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Nicaragua: Repression of the Miskito Indians (U)

An Intelligence Assessment of

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Nicaragua: Repression of the Miskito Indians (U)

An Intelligence Assessment

*Information available as of 12 March 1982
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

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Nicaragua: Repression of the Miskito Indians (U)

laborers in the forestry and mining industries. Expert boatmen, much of their existence has traditionally been spent on and around water— either the ocean, where they capture sea turtles, or rivers such as the Coco, where they navigate their long dugout canoes, the only practical means of transportation in a forested, almost roadless land. (U)

Where Are They?

The Miskitos have given their name to the whole stretch of Caribbean coast from Honduras's Gracias a Dios Department southward through Nicaragua to the border with Costa Rica. By far the largest portion of this coast falls within the Zelaya Department of eastern Nicaragua, and it is there that most of the Miskitos live. Zelaya, together with part of Rio San Juan Department to the south, forms what Nicaraguans call their Atlantic Region—a vast territory that has always been physically and culturally distinct from the rest of the country. While accounting for half of Nicaragua's area, the region holds less than 8 percent of its population (see chart). (U)

The Nicaraguan Miskitos have, until recently, been concentrated along the middle and lower Rio Coco, which forms the border with Honduras, and along the coast from just south of Cape Gracias a Dios to Pearl Lagoon, about 30 miles north of Bluefields (see map). Traditionally, the Miskitos have lived in small villages but have frequented market towns such as Puerto Cabezas on the coast, Bilwaskarma, Waspam, Leimus, and San Carlos on the Rio Coco, and Bonanza and Sijuna in a mining area of the interior. (U)

How Many Are There?

Our estimate of 55,000 Miskitos in Nicaragua (before the recent exodus to Honduras) and 25,000 in Honduras is based on extrapolations from academic studies done in the 1970s, on US Bureau of the Census projections for the Department of Zelaya, and on informal surveys by missionaries. Precise figures are impossible to give because of the lack of accurate census data and the varying interpretations of what

Who Are the Miskitos?

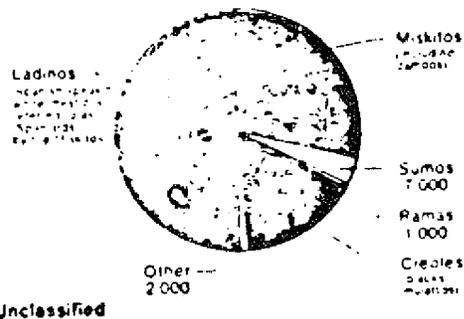
The Miskitos are believed to have migrated to their present habitat on the east coast of Central America well before European exploration of the Caribbean. Their origin is unclear, but linguistic similarities with the Chibcha Indian, of Colombia point to a South American derivation. The group now termed Miskito includes a large admixture of peoples of African ancestry—descendants of Jamaican blacks and of escaped slaves of earlier times who intermarried with the Indians. Besides the Miskito language, many also speak English and Spanish. In contrast to the vast majority of the Nicaraguan population, which is Roman Catholic, the Miskitos are mostly Protestants; Moravians comprise their principal denomination. (U)

The Miskitos pursue a life of hunting, fishing, and subsistence farming; some also are employed as wage

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constitutes a Miskito. The term is sometimes used only for persons of obviously Amerindian racial origin who speak the Miskito language and adhere to a typical Miskito lifestyle. At the other extreme it is sometimes used to include *sunibos* (mixed Indians and blacks) and even members of the other small east coast Indian groups, the Sumos and Ramas. (U)

Estimated Ethnic Composition of Zelaya Department



What Has Happened to Them?

Before the Sandinista revolution of July 1979, most Nicaraguan central governments paid scant attention to the Atlantic Region. Except during periods of estrangement between Nicaragua and Honduras, the Miskito Indians were free to pass back and forth across the Rio Coco with little regard for its function as an international boundary; some even lived on one side of the river and cultivated fields on the other. By and large, the Miskitos were content to be left alone by the government. Social services, health care, and education were left largely to missionaries—particularly Moravians. (U)

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The Sandinistas have, on balance, probably lost by their callous treatment of the Miskitos. Accounts—now being given by refugees at Mocomon—of murder, forced marches, burned homes, and desecrated churches have stiffened the resolve of those elements already opposed to the Sandinista regime and perhaps converted some of the government's erstwhile friends into enemies. The Sandinistas have further alienated the inhabitants of the remote Atlantic Region, which they are trying so hard to integrate with the rest of Nicaragua. (U)

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Distribution of the Miskito Indians in Nicaragua



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