

Women talking to women on Oxfam tour

Take 15 Canadian women, two trucks driving on unpaved roads in the sparsely populated mountain ranges of Nicaragua and you have the beginnings of an experience.

In March 1989, 15 women of various ages and backgrounds made the first all-women's Canadian Agricultural Study tour sponsored by Oxfam Canada. The object of the tour was to meet with the women of Nicaragua to exchange views and to learn first hand how they were dealing with the problems of a country devastated by war and economic depression.

But first a little background.

Geography

Of the five Central America countries, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua, the latter is the largest. It is 139,000 square miles, but it is the least densely populated at approximately 3,500,000. A high mountain range extends from north to south dividing the country. The only route across the mountains is a combination of road and boat, or by flying. Spanish is the language of the country although some English is spoken along the eastern coastal region.

The capital city is Managua. It is situated in the west where about 80 per cent of the population live. The main city in the east is Bluefields which was almost entirely obliterated in the most recent hurricane, along with the fishing fleet and dozens of bridges and roads.

Politics

Since the 1930's with the exception of a short time in the '60s, the country had been ruled by a member of the Somoza family. In 1979, Anastasio Garcia was overthrown because of dissatisfaction with the Somoza regime — poor handling of finances and actions of the elite National Guard. Political unrest followed.

After 18 months of civil war, the Somoza dictatorship crumbled. The Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN), with the support of the people won the struggle, forcing the U.S. Government backed Somoza into exile.

In 1981, former members of the National Guard, (known as Contras) operating from camps in Honduras and the mountains of Nicaragua began a

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counter revolution against the Sandinista government. The Contras are supported by funds from the U.S. Government, and have been joined by mercenaries and sympathizers.

The war escalated and regular raids were carried out. Whole villages were either occupied or destroyed by the Contras. Particularly vulnerable were remote farms on the Honduras border. Main targets were schools, consequently many young people died and young men and boys were kidnapped. (These were the peasants who farmed the land — the backbone of the export economy of the country.) Women as well as children had to take up arms in defense of farms and communities. Many were left maimed with little medical aid available.

The country is economically in a very weak position. Sixty per cent of the budget is being used for defense. The inflation rate is one of the highest in the world. The future does not look very bright as many are leaving, but the people left have hope and are willing to work and sacrifice for a better tomorrow.

When our group arrived in the country, the war had been cooling down. Monetary assistance to the Contras from the U.S. had been reduced since disagreement to the support was increasing. However, the Contras were still harassing the farmers by disrupting or sabotaging their equipment, harvesting and planting. Without production there is no money which in turn demoralizes the people.

We arrived the day before Women's Day and had the privilege of attending the celebrations. The partially roofed building held about 700 women who had travelled many hours to be there. (Travelling in rural areas is by foot or horse,

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A typical street in Nicaragua.



The mode of transportation for the women on the tour was this pick-up truck.