

Cultural genocide by the Sandanistas

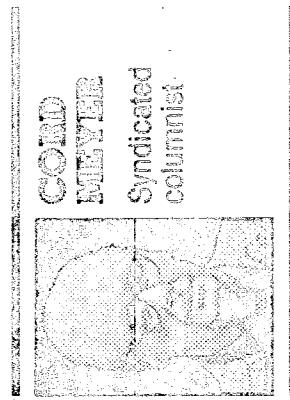
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WASHINGTON — Behind the recent admission by the Sandinista regime that it had to relocate 10,000 Miskito Indians forcibly from their native villages in northeast Nicaragua lies a tragic tale of two years of ideologically motivated brutality.

In a 20-page appeal to the Reagan administration and to all "organizations that claim to defend democracy," the young and charismatic leader of the more than 100,000 Miskitos, Stehman Fagoth, from his exile base in Honduras, has spelled out how the Sandinistas are committing a kind of cultural genocide against this proud Indian tribe that once ruled the Atlantic Coast of Central America.

Enjoying independence under their own king as a British protectorate until late in the past century, the Miskitos live in more than 250 self-governing communities, each with its council of elders and with land owned in common. Speaking their native language and English, they have long been devout, primarily Protestant Christians, and during the years of the Somoza dictatorship they were left alone to pursue their traditional ways by the Spanish-speaking, more populous western part of the country.

Largely untouched by the Nicaraguan civil war, the Miskitos



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welcomed the Sandinistas when they arrived after their victory in Managua in July, 1979. But the honeymoon didn't last long. As Fagoth describes it, there soon began "an entire people's struggle to preserve their identity, their customs, their community-type life-style in the face of attempted ideological-political penetration by Marxist Sandinism."

Fagoth says the Sandinista administrators, complaining at the "ideological backwardness" of the Miskitos, tried to break the power of the councils of elders by imposing Sandinista defense committees to control food distribution. They declared the communally owned land and forests to be state property. Traditional leaders were arrested, never to be seen again.

Most disastrous of all in this first phase of the repression was the literacy campaign run by the Marxist priest from Managua, Fernando Cardenal. Refusing to adjust

doctrine to reality, he imported hundreds of Cubans to teach the Indians to read and write in Spanish when most of them knew only English. The Cuban teachers so antagonized the Miskitos with their attempts to propagate anti-religious views that they eventually had to be withdrawn.

Taking one step back, as Lenin advised, the Sandinistas then recognized as the legitimate representative of the Indians a new organization, Misurasata. Fagoth was accepted as its leader and joined the Council of State in Managua. In a meeting December 19 with the top Sandinista leadership, he worked out an agreement to remove the defense committees from the villages.

When this agreement and all subsequent attempts to reach a compromise broke down in the face of Sandinista determination to nationalize communal property and to impose their party cadres on the villages, demonstrations erupted in September, 1980, in the major town of Estelzabal and were put down only with the help of Cuban troops. In February, 1981, Fagoth and 33 other Indian leaders were arrested and jailed in Managua on charges that they were "separatists, racists, imperialist reactionaries, and CIA agents."

Promising to go to Bulgaria for Marxist indoctrination, Fagoth

won his release from jail in two months and was warned by the interior minister, Tomas Borge, that the Sandinistas were prepared to eliminate the last Miskito in order to establish communism along the Atlantic Coast. Instead of going to Eastern Europe, Fagoth escaped to Honduras, where he leads a guerrilla movement of Miskito exiles.

Fagoth describes a series of massacres committed by Sandinista troops last December in Miskito villages, listing by name many of those killed. He remarks, "It reminds us of Stalin's arrival in Uzbekistan, populated by its native Uzbeks. History tells us that he had to massacre over 1 million in order to integrate them."

But these events described by Fagoth are taking place not in remote central Asia but in the United States' back yard. The Sandinistas have thrown a curtain of censorship around these bloody deeds. No U.S. television network has broken into this zone of silence.

Stehman Fagoth will be visiting Washington within the next two weeks to tell his story to the administration and the congressional committees. Here, at least, the media have a chance to give him the coverage he deserves.