

Presentation by Coleen Littlejohn, 13 February 2021

Good morning to all from Managua, my home base for the past 41 years and where, every four years, I follow the US presidential elections in the hope that something will change with respect to US foreign policy towards this incredible country. But it is hard to break traditions of over 160 years ago, when William Walker first invaded Nicaragua to try to annex the country as a slave state to the US prior to the civil war.

Recently, President Biden's team announced their priorities for Central America, concentrating on the "northern triangle" countries of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, in order to address severe problems of corruption, poverty and violence, and to stop people fleeing to the North. Nicaragua doesn't really qualify. Nicaraguans don't join the marches to the US via Mexico. Nicaragua has the lowest homicide rate in Central America, no gangs or cartels running the country and multilateral funders without exception have respected the transparent management and the results of their loan portfolios. Poverty rates have decreased considerably and the country is ranked fifth in gender equity worldwide.

Nevertheless, right before he left office, Donald Trump renewed sanctions, against Nicaragua, stating that the country remained an unusual and extraordinary threat to US national security and foreign policy. The United Kingdom and the European Union followed suit.

Sanctions include financial and travel sanctions against many top officials of the government, but these have little or no personal impact. However, it has meant changes in public administration to make sure that specific ministry financial transactions are not jeopardized. These sanctions also may have created uncertainty internationally with banks and potential investors, but it didn't stop the US investors who are now building a natural gas plant at the port of Corinto, which will help to decrease the use of imported petroleum. As a side note, last month, 88% of Nicaragua energy came from renewable sources and 98.5% of the population has electricity, a big advance from 16 years ago.

Individuals and organizations working on development projects have been affected though. For example, a community-based NGO I know that received ALBA funds for social projects lost their bank account and people are having problems opening new accounts, but a new consumer law just passed may provide some relief soon.

Another serious economic aggression was the approval of the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act, aka the NICA Act, in December of 2018. Its purpose was to block Nicaragua from development financing from the major multilateral funding agencies although pro-poor projects were to be exempt from the embargo. But even before the law was passed, the World Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank basically froze their programmes, under pressure from the US. IDB's last major loans were approved in December of 2017, although they continued with a series of small approvals, rarely over 1 million, until this past December. The WB approved a new

country strategy in March of 2018, along with three good sized projects, but then nothing until December of 2020 and again in this past January.

And the WB, the IMF and the IDB did NOT include Nicaragua in their initial emergency responses for the Covid pandemic, which meant that the Nicaraguan government had to deal with these issues with their general budget. Fortunately, about 60% of Nicaragua's budget goes to health and education and over the past 16 years, investments in new hospitals and clinics had strengthened the already well-developed community based FREE health system. But there were shortages of medicines, equipment and personal protective equipment well into 2020. Nevertheless, Nicaragua's strategic early response to the pandemic, using her own resources, has resulted in the lowest number of infections and deaths, and the highest recovery rate in the region whilst keeping all of its borders open under rigorous safety protocols.

Nicaragua was also not included in the initial multilateral emergency projects for Hurricanes ETA and IOTA, which were the most devastating hurricanes to hit Nicaragua in 40 years. But the government's very seasoned and efficient national system of disaster prevention and mitigation was activated a week before the first hurricane hit. 100,000 emergency volunteers were mobilized, 160,000 people evacuated, shelters established, equipped and supplied days earlier. No deaths were attributed to ETA but 16 died in IOTA, all related to people who refused to leave their homes or went back against advice. But It was not until last December and this past January that the WB and the IDB made more serious commitments to pandemic and hurricane relief.

The Central American Integration Bank has been the exception however, accompanying Nicaragua in the last few years with significant support, and now even more so in order to reactivate the economy and ensure that the region is provided with Covid vaccines. The responses have been in coordination with SICA, the Central American Integration System which has been the economic and political organization of Central American states since February of 1993. Working together on the pandemic has strengthened the relations between the countries, despite political differences. That unity and support also involved Caribbean neighbours, for example, the medical brigades that Cuba sent to Belize and Panama and the technical assistance to Nicaragua.

With the recent approval of new loans from the various multilaterals, and help from several other governments, not including the US, Nicaragua now has financing, though never enough, for continuing to combat the pandemic, for programmes to reconstruct post hurricane and for new pro poor programs to combat the negative effects of these disasters.

Ironically, there has been no shortage of US funding for the people and organizations who directed the terror campaign, manned the road blocks and shut the country down by not allowing trucks to pass through from Costa Rica to Honduras for over three months, all in an attempt to effect "regime change" starting in April of 2018. These so-called popular protests quickly turned into months of terror and destruction fed by years

of preparation and using social media to stoke the initial flames. Those three months caused more economic damage than the pandemic and the hurricanes combined.

The USAID 2021 budget for Nicaragua again includes funds “to support the restoration of democracy and human rights in the region”. Which means destabilizing and overthrowing the government if possible, or at least trying to get the very divided opposition to come together to win the national election this coming November. It even included financing for hiring a company to head up the destabilization plan. USAID funding for the opposition adds up to US\$ 102.27 million since 2017, a disturbing example of US intervention in another nation’s internal affairs.

The latest form of aggression of the US was the new maximum level 4 travel warning for US citizens issued last week, blaming the pandemic. On the same day, Nicaragua was awarded the Safe Travels Seal of Approval from the World Travel and Tourism Council in relation to Covid 19 Biosafety Protocols for tourists. It makes me think that the US does not want people to come to see for themselves what is happening here. The threat of a good example.

All of the above destabilization efforts through economic warfare and funding of third parties to destroy the Nicaraguan government have been the norm over the last 41 years, with the exception of 1990 to 2006, when a government approved by the US was in power.

One only has to remember the devastating economic strangulation and war during the 1980s when 50,000 Nicaraguans lost their lives. Nicaragua took her case to the International Court of Justice in the Hague in 1984. The Court found that the US was in breach of its obligations under customary international law not to use force against another country, not to intervene in its affairs, not to violate its sovereignty and a few other charges. The case was decided in favour of Nicaragua with the intent of awarding reparations to Nicaragua, estimated at 17 billion dollars. The US refused to recognize the court’s decision.

Nicaragua has been a supporter of international law, and has resolved major territorial disputes with Honduras, Costa Rica, and Colombia and has always respected and implemented the Court’s judgement. The US, on the other hand, sanctioned functionaries of the ICJ just last year.

Sanctions not only jeopardise ordinary people’s lives, but they constitute a violation of their human rights and in the current context of the pandemic, sanctions are tantamount to a crime against humanity.

I’d like to end summing up a statement recently made by Nicaragua’s Foreign Minister. He expressed the need to promote a green alliance between developed and countries that are trying to develop in order to face the combined consequences of climate change and the Covid 19 pandemic. The world urgently needs peace, security, stability and a new economic order which gives priority to life, health, and the fight against

poverty. We need a responsible and just world, with mutual cooperation. Where there is no room for unilateral, coercive, arbitrary and illegal measures, which some call sanctions but that the people of the world call aggressions, violations of international law and the Charter of the United Nations.

Thank you.