

NORWICH CITY COUNCIL

TWINNING COMMITTEE – 14th June, 2018

REPORT OF NORFOLK AND NORWICH – EL VIEJO FRIENDSHIP LINK

OUTBREAK OF VIOLENCE IN NICARAGUA

Introduction

Since 19 April a wave of violence has profoundly polarised Nicaragua. What started as a protest against a new social security law at the technical university in Managua rapidly spread to other state universities and cities. This situation rapidly escalated into violence that has resulted in the tragic deaths of over 40 people, hundreds injured and widespread opportunistic looting. There have also been politically motivated threats, attacks and deliberate destruction of public buildings and private property. Deaths, mainly of students, have resulted from the police inexplicably using live ammunition, an unprecedented act that had never previously happened in the past thirty years. Deaths of police officers, Sandinista activists, a teacher, a municipal worker and others are a consequence of violence on the part of protesters or criminals.

Since 22 April, large scale protests have continued, as have road blocks and sabotage, which is severely affecting the whole economy, particularly the tourist industry. In this chaotic situation there is a heightened level of fear and tension that takes a toll on everyone, especially those already impoverished and living on the margins. It has been a complete shock that a country with a stable growing economy and extensive investment in health, education, social programmes and infrastructure erupted into such violence so quickly.

How have people reacted?

What has happened is tragic: families and communities are mourning the deaths of loved ones and there is a generalised feeling of anxiety and insecurity. A country that saw a peaceful transition of power after the 1990 elections and has been stable for nearly three decades despite its previous history of violence has been plunged back into polarisation. For older people who lived through the contra war of the 1980s when 30,000 people lost their lives, the chaos has evoked extremely painful memories of the past. Passionate politics and protests are deep rooted in Nicaragua but the disregard for human life is what has profoundly shocked and horrified the whole country.

What has the role of the media and social media been in fanning the flames of polarisation?

The extraordinary power of social media has played a major role in what has happened. This is the way in which protesters have mobilised extremely effectively in huge numbers so quickly, but it means that it is difficult to discern fact from fiction, it acts as an echo chamber whereby people and the media cherry pick whatever information fits their narrative; this serves to intensify conflict and no-one knows where to get reliable information any longer. This feeds into hostile anti-government messages that are replicated in the media nationally and globally and rile people to extreme positions and/or actions.

So-called 'independent' commentators presented as 'experts' are using overblown, simplistic rhetoric to frame a very complex situation; this in turn fans the flames of polarisation and conflict.

What economic impact has the escalation of violence had?

Prior to the current wave of violence, tourism in Nicaragua was booming and the economy was set to grow by 5% in 2018. According to economist Nestor Avendano, Nicaragua's dramatic change of image abroad is already being felt. This will mean a fall in economic growth and foreign investment and a general deceleration of the economy. Given the susceptibility of the tourist industry, there is already a high level of cancellations, particularly affecting tourist towns of Leon, Granada, and San Juan del Sur. The losses to the country's economy are already estimated at US\$ 200 million.

What is already painfully clear is that those who will be affected most will be those who are most impoverished and living a hand to mouth existence on the margins in the barrios of the cities and in the countryside. They are the ones most affected by price rises, potential food shortages and threats to their livelihoods. This will particularly affect women.

What has the role of the US been in fuelling the conflict?

It is important to recognise the depth of the simmering anger and frustration against government errors particularly on the part of the students whose demands for a transparent investigation and calling to account of those responsible for the killings must be respected.

However, given the clearly stated aim of the US for 'regime change' in Nicaragua, there is a grave danger of grievances being politically manipulated.

The CIA Freedom Fighters Manual of the 1980s is full of helpful hints on how to destabilise and overthrow the government through measures such as spreading rumours, sabotaging state institutions and infrastructure and blocking highways: there is no reason to believe that the current CIA manual is any different. For the US, Daniel Ortega is unfinished business from the 1980s.

Over the weekend of 21 and 22 April, there was a wave of violence targeting social security offices, police stations, municipal authority offices, university buildings, government offices, and medical supply stores of the Ministry of Health. The speed of the escalation and the simultaneous events throughout the country appear to have all the hallmarks of a well co-ordinated, politically motivated operation designed to undermine the government and destabilise the country.

Between 2014 and 2017, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), awarded 55 grants totalling \$US4.2million to Nicaraguan NGOs opposed to the government. Representatives from some of these organisations travelled to Washington in 2016 and 2017 to lobby far right politicians to place sanctions on Nicaragua in what has become known as the NICA Act. NED was set up by the Reagan administration in 1983 in the wake of a storm of negative revelations about the CIA. Its purpose is to do overtly what the CIA had been doing covertly: meddling in the internal affairs of foreign countries.

It is also important to consider developments in Nicaragua in the context of US destabilisation internationally; the potentially dire repercussions of the Trump administration withdrawing from

the Iran nuclear deal, the building of a US embassy in Jerusalem, plans to build a wall to keep Mexicans out of the US...to name but a few examples.

Since coming to power, the Trump administration has intensified interventionist policies against Venezuela, Cuba and now Nicaragua. On 7 May, in a swearing in ceremony for Carlos Trujillo, the new US ambassador to the Organisation of American States (OAS), US vice president Mike Pence stated that working for 'freedom' in the three countries is a priority for the Trump administration: "We will stay by the side of those who long for freedom and we will confront their oppressors."

The intention is to bring Nicaragua into line and mould the country in the image of what the US considers an acceptable 'democracy'

Peace, justice, reconciliation and an end to violence

On 16 May, the National Dialogue was inaugurated involving all parties to the conflict: the government, business sector, civil society organisations, students and academics. The dialogue is being mediated and witnessed by the Bishops' Conference. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and other regional and international organisations will also be involved.

The National Assembly has set up a Truth Commission, who with the support of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, will carry out a broad and transparent investigation to determine who was responsible for the deaths and acts of violence so that they can be held to account.

To date, the violence has largely been confined to urban areas on the Pacific side of Nicaragua. However, there are grave concerns that the instability could spread to rural and more remote areas with the highest levels of extreme poverty in the country. This would be dangerous as they were far more affected during the contra war of the 1980s and any political polarisation could reopen old wounds. This is where reconciliation and peace is cherished so dearly and has been so hard fought to achieve. For this reason, alongside other peace initiatives, the cooperative movement has been meeting with other sectors of the social and popular economy to set up a parallel round table to contribute to peace and reconciliation and to be active and organised to prevent the violence from spreading.

What are the major challenges that Nicaragua faces?

The past weeks have been a stark reminder of the economic, social and political fragility of Nicaragua. However, just as the country is capable of extreme polarisation, protest and social unrest it is also capable of peace and reconciliation as history has shown. In the most difficult times the country has pulled back from the brink and pulled together with tolerance and understanding.

Some sectors are calling for regime change; however, even some of those opposed to the government accept that this would cause an extremely dangerous power vacuum.

The challenge for the National Dialogue is not only to address questions of justice, peace and reconciliation, but also to put in place new foundations that ensure that economic growth and stability and investment in health, education, social programmes and infrastructure development are maintained and strengthened.

Impact on Link Activities.

These events, and the confusion and dangers have impacted on day to day life in the whole of Nicaragua. Travel is difficult, if not dangerous, with road blocks set up by dissident groups, many of them armed with various weapons. Our representative, Carmela Hernandez, lives in Leon, about 35 miles from El Viejo. We know there have been disturbances in Leon, and in Chinandega, which is a few miles south of El Viejo, as well as road blocks by armed groups. Our advice to Carmela is that she should avoid travel until such time as the situation improves and travel becomes safe. Until then it will be necessary to suspend our contact with the schools in El Viejo. We know that Carmela has been in telephone contact with a couple of the teachers in El Viejo so contact has not been completely lost.

It is difficult at this distance to arrive at a single reason or event at the root of the current situation. Two years ago the present government was returned with 75% of the vote. There has been some concerns about micro government by the present administration and the Link has experienced this with Government intervention in a proposed project from Norwich for young adults, originally supported by the local Council in El Viejo who were 'advised' by the Government that the local organisations that would run the project were unacceptable.

This is a very worrying time for all concerned and we can only hope that the situation will return to normal as soon as possible.

We will update this report at the Committee.

Ralph Gayton
Link Secretary
7thn June, 2018