Horse. In December, the army reported additional FUAC casualties in shootouts with troops and police. Two were killed. Another two were wounded, including FUAC leader Domingo Quintero García (aka Tinieblas), who may have bled to death from his wounds according to residents of the Mining Triangle. With such severe losses, the FUAC was described as demoralized and disintegrating (Jarquín 2001, EFE June 2001, EFE December 2001).

#### POST-FUAC ARMED GROUPS LINKED TO TRAFFICKING IN NARCOTICS, TIMBER, AND ARMS

Helping precipitate the demise of the FUAC have been other armed groups operating in the Mining Triangle with the blessing of the military and police. One is a group of about 20 men under the leadership of former FUAC member Cristóbal Martínez. Another is a group of about 25 led by Ezequiel Medrano ("Mochila"), who developed ties with timber interests, that paid the group to protect their operations. With official designation as Auxiliary Police (Policía Auxiliar), Voluntary Police (Policía Voluntaria), or Rural Police (Policía del Campo), these groups operate clandestine prisons and engage in kidnappings and extrajudicial executions (Rocha 2001).

One of the most troubling developments over the past two years has been the development of armed groups with ties to drug trafficking and weapons smuggling. These groups have virtually no popular base and no political program, and are increasingly brutal in their use of violence. That has led to increases in the number of persons displaced to other parts of the country (Rogers 2001).

According to an investigative report published in the Costa Rican daily newspaper La Nación in June 2000, bands of former Nicaraguan contras are smuggling arms left over from the Cold War Central American conflicts to the Colombian FARC guerrillas. Using pickup trucks, vegetable trucks, and ferry boats, these bands are transferring AK-47s, M-16s, RPG-7 grenade launchers, C4 plastic explosives and surface-to-air (SAM) missiles to the Colombian rebels. Because the FARC taxes cocaine production within the territory they hold in Colombia, they pay very handsome prices, making the trade virtually as lucrative as drug trafficking (Rogers 2001).

#### MAJOR NICARAGUAN ARMED GROUPS IN THE POST-SANDINISTA PERIOD

1. Frente Norte 3-80: The most prominent Recontra group. Founded by former Contra commanders Pajarillo, Charro, Chacal, Caminante, and Zapoyol, it had 500-800 men under arms at its peak in the early 1990s. It received financing from Miami-based exile groups. The Chamorro government succeeded in negotiating its demobilization with a \$2 million package of benefits (Rocha 2001).

2. Andrés Castro United Front (FUAC, Frente Unido Andrés Castro): The most prominent Recompa group, formed by former EPS Captain Edmundo Olivas (alias Camilo Turcios), Tito Fuentes, José Luis Marengo, and other former EPS members who were disillusioned with the FSLN leadership and unhappy with the manner in which they were demobilized (Rocha 2001).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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