

We are writing to raise concerns about distortions and inaccuracies as well as the tone of your article of Monday 6 November titled 'Nicaragua climate politics in hot water over canal plan'.

The sub-title of your article rightly highlights the fact that Nicaragua took a principled stand to reject the Paris Agreement as being too weak. Yet you then refer to Nicaragua as sharing 'pariah' status with the US and Syria, thereby associating the country with the climate change denying Trump administration, which is very misleading and confusing.

By focusing on the Nicaraguan government's alleged hypocrisy and environmental protection failures, the article loses sight of the wider historical, political and social context.

As the second poorest country in the western hemisphere (you erroneously wrote 'the northern hemisphere') with a high level of vulnerability to climate change, Nicaragua epitomises the complex challenges of confronting this phenomenon, while at the same time addressing entrenched high levels of poverty caused by centuries of under-development. Despite the socio-economic measures introduced with considerable success by the FSLN government since returning to power in 2007, 25% of the population – 50% in rural areas – still live below the poverty line.

Given this background it would seem totally justifiable for the Nicaraguan government to demand greater political will and action on the part of those most responsible for causing climate change: the industrialised countries of the North.

Nicaraguan environmentalists are right to 'urge the government to halt deforestation, tighten controls on miners, and help communities adapt to climate impacts'.

However, these demands, as with other such arguments in your article, are very misleadingly and simplistically presented as if the government is doing nothing to address them, which is not the case. Nicaragua's rapid conversion to renewables - from 25% renewables in 2007 to 52% in 2017 - is just one such example.

As you rightly point out, deforestation is a major problem in Nicaragua with the annual loss of 70,000 hectares against only 15,000 hectares being reforested. One of the areas where this is a huge issue is in the remote area of north-east Nicaragua, a region where the FSLN government has been an international pioneer in granting land rights to 200,000 indigenous people. However, deforestation and conflicts in the region are having a devastating impact and the government simply does not have sufficient resources to adequately enforce laws across a vast area of 6.2 million hectares.

Again, Nicaraguan environmentalists are right to highlight the huge environmental and social damage the construction of an interoceanic canal might entail. However, the government and the trade unions argue that the project is the only way to lift the country out of centuries of under-development and high levels of poverty, and that the vast reforestation programme planned to accompany it, amongst other measures, will protect the environment nationally.

And anyway at the moment the project is nothing more than a plan - this is something that should have been made clear to your readers - at best stalled pending further studies recommended in the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment, including an economic feasibility study.

But we are particularly concerned about misleading claims in the penultimate paragraph. You claim that 'Campaigners against the canal ... say they have suffered violence and intimidation. Human rights watchdog Global Witness ranks Nicaragua as the most dangerous country for environmental activists per capita with 11 killed last year.'

These claims originated in a Global Witness report published in July 2017, entitled 'Defenders of the Earth: Global killings of land and environmental defenders in 2016.' But Global Witness irresponsibly conflated two completely separate issues, the planned interoceanic canal across the south of Nicaragua and land disputes in the extreme north-east. It is correct to claim that there have been deaths in the north-east of the country, but these relate to violent clashes between indigenous people and settlers over disputed land claims. But there have been no killings at all related to over 100 protests against the planned canal. It is regrettable that you have again repeated this inaccuracy.

For the reasons we outline above, we believe it is misleading and patronising to suggest Nicaragua is guilty of hypocrisy and has therefore abdicated its moral and political right to make demands of the largest polluters.

We hope that you will either correct or withdraw the article and/or publish our response.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards

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Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign Action Group