

Human rights trip to Nicaragua preceded expulsions

By MICHAEL POWELL
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MANAGUA, Nicaragua — Congresswoman Beverly B. Byron visited this country of political turmoil last weekend hopeful for solutions to human rights problems. Three days later any accomplishments may have disappeared.

Since her departure:

- The U.S. ambassador, Richard Melton, whom she met several times during the trip, is being expelled, and the United States is expelling Nicaragua's ambassador from Washington.

- The country's major opposition newspaper, La Prensa, where she visited directors Jaime and Cristiana Chamorro on Saturday, has been closed.

- Several U.S. diplomats she interviewed and worked with were labeled "persona non grata" by the Nicaraguan government and ordered to leave, following a demonstration outside Managua attended by her aide. "Almost all the embassy people ordered out," Mrs. Byron said Tuesday, "are the people who associated with us."

- One of the country's influential opposition radio stations, Radio

EDITOR'S NOTE — Frederick News-Post Managing Editor Michael Powell and photographer Sam Yu flew to Managua, Nicaragua, with Congresswoman Beverly B. Byron Friday, July 8. They returned to Frederick, Sunday, July 10. This is what they saw.

Catolica, which was included in discussions with the country's Roman Catholic cardinal, was closed.

For Mrs. Byron and three other representatives, the quick three-day trip here may have turned into the first chapter of the most volatile events in this country since the peace talks of just under a year ago.

"I thought it was strange when we left. No press at the airport. No diplomatic courtesy. Not having a meeting with the Sandinistas," she said Tuesday.

The trip had been planned to investigate allegations of human rights violations in Nicaragua, and included an agenda of meetings with anti-Sandinista groups and a "promise" of a meeting with the vice president of the communist Sandinista government. The four representatives met, however, only with anti-Sandinista groups and left Managua Sunday with the Nicaragua government obviously angry.

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Human rights trip to Nicaragua

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The group, for example, was not given the normal diplomatic courtesy of moving through customs quickly but, instead, was processed as normal travelers.

"It's the first time they've been like this," said Mrs. Byron before boarding the U.S. military plane. "And it's the first time we've never been able to meet with the Sandinistas. They are unhappy with us, whether it's because of the demonstration or our visit or what, they are unhappy."

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The diplomatic maneuvers on the part of the Nicaraguan and United States governments of the past two days stem primarily from the actions four days ago in a small town 40 miles south of Managua. It is called Nandaime and a group of 10 Americans went there to watch a planned, authorized demonstration by groups opposed to the Sandinista government led by Daniel Ortega.

It was a trip that was not attended by Mrs. Byron, but by her aide, Neil Dhillon.

The demonstration, which eventually turned violent and resulted in about 40 arrests of anti-Sandinistas, occurred in the small mountain town of cobblestone and dirt streets after much publicity in the anti-Sandinista press.

Mrs. Byron and Rep. Barbara Vucanovich, R-Nev., stayed in Managua to attend a Catholic church service with Mother Teresa, a last-minute arrangement when meetings with the Sandinista government were canceled.

Two other U.S. representatives, Thomas DeLay of Texas and Robin Tallon of South Carolina, decided to go to Nandaime, though State Department officials with the delegation as well as U.S. Embassy officials strongly urged them to stay away lest the United States be blamed for inciting the demonstrators.

Mr. Tallon and Mr. DeLay went,

however, much to the noticeable frustration of Mrs. Byron, who was said to have chastised them later. Mr. Tallon and Mr. DeLay waited until two U.S. vehicles — carrying five congressional staffers, two journalists and four embassy officials — left Managua. Then, the two representatives got in another U.S. vehicle and headed for Nandaime.

As the demonstration began, they tried to stay out of sight, sitting in a U.S. government vehicle with license plates indicating it was from the U.S. Embassy and parked on a Nandaime alley, to watch the demonstration. The other U.S. Embassy officials, congressional aides, and two journalists from The Frederick News-Post watched the demonstration. Two days later, Nicaraguan officials accused Mr. Melton and U.S. embassy officials of inciting the demonstration and, in fact, participating in it.

"It's unbelievable," said Mr. Dhillon. In an interview Tuesday, he said: "We were all there together, standing off to the side. People in the group would wave to one another just to stay together in the confusion. The next day the pro-government newspaper, Barricada, ran pictures on the front page of Americans with their hands in the air saying we were encouraging the demonstrators."

The photograph showed one U.S. Embassy official and one congressional aide, and the paper reported that they were raising clenched fists in the air and encouraging the demonstration.

During the demonstration, however, most of the arm waving was done to keep the U.S. group together. Hugh V. Simon, an embassy political officer who is being expelled, and Robert B. Murray, an assistant security officer who was in the photograph and who is also being expelled, told the U.S. group after they entered Nandaime to be aware that photographs would be taken of them.

"Don't be surprised to see your picture on the front page of a

Sandinista paper tomorrow describing you as an 'agent provocateur,'" joked one of the officials.

On Tuesday, Mr. Dhillon said the other person in the picture, identified as a congressional staffer, could be either him or Jim Kameen, an aide to Mrs. Vucanovich. Mr. Kameen said he was surprised at the attention drawn to the U.S. citizens at the demonstration. "We watched and took pictures. That was it." Trish Brink, a press aide to Mr. DeLay who was in Nandaime, said: "We were all just observers."

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Clockwise from the top are members of the Social Christian Party taking part in the anti-Sandinista rally in Nandaime, a town of about 1,000 residents 40 miles south of Managua. A Sandinista sculpture in Managua with the inscription "Only the workers and the peasants will last till the end." Rep. Beverly Byron (left) talks with Cristiana Chamorro (center) director of the La Prensa newspaper, and Humberto Charneco of the U.S. State Department. The Sandinistas shut the paper down for 15 days starting Monday. Members of the Jan. 22 Mothers of Political Prisoners give testimony before a U.S. congressional delegation investigating human rights abuses. The group is named for the date of their first march in 1987. Lino Hernandez (left), director of the Permanent Commission on Human Rights, talks with the delegation as U.S. Ambassador Richard Melton, who was expelled from Nicaragua Monday, looks on.

preceded expulsions

The diplomatic actions of the past two days were surprising, though somewhat confusing, following this congressional delegation trip that had drawn little attention from the media in the United States. In Nicaragua, however, the national press quickly picked up on the visit, with Mrs. Byron's picture, along with others, on the front page of *El Nuevo Diario*, a paper supporting the Sandinista government.

Arriving in Nicaragua, embassy employees and the congressmen talked about cooperation from the government but then eventually found

that their plans to tour a state-run prison were canceled. A scheduled meeting with Sandinista Vice President Sergio Ramirez was canceled.

The Roman Catholic cardinal of Nicaragua complained about the pro-Marxist government of Daniel Ortega during a private meeting with the representatives, their staffs and some embassy officials.

So the delegation spent its time with people who oppose the present government or conditions in the country. The people, said Mrs.

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Byron, are warm and friendly, but often seem to avoid U.S. citizens.

Mr. Melton, on Friday, the day the delegation arrived, told the group before they entered bullet-proof American-made vans that would take them to Managua's largest hotel that "the people here are amazingly friendly, when you figure we're here to overthrow their government."

Two days later the Nandaime demonstration of about 4,000 people led to a violent confrontation with Sandinista soldiers, and to accusations that the Americans fueled it. And two days after that Mr. Melton was ordered to leave the country.

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This was Mrs. Byron's sixth trip to Nicaragua. Each time, she said, it changed a little bit.

"It was little noticeable things," she explained. For example, Mrs. Byron, an avid jogger, seldom gives up her morning run no matter what part of the world she is visiting. That held true for Nicaragua, where, on Saturday morning, she took a quick 1½-mile run.

"I've gone the same way before, like last January. And it changes. The sidewalks, for example, are in worse shape. You go out at dawn and run through the streets and it's quieter. There are fewer people, fewer animals."

One U.S. embassy official, hearing Mrs. Byron description, added: "Managua is just slowly sinking — the people, the spirit, the buildings. Little is ever repaired, not streets, not buildings, certainly not the people."

And Mrs. Byron is aware of criticism that can come with frequent trips. There is usually an elaborate agenda of protocol and meetings with organizations which oppose the present government of Daniel Ortega. The recent trip was no exception, and, in fact, many of the people and places Mrs. Byron and the three other representatives visited were a repeat of past trips. "The idea," said Mrs. Byron, "is to see the changes, to see what it was like here before and compare it to now."

But she's aware that congressional trips to world hot spots are almost routine. Nicaragua is no exception, especially with the attention from President Reagan and Congress to support the Contras (aid, however, was withdrawn earlier this year) that oppose the Ortega government. In fact, embassy officials said that during 1987 there were about 50 "codels" — congressional delegations — to Nicaragua. Mrs. Byron said she has "a tremendous number of constituents who come down here with something like

Witness for Peace."

At a meeting with embassy employees, Mrs. Byron, along with Mrs. Vucanovich, R-Nev., joked about the frequency of the congressional visits. Mrs. Vucanovich, talking with the employees, matter-of-factly asked, "What do you think about us coming?" Before anyone could answer, Mrs. Byron piped in: "That we come too often." That brought laughter, and Mrs. Vucanovich added, "We know we come too often. We know that's got to be a burden on the embassy."

But only a small part of the embassy staff was visibly geared up for the congressional visit. One political officer said they take turns handling the "dignitaries," who usually come on weekends. Jan Hartman, a press attache to the embassy who arrived only two months ago from assignment to the U.S. Embassy in Somalia, said: "I've been here two months and all the itineraries are the same. They visit the cardinal, visit opposition businessmen, visit La Prensa." In fact, the trip last weekend included those three stops, along with more than a dozen others.

But all the stops had one common thread — they were with organizations, businesses or people who oppose the Ortega government.

"We came here expecting to also meet with a high government official," said Mrs. Byron, referring to Mr. Ramirez. Mrs. Byron wanted the meeting with Mr. Ramirez to ask about human rights violations, the purpose of the visit. "I've been troubled since being here five months ago about the increase in the number of prisoners. We hope our concerns about that can be heard." They were not, and after arriving back in Washington, Mrs. Byron said that fair and just trials in Nicaragua are "nonexistent," and that Nicaraguan citizens are picked up off the streets "by the secret police because they look suspicious."

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For Mrs. Byron the trip to Nicaragua was expected to be hard work. At one point, on Saturday, she explained: "We've been here just 24 hours and already I've had 11 meetings." Her husband, Kirk Walsh, accompanied her but often found himself sitting on the sidelines during meetings. Mrs. Byron said she was looking for information on

human rights violations because of a resolution now before Congress that asks for a general amnesty for political prisoners.

At meetings she constantly took notes, asked questions and looked for new information. For example, in addition to talking with people previously scheduled to meet with her and the other representatives, Mrs. Byron sought out strangers for questions.

Mike Donovan, a State Department official who accompanied the group on the Nicaragua trip, said: "Mrs. Byron has experience that the co-sponsors (of the resolution) don't have. She's been here before. Some of the people here, in the government and not, are very cagey and she can help spot them and smell out the red herring."

The latest trip was not part of her work on the House Armed Services Committee, but was, instead, a special delegation backed by the White House, Mr. Donovan said. Funding for part of the trip came from the National Forum Foundation.

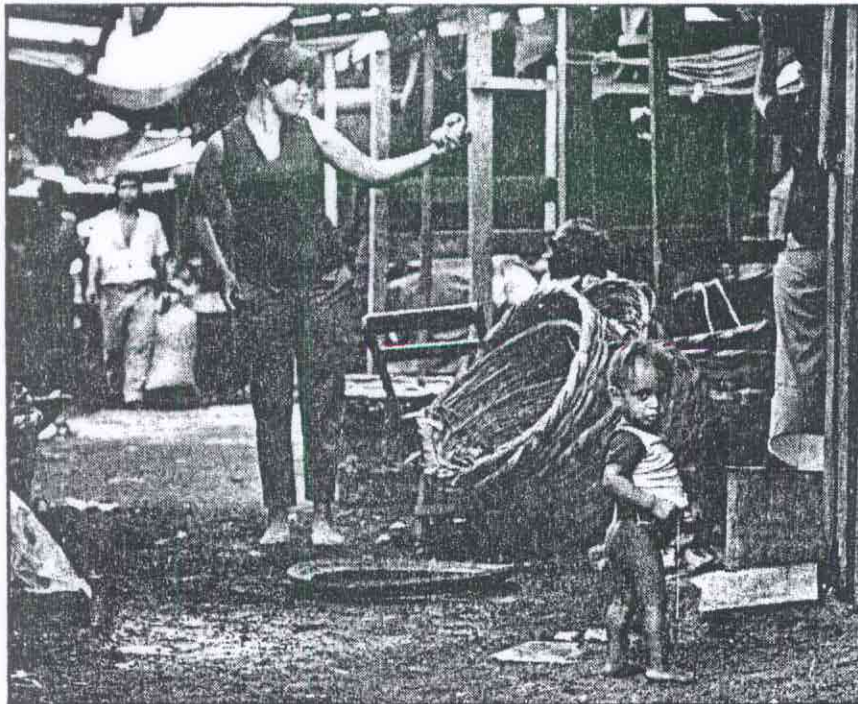
Although she was the most senior of the four representatives going to Nicaragua, the delegation leader was Mr. DeLay. Also, Mrs. Byron had tallied five previous trips to the country,

more than the other three. She also has been to other Central American countries, such as the trip to monitor elections in El Salvador several months ago.

"It's that kind of experience that counts," said Mr. Donovan. Mrs. Byron still enjoys talking about the El Salvador trip. There her finger was dipped in silver nitrate to show how the country indicates that someone has voted. She still has the mark on her fingernail. It was in El Salvador that the building she stayed in had only water to shower or flush the toilet for 10 minutes a day, where the dishes were washed in a swimming pool, and "where we paid \$100 a night."

On the plane ride to Nicaragua she told stories of past trips, including one to Honduras where she went into the country and walked with Contra troops along jungle trails and across the border into northern Nicaragua.

During a meeting in the poorest section of Managua with mothers whose husbands or sons have been taken prisoner, she placed a 10-year-old girl on her chair and was told her brother was a prisoner. Mrs. Byron gave her a House of Representatives pen and her U.S. congressional name tag.



Staff photo by Sam Yu

In the Eastern Market of Managua, Nicaragua, a small child plays in squalor. The country is currently in economic and political turmoil.