

Terror in Pantasma

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Rod Bush and Richard Schauffler, of the Institute for the Study of Labor and Economic Crisis, were members of a delegation to Nicaragua organized by U.S. Out of Central America (USOCA) in October 1983.

On Tuesday, October 18, 1983, the village of Pantasma in northern Nicaragua was viciously attacked by the CIA-backed *contras*, based in Honduras, who murdered 47 people and left \$2 million in damages to the town's economic infrastructure. For 13 hours the band of counterrevolutionaries, some 250 in all, plundered the village, killing, looting, kidnapping, burning. Like My Lai, this was one more brutal atrocity in a long line of atrocities by U.S. or U.S.-backed forces, committed in the name of "God, freedom, and democracy." And as in the case of My Lai, such tactics only indicate that the *contras* are a force whose will to fight is extremely tenuous because of the increasing demoralization within their ranks; and further, that such actions are not a sign of a confident force sure of victory, but of a desperate army attempting to claim a victory and inflict damage at any cost.

In dramatic contrast to the *contra* army, driven to insane cruelty by the contradiction of their mission—to destroy their own people—the citizens of Pantasma showed remarkable resolve:

Not one tear, not one lament, not one flower will there be in this valley for the death of our fellow peasants, teachers, and soldiers, our massacred people. The tears will now be the arms we will take up to destroy every one of the criminal Somocistas.

The first North Americans to witness in detail the full horror of Pantasma were members of a delegation organized by a national U.S. organization, USOCA (U.S. Out of Central America). We were on a week-long delegation and stayed an additional day to go to Pantasma and see firsthand what had occurred. Throughout the trip we had ample opportunity to witness the remarkable courage with which the Nicaraguans confronted their

difficulties. Everyone we met emphasized that they wanted us to witness their reality, to understand their struggle and the depth of their commitment. Most important, they wanted us to take what we had witnessed and convey it to the American people.

After a three-hour drive to Jinotega, our bus left paved roads with armed guards, climbed a ridge, and traveled down into the green valley of the Rio Pantasma. We could see Honduras in the distance. One key bridge was out, and our bus forged the river to get across. We talked to the people of Pantasma from early afternoon until late at night. As the story of Pantasma unfolded, what moved us as much as the horrors and atrocities was the determination of the people to persevere, to defend the achievements of their revolution, and to rebuild what had been destroyed.

The cooperatives at Pantasma had been models of agricultural production, in the very heart of the coffee region. *There was absolutely nothing of military significance in Pantasma!* The *contras* destroyed every tractor, every truck, a lumber mill, a school, a health center, the development bank, the office of adult education, and much of the new housing in the cooperatives. The attack was designed as part of the current CIA strategy to destroy the economic infrastructure of the country. It was also aimed at terrorizing the peasants just prior to the beginning of the coffee harvest. Coffee is Nicaragua's second most important export crop, and this year's harvest must succeed in order to earn desperately needed foreign exchange.

Buildings were still smoldering as we walked through the village; on the walls the slogans written by the *contras* with the blood of their victims were still visible. We learned that the attack began at 5:30 a.m., and that the largely unarmed civilian population of Pantasma, because of their geographical isolation, had to defend themselves for 10 hours before reinforcements arrived and drove the *contras* out of the area.

Apolonia López Díaz told us:

They came and seized us in our houses and took us hostage. They made us lie down on the floor; with a bayonet, they picked up my baby by her shirt and lifted her up. They said we were all militia and sons of bitches. They told us they were going to kill everyone in the cooperative because they didn't want to see people organized; they said we didn't belong on this land. We were told to leave the area or we would be murdered and our homes destroyed. You see how they attacked us. What they did has no name.

When the assault began there were three militiamen and one policeman on duty. Nonetheless, the *contras* were held at bay for hours by the fierce resistance mounted by civilians with rifles and handguns, who were trapped in the buildings where they worked. For others without arms, resistance took the form of placing their bodies between the *contras* and the facilities they sought to destroy, and refusing to allow them to be attacked. In this way the grain silos and a seed warehouse were saved.

Others defended themselves with words, attacking the ideological assumptions that sought to justify the *contras* as a political force in Nicaragua. One of the chief *contras* slogans is "God, Homeland, Liberty, or Death." Yet when they lined up a group of unarmed women to kill them, one woman challenged:

Why are you going to assassinate us? We are all Nicaraguans, a consecrated people. Jesus Christ is not inflicting this on us—it is you who have taken the word of God to assassinate us and humiliate us humble women. Jesus Christ died for the truth, and for the truth we will also die.

This courageous statement was a direct challenge to the ideological justification drummed into every *contra* recruit, the justification for their existence as a political force: if not for "God and Country" then for whom—this killing of unarmed people? Especially those *contras* from social backgrounds similar to that of the residents of Pantasma were vulnerable to this argument from unarmed people. On the other hand the brutality of the *contras* is directly traceable to their creation as a mercenary army by the CIA, under the political leadership of the Somocista National Guard. The combined tutelage of the murderously efficient CIA technocrats and the Somocistas deforms the *contras* as human beings—thus their characterization by the Nicaraguan people as "beasts."

The people of Pantasma stood up to defend what their revolution had accomplished. Carlos Vaquero, FSLN Political Secretary for the region, explained:

With the revolution, everything changed for them. They used to live up in the hills and plant with a hand spike. Now the best land, the flat land is theirs. The tractors we saw destroyed back there were used to prepare the soil. The cooperative had actually fulfilled 100% of their production plan, and they were happy about it. This cooperative had become a model for the area. After work the adults went to school because none of them learned to read and write under Somoza. Over there we also had a preschool, now it is ashes. Today we are preparing to clean up. We will rebuild in the same location the houses of the widows of this cooperative. There are 16 widows and 57 children without fathers here. We are their fathers, their uncles, their brothers—we are everything.

The spirit of the people and their determination not to be driven backward into illiteracy and exploitation echo throughout Pantasma. This spirit is in direct contrast to the destructiveness of the *contras*, who would destroy all that has meant a better life for the people of Pantasma—the schools, the cooperatives, the development bank, trucks, tractors, and so on. This indicates a profoundly backwards and reactionary outlook, which would literally restore the people of Pantasma—and all of Nicaragua—to the

conditions of hopeless poverty and powerlessness that existed under Somoza.

Mercedes Pérez García, whose slain husband was president of one of the cooperatives here, concluded our visit by telling us: "I believe that we are committed to continue the struggle, to fight as our *compañeros* fought, to pick up the guns they left when they fell—and to help increase production, which was their hope."