

Rainbow Network surviving strife in Nicaragua

Linda Leicht, For the News-Leader Published 9:51 p.m. CT April 25, 2018 | Updated 9:56 p.m. CT April 25, 2018

Roads blocked in evening protests in Nicaragua's capital Video provided by AFP Newslook



(Photo: Rainbow Network)

As protests and rioting have shaken Nicaragua, The Rainbow Network has been able to continue to serve the more than 50,000 people in its “networks.”

Although its offices have had to officially close, and much of the staff in Nicaragua have had to “hunker down” in their own homes, the rural communities served by Rainbow Network have remained relatively calm. Community residents have been able to continue to keep their local schools and feeding centers operating, and the Springfield-based charity has been able to provide for emergency needs.

Megan Munzlinger, director of development for Rainbow Network, just learned of one such emergency. Jerson Ruiz, a 3-year-old with severe seizures due to a cyst on his brain, needed the medication he takes to control the seizures. He was able to go to the Rainbow Network office at Ciudad Dario to get the medicine from the doctor there, she said.

However, the violence has had an impact on the organization. For the first time in its 23-year history, Rainbow Network had to cancel group trips planned for this month.



Elvin and Sayda Patricia Alfaro Rueda and their children, Idalia, Michael and Fernandita, stand in front of their new home — the 1,000th house that Rainbow Network has constructed since it began working in Nicaragua in 1996. Rainbow Network

The U.S. government issued a travel warning and ordered family members of American federal employees to leave Nicaragua. The notice said in part, “Political rallies and demonstrations are occurring daily, often with little notice or predictability. Some protests result in injuries and deaths. Demonstrations typically elicit a strong response that has in the past included the use of tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets, and live ammunition against participants and occasionally have devolved into looting, vandalism, and acts of arson.” Ability to purchase food and fuel may be limited, and access to the Sandino airport in Managua may be blocked. Both the Government of Nicaragua and the U.S. Embassy in Managua are limited in the assistance they can provide.”

Keith Jaspers, founder and president of The Rainbow Network, explained that the political unrest in Nicaragua has been brewing for a long time, erupting last week after a decision by the government to push through reforms to the national pension program that cut pensions and increased contributions. Student protests that began in Managua have spread across the country, including in Matagalpa, and now include the business community as well.



Rainbow Network takes a lot of mission teams to Nicaragua each year, where volunteers do a variety of things including building houses. Most are adults or families. Keith Jaspers, the nonprofit's founder, said to take a mission trip, you should have a heart for helping the poor. (Photo: Rainbow Network)

The protests reflect a deeper dissatisfaction with the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) government and President Daniel Ortega. With Monday night's protests directly calling for Ortega's ouster, it reflects Nicaraguan's perception that Ortega and the FSLN have created a "dictatorship" through constitutional changes, including allowing Ortega to serve more than two terms as president and heavy-handed response to any opposition, Jaspers said.

"A major political movement is taking place," he said. "In our country, we have processes to get rid of corrupt politicians or bad policies. Elections will eventually force changes. Not so in Nicaragua. They do not have personal representation in the government. Their national assembly cannot make any decisions or even recommendations. So, these types of demonstrations are the only way the people can make themselves heard, their only mechanism for forcing change. It would seem people have to die to force even minor policy change."

Rainbow Network has been working in rural Nicaragua since 1995, just as the civil war in Nicaragua was ending. A revolution from 1979 to 1990 had put the FSLN and Ortega in power. Ortega served as president from 1985-1990 and was elected again in 2007 with only 38 percent of the vote. Since then, with Sandinista magistrates in control, Nicaragua's Supreme Court disqualified opposition political parties and ruled that the constitution did not limit presidential terms. In the 2016 election, Ortega named his wife, Rosario Murillo, as his vice president.



Nicaragua (Photo: USA TODAY)

Both police and Sandinista Youth have responded to the most recent protests, leaving at least 30 people dead, including a journalist shot in the head while transmitting live on social media, and many more are reported missing. Looting and other violence have also been reported. Official news reports have been limited, with the government censoring the media, but social media has provided a platform for the protestors to get the word out about their cause.

On Sunday, Ortega announced that the government would withdraw the pension changes and called for negotiations to find a new solution to the economic problem. But he rejected demands to free detained protesters, withdraw the police and lift some censorship of the news.



People push carts with goods after looting a supermarket during protests against the government's reforms in the Institute of Social Security in Managua, Nicaragua, on April 22, 2018. (Photo: INTI OCON, AFP/Getty Images)

Samuel Reyes, a Rainbow Network employee in Nicaragua, reported that the Monday night protests were peaceful. “Thousands of Nicaraguans in every city of Nicaragua marched for peace (Monday), and no violence at all,” he said. While schools remain closed, some businesses and supermarkets have reopened.

Jaspers said he has been in contact with the staff in Nicaragua continually throughout the violence, getting hourly updates at one point. Tuesday, he was informed that some of the students have been released and others will be released soon. Also, his sources say that Ortega has ordered a pro-government march with government employees and students required to participate, which could create even more unrest.

Rainbow Network has a staff of more than 60 people, all Nicaraguans, in Nicaragua. The charity serves 164 rural communities in nine “networks” through its holistic program, which includes health care, education, economic development and housing. It is primarily supported through individual and church donations in the United States.

To learn more about Rainbow Network, visit RainbowNetwork.org.

Linda Leicht is a retired journalist who now does some work for The Rainbow Network. She has written a book “Over the Rainbow,” about the organization.