

Nicaragua after Felix

OUR OPINION: PROVIDE DISASTER AID TO PEOPLE WHO NEED IT MOST

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The death and destruction left in Nicaragua by Hurricane Felix last September is now being compounded by a political disaster: the growing complaints that the Sandinista government is distributing relief aid based on party loyalty.

Those rumblings should worry President Daniel Ortega. Nicaraguan governments have botched responses to a natural calamity before. He should know. The 1972 earthquake that destroyed Managua was the beginning of the end of Anastasio Somoza's dictatorship. Accusations that he distributed aid to partisans and skimmed millions of dollars of donated aid stoked support for the Sandinistas. When Mr. Somoza was ousted in 1979, Mr. Ortega took command.

This time around Mr. Ortega has been elected into office. Ideally, the millions of dollars of donated disaster aid should go to the people who need it, not just those who are politically connected. But devastated communities claim that the relief hasn't reached them, and complaints are growing louder.

The loudest protests come from areas that opposed and suffered abuses under Sandinista rule in the 1980s. Among them are the Miskito Indian communities, which were ripped by Felix. One complaint is that local Sandinista groups are using aid to recruit new party members.

The anger is starting to boil over. Last month hundreds of Miskito Indians seized airport warehouses looking for relief aid. Yet the Sandinista government has yet to directly respond to the complaints.

Now food prices are rising. Some fear dismal losses in the current harvests, higher prices and more hunger. Such a tinderbox benefits no government -- especially when the people in conflict, the Sandinistas and their opponents, were killing each other in a civil war only 20 years ago. Getting aid to people who need it is the best way to avoid history repeating itself.