

SPEECH DELIVERED BY RAY HOOKER ON THE OCASSION OF THE VISIT BY PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TROMSO TO URACCAN'S

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Throughout most of Nicaragua's history, two main streams of nationhood, sometimes flowing parallel to one another but many times savagely clashing with the other, have struggled to impose their patterns of culture upon each other. A cultural stream emerging from the tropical rainforest of the Atlantic and another spouting forth from the volcanic plains of the Pacific.

When the cultures of Europe clashed with those of America during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the way of life of the Indian population on the Pacific region of Nicaragua was destroyed. Spain imposed its religion, its language, and its oligarchic form of government and its patterns of production upon the peoples of the Pacific. Many of the vital sources of these Indian cultures were extinguished. This brutal imposition of Spanish way of life upon an Indian cultural background, which took place on the Pacific Region of Nicaragua and in most of Latin America, has been one of the two conflicting sources of Nicaragua's nationhood. Spain imposed upon its new offspring not only its language, religion and oligarchic institutions, but also the rivalry and antagonism it then felt to everything British.

The systematic extermination of people and culture carried out by the Spanish on the Pacific was widely known to the peoples of the Atlantic, where the clash of cultures was with the British. In this conflict of cultures two of the three Indian tribes of the Atlantic, the Sumu-Mayangna and the Miskitu, were able to retain many of the fundamental characteristics of their way of life such as language, patterns of production and social organization. The other tribe, the Ramas, has virtually lost its language but retained many of its patterns of production and social organization. Vital features of these cultures survived because the British needed their help in fighting the Spanish. The British found a very fertile ground in which to cultivate their "grapes of wrath" against everything Spanish, against Catholicism.

Against its will, the cultural wealth of Africa became intermingled in this volatile milieu, introducing diversity, strength and complexity into the Atlantic source of Nicaragua's nationhood.

A short while after the voyages of discovery an intense rivalry was unleashed among the European powers to be first to discover the natural waterway linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Further expeditions proved that no natural route existed and that the most feasible location for the construction of such an interoceanic waterway was across the territory of Nicaragua. Once the colonial powers became aware of the strategic importance of Nicaragua, an intense struggle was unleashed to acquire control of this country. Initially, the struggle was between Spain and England, later, between England and the United States. This savage struggle among the colonial powers for control of this interoceanic route has been a continuous source of suffering for the peoples of Nicaragua and has intensified and deepened the destructive and divisive interethnic conflict bequeathed to us by different colonial powers.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries England and the United States helped most of the Spanish colonies of North, South and Central America to gain their political independence, from Spain. This was how the Pacific region of Nicaragua, in 1821, formally but not in reality became an independent country. Nicaragua changed one master for another, a Spanish viceroy for an American consul. This was the beginning of the "Monroe doctrine", "America for the Americans".

The Atlantic region of Nicaragua remained a British Protectorate until 1894. The British deliberately instilled in the collective mentality of the peoples of the Atlantic region hatred and mistrust of Spain, of Spanish-speaking-peoples and of Catholicism. It was not difficult to do this, in fact it was relatively easy to accomplish because the genocide which the Spanish had inflicted upon the indigenous peoples of the Pacific at the moment of contact was ever present in the minds of the indigenous people of eastern Nicaragua. In their story-telling-sessions around the campfire the savagery inflicted by the so called "conquistadores" upon their brothers and sisters from the Pacific was transmitted from generation to generation. This terrible wound has never been healed.

In 1894, Jose Santos Zelaya, the President of Nicaragua, organized an army to conquer the Atlantic region of Nicaragua. This army was defeated in Bluefields and expelled from the region by the people of the region. Faced with such a military disaster, President Zelaya asked the United States Government for help. Naval units of the United States were promptly dispatched to Bluefields. These combined forces of the United States and Nicaragua conquered the region in the name of Nicaragua. The Atlantic Coast then became a colony of the Pacific Coast of Nicaragua. To be the colony of a country is to be in a very unfavorable position. But to be the colony of a colony is much worse. Remember that in Nicaragua at this time it was the United States Ambassador who decided what was to be done in the country, who would do it and when it should be done. For more that twenty years all schools in the region were closed. The policy of the government was to keep the people ignorant and illiterate in order to more easily impose upon them the selfish aims of the ruling clique.

The best lands in the region were distributed among the ministers of the government, the friends and relatives of the President and other high-ranking governmental officials and officers of the army. All jobs and positions of any importance in our region were assigned to the Spanish speaking people from the Pacific region of Nicaragua.

Spanish was imposed as the official language of the Atlantic and all transactions, had to be carried out in this language.

The abundant mineral and forestry resources of the region were given in concession to American companies. In a fifty-year period of time these Mineral and Forestal Resources were virtually wiped out. The indigenous and Afro-Caribbean people of the Atlantic Region became a poor landless people in their own land. A people deprived of their freedom, their language and of hope. A people without a future.

For the people of the Atlantic Region this was a period of suffering as they had never suffered before. They became alienated from their true selves. A life-protecting mask was imposed upon their natural spontaneity. They were forced to constantly live a lie. This experience deepened the division between the peoples of the Pacific and the Atlantic.

The Atlantic Region was regarded by the ruling clique in Managua as a backward but valuable reservoir of camouflaged wealth which they could rely upon after they had squandered the treasures which they now had at their disposal, During this period of occupation of the Atlantic by the Pacific, no roads were built to facilitate the exchange of goods and the mutual interaction of people and ideas. Education and health services depended upon the limited capacity of the different churches established in the region. Unfortunately, the main area of concern of these churches was the quality of life after death and not the present human predicament. Therefore most of the people were illiterate, infant mortality was very high and in the few schools which existed it was taboo to question the justice or injustice of the situation. The people were isolated from the population of the Pacific and had practically no contact or knowledge of the outside world. The people in government, the ruling class, coveted the gold, the silver and other natural resources of the region but regarded the indigenous people and Ethnic Communities as a disturbance, an obstacle, a threat, a plague which should be exterminated.

Beginning in the 1930's The Somoza family took control of the government of Nicaragua. They ruled Nicaragua as their private farm. The Somozas became one of the richest families of the world. They ruled Nicaragua with an iron fist for more than fifty years.

After a long-lasting and bloody struggle, the Sandinistas overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in July of 1979. Most of the people of the Atlantic Coast did not participate in the war to get rid of the Somozas. They felt that this was a conflict between two Spanish speaking groups, mutually exterminating one another, in order to seize control of the instruments of political power of the country. The majority of the people from the Atlantic Coast felt that for them, this was a no-win situation.

After the triumph of the Sandinistas, the people of the Atlantic Coast did not know what to expect from the Sandinistas. They had no illusions about the new government. After a year's experience with Revolution, most of the people were pleasantly surprised by the new policies and programs. The number of teachers doubled. Schools were established in the most inaccessible village of the tropical rainforest. Scholarships were provided to all students who needed them. Mobile aquatic health programs were made available to all communities on a

pre-arranged schedule. Community development programs were initiated. Both land and aquatic transportation was improved and ambitious programs of industrial development were launched.

Then Ronald Reagan won the presidential elections in November of 1980. Immediately after his inauguration in January of 1981, he unleashed his program to destroy the Nicaraguan Revolution. Attacks were launched upon targets chosen by officials of the United States Government. Most of these targets were health clinics, schools, agricultural cooperatives, boats taking food and medicine to different communities, doctors, nurses, teachers working in the different programs to provide a better way of life for the people. The towns established along the Rio Coco River were especially targeted by groups trained, armed and equipped by the CIA.

The revolutionary leadership did not know how to respond to these murderous attacks. After an intense debate within the party, it was decided to respond militarily to this situation. The decision was taken to resettle in Tasba Pri, the communities established along the banks of the Rio Coco River, the Wangki River, which served as a natural boundary between Nicaragua and Honduras. This was the biggest mistake made by the Sandinistas in their dealings with the peoples of the Atlantic Coast. The Sandinistas had made other mistakes, but none with the devastating repercussions as this resettlement program.

All resettlements programs are violent. This program was carried out with a minimum degree of physical violence. Eleven people were killed, four Sandinista soldiers and seven of the people who were being resettled. Emotionally and spiritually it was a very cruel and heart wrenching experience for the people involved. They were provided, in Tasba Pri, with better housing, better schools and health facilities, than they had in their communities. But in spite of these benefits the people was always dissatisfied with their situation.

After the elections in 1984, when they were allowed to choose whether to stay in Tasba Pri or to return to their communities, they all decided immediately to return to the Wangki River. By the year 1984 the territories of the Caribbean Region of Nicaragua was an immense battleground. The revolutionary government controlled only the cities of Bluefields and Bilwi.

At the end of 1984, after an intense process of introspection, the revolutionary leadership acquired a better understanding of the reality of the Atlantic Coast and came to the conclusion that the military response was inadequate, that a new and more ambitious approach was needed in order to have any possibility of introducing qualitative changes in the way of life of the people of the Atlantic Coast, and to pacify the region. This was the birth of what we have called "The Autonomy Process", the process through which, for the first time in our dealings with the Government of Nicaragua, it was legally recognized that the peoples of Caribbean Nicaragua were entitled to exercise special political, social economic and cultural rights in the territories where they have traditionally lived.

By political rights we mean that the peoples of the Atlantic region will actively participate in the law-making-process, in the election of their own leaders in honest, fair and free elections and that they will also be entitled to occupy positions of leadership both at the regional and national level.

By economic rights we refer to the prerogative of the people of the Atlantic Coast to rationally and intelligently manage on a sustainable basis the natural resources of the region and also for the first time in our history, to enjoy the benefits from the correct management of these resources.

We define cultural rights as the direct participation of the peoples of the Atlantic Coast in the creation and establishment of an environment, a way of life, in which the daughters and sons of the Atlantic will learn to be proud of their physical and spiritual characteristics and of their culture, without being ashamed of their essence as was the case before July of 1979. A program of bilingual-intercultural education is an essential ingredient in the establishment of this environment.

Autonomy should not be understood as a backward plunge into something inferior. Rather, it must be a leap forward to a higher stage of human fulfillment.

The conviction is that Autonomy for the peoples of the Atlantic Coast would lead to greater self-pride and the strengthening of the weakened identity structures of our people, which is a prerequisite if major transformations in a society are going to be introduced.

Without an abundance of self-pride the creative forces of human beings are repressed. When creativity is absent it is very difficult, if not impossible, to carry out revolutionary transformations. The task of making a better human being requires new ways of doing things, new approaches. The job of transforming second-class human beings, whose identity system has been ravished by the impact of centuries of oppression and exploitation into first class citizens, is a task that requires intelligence, creativity, dedication and national sacrifice. Autonomy has been foreshadowed as a dim anticipation and hope in many instances of our history. It is a new awakening, a renewal of growth. We are struggling to make of autonomy an end of decadence and decay, and the beginning of a better tomorrow.

We did not delude ourselves in believing that Autonomy would magically solve the problems of the Atlantic. We were aware that there are deeply entrenched barriers to effective communication and mutual understanding among peoples.

Because Autonomy for many Nicaraguans is a journey into the unknown, certain apprehensions related to separatism exist. It is natural that this be so.

The exercise of the rights of Autonomy by the people of the Atlantic Coast is an integral part of the quest for national unity, nurtured by the cross fertilization of ethnic diversity. True culture must always respond to the social requirements of the times. In the case of Nicaragua, genuine national unity is indispensable if we are ever going to be able to successfully respond to the challenges of this selfish and cruel unipolar world in which a few, mostly from the north, enjoy the benefits that are harvested from the toil and sweat of workers from both south and north.

One of the fallacies of many thinkers has been to regard the presence of ethnic diversity within the nation state as inimical, as antagonistic, as the enemy of national unity. We sustain the contrary. We affirm that a new national harmony will emerge from Autonomy. We know that genuine, authentic national unity, in which mutual understanding and ever-increasing levels of self-respect and esteem are continuously nurtured and encouraged, cannot be achieved through the barrel of a gun.

We also know, that the exercise of political or economic rights in isolation is not sufficient to heal the physical and spiritual wounds of a people who have become alienated from their true selves as a result of historical oppression. We are convinced that only a comprehensive program in which political, economic, social and cultural rights are simultaneously carried out, will have any possibility of successfully building a better homeland. Such a program is very expensive, but it is even more tragic and costly not to do so.

One of the main tasks which must be accomplished by such a comprehensive program, is the eradication of the slave mentality out of those who have had to live under such terrible circumstances. It is relatively easy to legally abolish slavery. What is much harder to do is to extinguish the slave mentality out of the minds of people who have never enjoyed the fruits of freedom. The task is made more difficult because not only must we struggle to extirpate the slave mentality out of those who were previously enslaved, but simultaneously, we must also find a way to extinguish the master mentality out of the minds and lives of those who were taught to regard themselves as master of their universe, as superior human beings.

THE HUMAN CONDITION IN THE AUTONOMOUS REGIONS

Since 1894, there has been a constant deterioration of the human condition in the Autonomous Regions. Before the forceful annexation of our region to this country the people of Caribbean Nicaragua were prosperous. There was food in abundance; every family had its own home.

The minerals had not been depleted. Verdant forest extended over the entire territory, and there was an abundant supply of Marine life. People and ideas moved freely from community to community and the extended family was a tightly knit unit. The communities were self-sufficient and the people lived in harmony with their environment. Conflict and differences among peoples and ethnic communities existed. But in the majority of cases these differences were solved through dialogue and compromise.

One hundred and ten years, or if you prefer, five scores and one decade after this forceful annexation, what is the situation of the human Condition in the Autonomous Regions? This region is now a disaster area.

- 1) The municipalities of Nicaragua with the greatest levels of poverty and extreme poverty are those of the Autonomous Regions.
- 2) The highest levels of illiteracy in the country are those of the Autonomous Regions.
- 3) The highest rate of joblessness in Nicaragua is that of the Autonomous Regions.
- 4) The region of the country with the least amount of paved highways is Caribbean Nicaragua.
- 5) The region of the country that has the least access to the National electricity grid is the Atlantic Region.
- 6) The cost of living in the Autonomous Regions is higher than that of the rest of the country.
- 7) The tropical rainforest of the region has been savagely devastated.
- 8) The marine life is being wiped out.
- 9) The seaports of the region which should be the best in Central America, are the worst in the country.
- 10) The overwhelming majority of the people of the region does not have access to safe drinking water.
- 11) The consumption of drugs and the drug trade is proliferating in the communities.
- 12) And the main sources of income for many families of the region are the remittances sent to them by their children and relatives who were forced to leave our region and country because of the generalized situation of joblessness in the Autonomous regions.

Ladies and gentlemen: This is a true portrait of the human condition in our region. This is the savagery that the central governments of Nicaragua have inflicted upon us and this is what we have allowed them to do to us.

What can be done? What must we do to remedy this situation? What can we do to help provide the opportunities to our people's and ethnic communities to build a better life, a more prosperous Atlantic Coast? A region where we'll reestablish the harmony that once existed between Mother Nature and our people.

First: We who are legally entitled to the rights of Autonomy must fully understand that the people from the Pacific Region of Nicaragua are from other parts of the world are not going to build a better Atlantic Coast for us. It is we the Miskitu, the Mestizo, the Sumu-Mayangna, the Rama, the Creole and the Garifuna who must immediately begin the difficult task of building a brighter future for our children and our children's children.

Second: We who are legally entitled to the rights of Autonomy must fully understand that the task of transforming our regions into a land of wealth and opportunity is a very difficult task which government alone cannot do; which private enterprise cannot do; which a single people cannot do; which foreign companies are not going to do; which political parties cannot do and which the churches alone cannot do. This is a complex, difficult and a long term undertaking which will require sustained unity of effort from us all. This is a life or death task for our cultures which will require a certain degree of help and support from the rest of the country and from our friends from abroad and intelligent, long range policies of the regional and central governments, which promote sustainable development and discourage abuse, corruption and irrational exploitation of our human and natural resources.

Ladies and Gentlemen: the task of building a better homeland is a difficult task. It is a task that has to be completed by more than one generation. It is a task, which requires levels of multiethnic unity that we have never had before. It is a task, which requires unheard of levels of trust and mutual understanding among all our peoples and ethnic communities.

It is a task that can only be accomplished by all of the people of both Autonomous Regions, those actually living in the region, and those, who in most cases against their will, are now living and working in other parts of the country, in other parts of the world. The costefios, who are now living out of the region, have acquired skills, knowledge experience and economic resources that are indispensable in the building of this better homeland. Many of

these Costenos and Costenas living abroad, probably understand the world of Globalization better than we do. On the other hand, we who have remained, probably understand the actual conditions of our region better than they. We complement each other very well. Certain barriers of Mistrust, which has developed between those who have remained in our region, in spite of the difficulties, and those, who in many cases, against their will, decided to leave, must be extinguished. These differences, which keep us apart, must be obliterated. The ties that bind us together must be strengthened. Our common heritage and our never-ending commitment to a better Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, must be accentuated and reinforced. Differences will persist, but the lasting ties of sisterhood and brotherhood must knit us tightly together, so that we can jointly build this better homeland.

Third: We who are legally entitled to the rights of Autonomy must immediately assume all of the responsibilities which must be carried out by us according to the laws of this Nicaragua such as the constitution of Nicaragua, The Law Autonomy and Its Rules and Regulation, Law 445 or the Law of Land Demarcation of the Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Communities of the Autonomous Regions. The Law of Languages and other laws of this country, which have been passed by our National Assembly since 1986. In no other country of Latin America are the legal rights of Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Communities as well protected as they are in Nicaragua. Nicaragua's legislation in protection of the rights of Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Communities is very progressive. Our problem is not a problem of Law. Where we have failed is in the implementation of the Laws which have been passed by our national assembly to protect our rights. The Central Government is partly responsible for the failure of implementation of these laws. But we, who are entitled to the rights of Autonomy, are also to be blamed. We who are entitled to the rights of autonomy have not taken advantage of the opportunities opened to us by these laws. If we were to fully embrace these opportunities we could begin to build this better homeland. If we were to intelligently take advantage of these opportunities we would elect honest, capable and responsible leaders to the regional council, to direct the affairs of the Municipalities of Caribbean Nicaragua and to represent us in the national assembly.

We would begin to manage our forest and marine resources in a sustainable manner. We would stop the destruction of our forest and we would not allow foreign fishing boats to fish

illegally in our waters. If we were to intelligently take advantage of these opportunities, we would be managing and regulating all air, sea and land transportation in our region. We would be building the roads and highways in the land of autonomy.

If we were to intelligently take advantage of these opportunities, we would be managing the health and education program, with their respective budgets, in our territory. We would be participating decisively in all planning of programs that the different Ministries of the National Government carry out in Caribbean Nicaragua. We would have already established a special fund for the development of the Atlantic Coast and we would be hard at work defining the boundaries of the lands of our communities and the extension of the territory of Autonomy, and not be talking about the need to take these measures.

Ladies and Gentlemen one of our major responsibilities is to make sure that our people begin to take advantage of these opportunities and to begin to build a better future for our peoples.

Ladies and Gentlemen: Major accomplishments have also been achieved as a result of Autonomy.

- 1) Two vibrant centers of Higher Education, Bicu and URACCAN, have been Established and are now functioning in our region with campuses and programs in Bilwi, Bluefields, Nueva Guinea, Siuna, Rosita, Bonanza, Waspam, Rama and Pearl Lagoon, providing higher educational opportunities to our people, practically free of charge.
- 2) Regional Political Parties, such as YATAMA, are now successfully competing for the minds and hearts of our people against the major National Political Parties.
- 3) As a result of pressures exerted by the people from the Autonomous Regions major legislation has been enacted by the National Assembly of Nicaragua in protection of the right of the peoples and ethnic communities of the Autonomous Regions.
- 4) Civil society in the region has been strengthened by the establishment and successful functioning of regional Non-Governmental organizations such as PANA-PANA, CEDEHCA, ADEPHCA and FADCANIC.

5) The Bilingual Intercultural Educational Program has been strengthened in spite of initial opposition from the Central Government.

6) Progress has been made which hopefully will lead to the functioning of the Regional Autonomous health and Education Systems.

7) Support for Autonomy is much greater today than it was in 1984. All major National Political Parties functioning in the region claim that. They support Autonomy. All Regional Political Parties are Committed to Autonomy.

8) Constant pressure is being exerted upon the Central, Regional and local governments and upon elected regional officials to make them do more, to forward the cause of Autonomy.

9) The Professionalization Program of Untitled Primary Teachers that is being carried out by different organizations and institutions working in both Autonomous Regions.

Ladies and Gentlemen: We have begun to walk upon freedoms Highway, but the road ahead is slippery and dangerous and we'll be challenged as we have never been challenged before.

Thank you ladies Gentlemen, thank you Brothers and Sisters, Friends from abroad, this land is also your land, welcome to the land of Autonomy.