

THE ORTEGA-MURILLO REGIMES WAR AGAINST  
THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CIVIL SOCIETY  
IN NICARAGUA: BISHOP ALVAREZ, POLITICAL  
PRISONERS, AND PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

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HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL  
HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZA-  
TIONS

OF

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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**Wednesday, March 22, 2023**

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL HUMAN  
RIGHTS, AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, JOINT WITH  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WESTERN HEMISPHERE,  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 4:00 p.m., in room 2200, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Christopher H. Smith (chairman of the Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations) presiding.

Mr. SMITH. The subcommittees will come to order.

And, first of all, let me welcome everyone to the joint hearing. I am joined by my good friend and colleague, Ms. Salazar, who is the chairwoman of the Western Hemisphere Committee, as well as Ms. Wild, who is the ranking member on my committee, the Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations Subcommittee.

And, Mr. Stanton, I think you will be filling in, I think.

Mr. STANTON. I am acting today.

Mr. SMITH. Acting. That is very good. We are all acting.

But thank you so much for joining us, and all of my colleagues who are here today and, of course, our incredibly distinguished witnesses, at today's hearing.

I want to convey my deepest thanks to Bianca Jagger, who is going to be joining us in a moment—she is an amazing human rights champion—and, once again, for her continued tenacious advocacy on behalf of the Nicaraguan people, including Archbishop Alvarez and other political prisoners.

Is the United States doing enough? Are we doing enough in Congress? Is the President doing enough? Frankly, I am concerned.

Yesterday, Owen Jensen, an EWTN correspondent, asked National Security Council spokesman John Kirby—and this is what his question was—Nicaragua is my question, OK. So you may know that Daniel Ortega recently threw into prison Bishop Alvarez, well-known, well-respected bishop throughout the world. He was thrown into prison for 26 years on trumped up charges.

The question: Are you aware of any efforts the United States is making to free Bishop Alvarez?

The National Security spokesman John Kirby responded: I am going to have to take the question and get back to you, sir. I am not tracking that particular case.

We all need to up our game. We all need to do more, and we need to do it immediately.

For the record, as co-chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, I convened a hearing on religious persecution as recently as December 22—December 2022, I should say, and then held another hearing focused on Nicaraguan political prisoners back in July 2021.

With great courage, eloquence, and resolve, Berta and Victoria, or Vicky, testified at the 2021 hearing about their suffering husbands, Felix Maradiaga and Juan Sebastian Chamorro, and other political prisoners, that they were enduring at the hands of Ortega. Berta told us that it was very clear that Daniel Ortega will do anything he can to maintain his grip on power. By arresting the leading Presidential candidates and dozens of other critics, Ortega has shown the world that he cannot win reelection if the opposition is allowed to participate.

The oppression is not news, she went on. For years, Felix has been the target of attacks by the Ortega regime because he speaks truth to power. He has been beaten, confined to house arrest, and threatened for months. He endured 24/7 surveillance by the police, she went on. Then again and again they tried to silence him, but he would never stand down.

Vicky then testified and said, since Juan's arrest, the Ortega regime has systematically violated all of his rights. We identified at least 10 violations of international law in their cases. Ortega has completely eliminated any due process rights and manipulated Nicaragua's justice system to maintain his grip on power.

Vicky then went on to say: Juan has always fought for Nicaragua. He has always wanted to be involved in improving his country, contributing to its economic and social development, so that all Nicaraguans can live prosperous and peaceful lives in dignity.

My husband, she went on, is a peaceful and honest man, but Daniel Ortega feels threatened by him because he dares to speak out against the regime's oppression.

Thankfully, Felix and Juan Sebastian were among the 222 political prisoners that arrived in the United States on February 9 of this year. However, in clear violation of article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they were stripped of their citizenship. Another 94 dissidents were also stripped of their Nicaraguan nationality. And today, at least 37 political prisoners continue to be unjustly incarcerated and grossly mistreated.

It is especially meaningful that these two men, these two giants, these two heroes, are here and will speak to us and that they are finally free.

However, they, like other amazing pro-democracy leaders, yearn for the day when Nicaragua will be free and its government robustly defending the fundamental rights, human rights of every citizen.

So today, again, we will hear from them directly, and my hope is that their words spoken today animates, gets every one of us to be more motivated to do all we can possibly do.

Today we, once again, send a clear message to the world that the United States stands with the brave Nicaraguans who are committed to democracy and respect for the internationally recognized human rights.

We are inspired by the incredible faith and bravery of those like Bishop Alvarez who nonviolently resist tyranny and refuse to give in to the demands of dictators.

As we work to ensure that President Ortega and his cronies are held accountable for these heinous acts, I would note that the U.S. Treasury Department has sanctioned more than 43 individuals and 11 entities, and has restricted hundreds of visas. So that is definitely a step in the right direction.

Nevertheless, the extreme repression that the Ortega regime is committing against the people of Nicaragua deserves even greater attention from the United States and from our allies. Under President Ortega, Nicaragua has become a pariah dictatorship in league with other human rights abusers like Cuba, Venezuela, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and the People's Republic of China.

The Ortega regime continues to eviscerate basic rights and fundamental freedoms, a decline which has been markedly increased over the last 5 years. Beginning with the government's crackdown on protestors in 2018, which left over 300 dead, thousands injured, and hundreds in prison, President Ortega has shown the world his blatant disregard for everything except consolidating his own power.

I note parenthetically that we got a mere glimpse of this, a few of us, back in 1984, when Frank Wolf and I and two other Members, Tony Hall and Bob McEwen, went and met with him in Managua, raised human rights issues directly with him. Thinking that we were coming to praise him, we spent 2 hours talking exclusively on human rights. They gave us drinks. Three of us drank the drinks. We got very, very ill. And Tony Hall, who perhaps was wise enough not to take a sip, never got sick.

We saw when he did this to the students. It is one of their terrible ways that they deal with dissidents. They sent in rancid food, and many of them got very sick as well.

The Catholic Church is under siege, as we all know. He is waging a war against them.

So, again, we are doing everything we can to raise these issues. This hearing is but another step, and I cannot thank you enough for being here to be our witnesses.

I would like to yield to my good friend, Chairwoman Salazar.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And delighted to see you here, Mr. Maradiaga, Mr. Chamorro. We really never thought that probably we were going to be able to see you again, and I am delighted that we were able to do everything possible in order to have you here.

And thank you, Mr. Chairman. As the chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere and a relentless fighter for the people of Nicaragua because I know them very well, I lived there,

I know what a great country you have. And it is an honor to host you this hearing today and with the rest of my colleagues.

As we were saying, the Catholic church is under siege. Almost three-quarters of Nicaraguans belong to the Catholic church. To have complete control over them, the now dictator in chief, Daniel Ortega, needs to replace the Almighty God with his dictatorship. And that is why he is systematically hunting down and silencing the most sacred, sovereign institution in Nicaragua's history—the Catholic church. The church is the last, the loudest voice against his regime.

There have been over 400 attacks on the church in recent years, and let me just name a few so everyone can remember.

In 2018, police went into the Divine Mercy parish located in Managua, locked in young protestors and rained bullets on them. They were looking for a sanctuary, but instead they found death.

In 2020, a fire bomb was thrown in Managua's cathedral, destroying the famous image of Blood of Christ, an almost 400-year-old crucifix beloved by thousands and thousands of Nicaraguans.

Last year, Daniel Ortega escalated his attacks on the faithful. He ordered the dissolution of hundreds of NGO's. He expelled 18 of Mother Teresa's nuns, holy women who worked in the most dangerous areas of Nicaragua, including el Mercado Oriental.

This breaks my heart because as a journalist working for Univision, I interviewed those women. They were saints. And I felt their holiness when I walked into their humble clinic and spoke with them for hours.

He also shut down 19 Catholic radio and television stations.

Not only that, last month he broke relations with the Vatican, and they are to expel el Nuncio Apostolico, the Apostolic Nuncio.

And now he wants us to be impressed by his goodness. Few weeks ago he released you, 222 political prisoners to the United States. He let them go—some of you free—but he took away your citizenship, your families, your property, everything except your lives.

If Ortega were to be so compassionate, as you said, then Bishop Rolando Alvarez would have not been sentenced to 26 years in the most brutal prison called La Modelo for leading a powerful demonstration just crying for freedom.

From Managua, the message is clear: Ortega has made Nicaragua a prison for anyone who kneels to God the Father y La Santisima Virgen.

In a shocking moment of clarity, Pope Francis called—himself, he called Ortega the new Hitler, and compared the Sandinista movement to the Russian Revolution. Bravo for Your Holiness.

It is time for the international community to wake up to this historic evil and for the Biden administration to take action.

First, the White House must continue increasing the RENACER sanctions on Ortega that I proudly passed in Congress.

Second, the White House must communicate to American investors the danger of doing business in Nicaragua. The No. 1 danger is that you could be expropriated and lose your money. And we wish luck to that textile company which just opened a 100,000-square meter factory in Nicaragua. Good luck to you.

Third, we must call on our Central American partners to shut down lending to this dictator. The Central American Bank for Economic Integration has approved \$3.5 billion in funding for the Ortega-Murillo regime in the last 5 years. Shame on you. All this money only provides economic oxygen to the regime so they can keep oppressing the people.

So having said all that, this is a message directly to Ortega-Murillo: You would be wise to remember that the Catholic church throughout history has defeated greater demons than you and your satanic wife, Rosario Murillo. It must humiliate you that everyone knows that, despite your title of President, she has the real power. For that reason, it won't surprise anyone that you are too small of a man to take down a 2,000-year-old legendary institution.

And in case you haven't been reading the Scriptures lately, let me just tell you what Daniel chapter 5 says: You will learn that the last king of Babylon was also drunk on power and defiled God. And then the writing on the wall appeared.

And the warning is the same for you. Your days are numbered. You have been measured and failed, and everything you have stolen from the people of Nicaragua will turn to ash.

But I am going to say it in Spanish so he can hear me.

[Speaking in Spanish.]

I yield back.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much for that very powerful opening statement.

And I would like to now yield to Mr. Stanton.

Mr. STANTON. Thank you very much, Chair Smith and Chair Salazar, for calling this critically important hearing.

I want to thank the witnesses who are here today for your testimony in advance. I want to especially welcome Mr. Maradiaga and Dr. Chamorro, and commend you for your bravery in standing up for democracy in Nicaragua.

While I am grateful that you both have finally been released from your unjust imprisonment, I am deeply disturbed that Daniel Ortega chose to strip you both and 220 others of Nicaraguan citizenship shortly after your arrival in the United States last month.

These political and business leaders, journalists, and students cannot go back to their homes. They remain separated from their families. They have had their property seized. They cannot study, work, or participate in political or civil life in their homeland, and that is appalling.

From his reelection in 2007 through today, President Ortega has worked to consolidate power for himself. Our hearing today focuses in particular on his regime's brutal attacks on the Catholic church and civil society. Ortega has targeted both since retaking power 15 years ago, but his violent repression tactics intensified in 2018 after countrywide protests, protests that the Ortega regime cracked down on, resulting in the deaths of more than 300 Nicaraguans.

Then in 2021, Ortega jailed every potential political opponent, dropping any pretense of democratic legitimacy. Those who dare to speak out against his crimes against humanity, including faith leaders, students, journalists, and human rights defenders, face the same arbitrary detentions or worse. In fact, a U.N. delegation found that the Nicaraguan Government has and continues to par-

ticipate in serious and systemic human rights abuses, including extrajudicial executions and torture.

And while 222 Nicaraguan political prisoners were freed and most flown to the United States in February, dozens remain, including Bishop Rolando Jose Alvarez, who refused to be exiled from his country and now faces 26 years behind bars. He and nearly 20 other priests have been stripped of their nationality, and more than a dozen have been prosecuted for speaking out with moral clarity against Ortega's human rights abuses.

Last year, Ortega expelled the Apostolic Nuncio, the highest ranking diplomat of the Catholic church, from the country, and early this month officially severed diplomatic ties with the Vatican after Pope Francis harshly criticized the regime.

These are calculated and consistent attacks, and it is clear that the Ortega regime assault on the church and its leaders is part of a larger effort to consolidate absolute power in Nicaragua.

But Ortega has not limited his attack to the Catholic church. Instead, he has worked to all but eliminate any organization his regime does not control, including nonprofit organizations, including charities. More than 3,000 national and international NGO's are no longer allowed to operate in Nicaragua. Some will be able to conduct their missions from other Central American countries or the United States, but most have been forced to permanently close.

This has widespread socioeconomic consequences for vulnerable populations, especially indigenous communities, worsening the humanitarian situation of the country, limiting access to information, increasing international migration.

It is a travesty, and it is happening to our neighbors. America cannot afford to overlook the human rights abuses happening right now in Nicaragua, so we have stepped in several ways.

The Biden administration, with the support of Congress' bipartisan RENACER Act passed in 2021, has strengthened U.S. sanctions against Nicaragua. We continue to pursue targeted sanctions to hold Ortega and his cronies accountable for their human rights abuses. The Biden administration has also requested \$15 million in democratic assistance directly for the Nicaraguan people in Fiscal Year 2024.

While this committee will dive deeper into budgetary issues in tomorrow's important hearing, I will note how important it is to fund foreign operations at least at the President's requested levels, and we will hear examples of what import this is from our witnesses today.

And we should also work to reform our immigration system to make legal pathways more accessible while investing in border security and ensuring safe, humane process for migrants, including those fleeing repression in Nicaragua arriving here in the United States.

We are witnessing one of the worst authoritarian assaults on democracy in Latin America in decades. This committee, our committee, our joint committees, will continue to work in a bipartisan way to support the Nicaraguan people and those who have been exiled. The United States cannot waiver in our efforts to restore democratic governance in Nicaragua, protect fundamental human

rights, and end Ortega's campaign of violence, intimidation, and repression.

Thank you all for being here.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, Mr. Stanton.

The chair recognizes my friend and colleague, Ms. Wild, the ranking member on our subcommittee.

Ms. WILD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Let me begin by thanking Chairs Smith and Salazar for calling this important hearing.

And to our witnesses, thank you for your leadership, your sacrifice, and unwavering commitment to a future of democracy, human rights, and human dignity in Nicaragua.

For years, Daniel Ortega has consolidated wealth and power at the expense of his people, and has run Nicaragua like his personal fiefdom, installing family members in senior roles across the regime, including his wife, Rosario Murillo, as vice president, enriching himself through corruption and illicit financial schemes and cracking down on all forms of dissent.

Once the leader of the revolution which toppled a brutal multigenerational dictatorship and once a symbol of hope for the Nicaraguan society long torn by inequality, Daniel Ortega long ago destroyed his legacy, betrayed the revolution, and turned Nicaragua back into an authoritarian country ruled by an all powerful dynasty.

Since the regime's response to protests over deeply unpopular economic austerity politics in 2018 in which security forces used weapons of war to kill, injure, and detain thousands of people exercising their fundamental rights, more than 100,000 Nicaraguans have fled the country.

Violence, repression, and arbitrary detentions remain a deadly reality for anyone who dares to speak out against the regime, not just activists, but religious leaders, indigenous people, healthcare workers, members of the LGBTQ community, and Nicaraguans of all stripes.

Earlier this month in its first report to the U.N. Human Rights Council, the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua reported that widespread human rights violations that amount to crimes against humanity are being committed against innocent civilians.

As Members of Congress, it is our responsibility to use our platform to draw attention to this crisis and to stand in a spirit of solidarity and partnership with the people of Nicaragua. I use the words "solidarity" and "partnership" very deliberately here. I cannot neglect to note the tragic history of destructive U.S. Government interference in Nicaragua. We should never go back to that time, not in Nicaragua, not in Latin America, not anywhere around the world.

Our task is not to infringe on the sovereignty of the Nicaraguan people or any other people. It is to advocate for and to support a policy of support for human rights that is consistent and based in a spirit of neutral respect, cooperation, and justice.

I look forward to hearing from our diverse panel of witnesses about what more the United States and international community can do to support all of those struggling for human rights and

democratic values in Nicaragua. I hope this serves as a starting point for a continued conversation this Congress on how we can more effectively support the people of Nicaragua at this difficult time.

Thank you for joining us today, and I look forward to a productive discussion.

Mr. SMITH. Ms. Wild, thank you very much.

I would like to introduce our witnesses. The co-chair and I will just very briefly introduce you, and then—the first will be Bianca Jagger, who has been an aggressive human rights advocate. She has been in all of our offices time and time again pushing especially for human rights in Nicaragua. She was born in Nicaragua, and in 2005 founded the Bianca Jagger Human Rights Foundation. She has received numerous awards, including the alternative Nobel Prize award in 2004 called the Right Livelihood Award.

Going back 30 years ago, we had her at hearings when we had serious problems in the Balkans. I will never forget her testimony on that as well.

So she will be our first witness. She cannot make it today physically. She hurt her back, so she is doing it by way of Zoom.

And then we will go to Felix Maradiaga, who is—what a hero he is, as well as Dr. Chamorro. He is an academic. I have a full statement here, and we will put all of that into the record, but he is the former secretary general of the Nicaraguan Ministry of Defense. Due to his outspoken activism, the Ortega regime accused him of terrorism related to the demonstrations that erupted in April 2018. Again, he spent 611 days behind bars. And he and his wife are just two very, very noble people, and I think the future, along with Dr. Chamorro, the future of Nicaragua.

I would like to yield to my co-chair.

Ms. SALAZAR. Yes. And I think we are going to be presenting Juan Sebastian Chamorro—once again, glad you are here—a Nicaraguan economist, political leader, and human rights defender.

In 2005, Mr. Chamorro served as the technical secretary of the Presidency of the Republic of Nicaragua, the ministry in charge of strategic national planning, before serving as the vice minister of finance the following year. From 2006 to 2011, Mr. Chamorro helped execute the grant program by heading the millennium challenge in Nicaragua. But in June 2021, he was detained by the Ortega repressive apparatus, and later was able to come to the United States in February 2023.

And also should we introduce our other witness? And Mrs. Deborah Ullmer. Thank you for being here.

Mrs. Ullmer brings more than 20 years of experience managing a range of democracy assistance and human rights programs. Most recently, she served as Freedom House's director for Latin America. Mrs. Ullmer previously served at the National Democratic Institute from 1996 through 2018, where she focused primarily on the Latin America portfolio.

Thank you, the four of you, for being here.

Should we start the questions?

Mr. SMITH. Well, first their comments.

Ms. SALAZAR. OK. I think that maybe we should give you some time—



Mr. SMITH. Exactly.

Ms. SALAZAR [continuing]. For you to——

Mr. SMITH. Starting with Bianca, if she is ready.

**STATEMENT OF BIANCA JAGGER, FOUNDER, PRESIDENT, AND  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, BIANCA JAGGER HUMAN RIGHTS FOUNDATION**

Ms. JAGGER. I am.

Honorable Members of Congress, I would first like to thank Congressman Chris Smith and Congresswoman Maria Salazar for their unflinching support of the Nicaraguan people. It is always a pleasure for me to testify before Congressman Smith, who I have known for many, many years, and I have shared many of my concerns with him.

I would also like to say hello to my fellow Nicaraguan and fellow witnesses, especially to my two dear friends, Felix Maradiaga and Juan Ignacio Chamorro—Juan Sebastian Chamorro. Of course, I am very honored to be here with Deborah Ullmer, who is a champion of human rights and democracy.

I would like to request to have my written testimony and the article I published in the Catholic Herald submitted for the record.

Mr. SMITH. Without objection, so ordered.

Ms. JAGGER. Thank you.

I would address the subject of today's hearing, the Ortega-Murillo regime's unholy war against the Catholic church and civil society in Nicaragua and the martyrdom of Bishop Rolando Jose Alvarez Lagos.

It gives me great pleasure to see that most of the members who have spoken today are well aware of what is happening in Nicaragua, not just now, but for many years in the past. I do not know if some of what I will say you already said in your presentation, but I would like to remind everyone that on the 9th of February, 222 political prisoners were expelled from Nicaragua to the U.S. by the dictatorial regime of Ortega and Murillo. Among those who boarded the plane were top opposition leaders, six Presidential pre-candidates and, of course, two of them are among us and will be testifying before you.

And I think that it will be better for them to tell you more about how they felt now that they are free. But among those people where—among the 222 were campesinos and business leaders, journalists, and priests. And it gives me great hope to know that they are free at last and that perhaps that is the end for the suffering of all of that period of time in which they were in jail.

But the most eminent prisoner who Ortega and Murillo were eager to get rid of, Bishop Rolando Jose Alvarez, the bishop of the Diocese of Matagalpa, refused to leave the country and accept expulsion. The bishop had repeatedly stated that he will not leave the country and abandon the people of Nicaragua, despite the regime's repeated threat of exile or jail. It is reported that he said, Let them go free. I will pay for their sentences. He was offering himself as a sacrifice for the good of others. Bishop Alvarez Lagos, following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, is the good shepherd who will lay down his life for his sheep. He is and remains today as the

symbol of resistance in Nicaragua, never faltering in his struggle against tyranny and repression.

I cannot tell you how important it is the gesture of Bishop Alvarez to remain in Nicaragua. It was not only because he had always said that he would not leave the country, but I think that he wanted everyone to realize that, yes, Daniel Ortega released or expelled 222 people, but that the people of Nicaragua are still there under a repressive government.

Jan-Michael Simon, chair of the U.N. Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua, compared the Nicaraguan regime's strategy to the crimes committed by the Nazis in Germany in the 1930's and 1940's. He said: "All the elements that are seen in Nicaragua, unfortunately, can be seen in the Nuremberg trials." In Nazi Germany, about 39,000 people were deprived of their citizenship from July 14, 1933. Among some of the most prominent were Bertolt Brecht, Albert Einstein, Erich Maria Remarque, Stefan Zweig, and Willy Brandt.

The Stalin Soviet Union also adopted the advanced repressive practice of the allies under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. During the existence of the USSR, dozens of thousands of people were deprived of citizenship, including Trotsky, Solzhenitsyn, Rostropovich, and Lyubimov, and many, many others.

That is why I think that it is so important that we realize that what Daniel Ortega is doing today in Nicaragua is of a great seriousness and that the international community cannot really accept it without imposing more sanctions on their regime.

On the 9th of February, as a retaliation for his refusal to board the plane, Bishop Alvarez was transferred to the infamous Jorge Navarro prison, known as La Modelo, regarded as one of the most brutal in Latin America. The bishop is one of 37 or 39 political prisoners that remain in Nicaragua.

On the 10th of February, the day after Bishop Alvarez Lagos refused to board the flight to the U.S., he was condemned without due process and through a spurious judicial proceeding to 26 years and 4 months. His sentence was read by president of Chamber 1 of the Court of Appeals in Managua. He said: The defendant Rolando Jose Alvarez Lagos is held to be a traitor to the country, guilty of being the author of crimes to undermine the national security and sovereignty, spreading fake news through information technology, of obstructing an official in the performance of his duty.

On that day as well, in addition to stripping Bishop Alvarez of his Nicaraguan citizenship, he was disqualified for life for exercising public office at the service of the State of Nicaragua and decreed perpetual loss of his civil rights.

That same evening, Ortega held a rambling televised press conference to give his official version of the largest deportation in Latin America history. And I call it deportation, but, of course, deportation is only when you are deporting a foreign citizen. But let's call it for the benefit of what he said at the time. He was outraged at the bishop's refusal to leave the country, accusing him of being a terrorist. Ortega confirmed that he sent Bishop Alvarez Lagos to La Modelo prison because "he is an ordinary man." What we have is an arrogant individual who considers himself the head of the church in Nicaragua, the leader of the Latin America church, and

must think that he is in line to be the Pope. He is unhinged, he said. When he arrived at La Modelo he was a madman, incapable of having the courage of Christ, who endured flagellations and the crucifixion. He refused to accept being put in a cell where there are hundreds of prisoners. He is irritated because now he is in prison.

I cannot tell you the chills that I felt down my spine when I heard Ortega make this statement. Did Daniel Ortega mean to say that he put the bishop in a cell with hundreds of other prisoners?

On the 15th of February, Ortega and Murillo intensified their crackdown on dissidents to maintain their grip on power, putting into practice Murillo's infamous phrase, "vamos con todo," let's go at them with everything.

This regime arbitrarily stripped another 94 political dissidents of their citizenship, accusing them of being traitors to the homeland, committing criminal acts to the detriment of peace, sovereignty, independence, and self-determination of the Nicaraguan people.

Among those distinguished human rights people and others, they are Bishop Silvio Baez, a distinguished—who is in exile in Miami; the distinguished human rights defender Vilma Nunez, who has decided herself as well to remain in Nicaragua; our winning authors Sergio Ramirez, Gioconda Belli; and influential journalist Carlos Fernando Chamorro.

During—and I would like to explain, if I may and I have the time, why is it that Daniel Ortega hates so much Bishop Alvarez?

During the civil unrest in 2018, Bishop Alvarez Lagos led the Episcopal team, who mediated the first national dialog between the Ortega regime and the opposition. The bishop gave explicit instructions before the parties sat down at the negotiating table. The national dialog has only one goal—he said—change. Change is inevitable. There is no other way, and there is no other purpose. Change is coming, and with it the democratization of the Republic of Nicaragua.

Ortega never forgave him for saying that. Ortega used the dialog to launch a deadly crackdown on the population with weapons of war, the police, riot police, military and paramilitary forces to crash the rebellion.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights commissioned a report by the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts, GIEI, which condemned the Ortega-Murillo regime for weakening the rule of law and committing crimes against humanity. They estimated that, during those violent days, at least 355 people were killed, 2,000 were injured, and 171 arbitrarily detained. In March of the following year, the Ortega regime vetoed Bishop Alvarez Lagos from mediating or even witnessing the negotiations. Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes ended up being the sole representative of the Catholic church, accompanied by the then Apostolic Nuncio Stanislaw Sommertag.

Bishop Alvarez Lagos' sermons and homilies have frequently decried Ortega and Murillo's systematic and grave violations of human rights, brutal repression, and religious prosecution. I admire his integrity, his prophetic voice, and his courage to speak truth to power.

I am not going to talk to you about these many famous sermons of Monsignor Alvarez because I have put it in my written testimony, but I urge you to read them.

I would like to convey my gratitude to bishops throughout the world who have issued statements calling for Bishop Alvarez Lagos' release, condemning the Ortega-Murillo regime persecution of the Catholic church and the repression of the people of Nicaragua. Their unwavering support has provided hope to those living under the dictatorship and will ensure that the bishop is not forgotten.

On the 12th of February during his weekly blessing of the Angelus to pilgrims in Saint Peter's Square, Pope Francis issued a statement on Bishop Alvarez Lagos, who said: I have been much saddened by the news that comes from Nicaragua, and I cannot but remember with concern the bishop of Matagalpa, Monsignor Rolando Alvarez, who I love so much and who was condemned to 26 years in prison, and also the people who were deported to the United States. I pray for them and for all of those who are suffering in that dear country.

On the 22d of February, Ortega launched a tirade of insults against the Catholic church, describing it as an organized mafia. If we are going to talk about democracy, he said, the people should first elect the priests. I do not believe in popes or kings. If they are going to be democratic, they must begin by electing the Pope, the cardinals, the bishops with the votes of the Catholics, and went on to accuse the church of being allied with the Nazis during the Second World War.

Pope Francis, who had taken more than 6 months to mention Bishop Alvarez Lagos and address the dire situation the people in Nicaragua are facing, gave an interview to Spanish newspaper ABC last December where he said: The Holy See never leaves. They kick her out. It always tries to save the people. And its weapon is dialog and diplomacy.

But on the 10th of March, after Ortega's unspeakable attack on the Catholic church and the Pope himself, Pope Francis gave an interview to an Argentinian journalist called Daniel Hadad, for Infobae, stating: With great respect, I have no other choice but to think that the person in power, relating to Ortega, is mentally unbalanced.

For the first time the Pope spoke bluntly about the attacks of the regime against the Catholic church and expressed the solidarity with Bishop AlvarezLagos: We have an incarcerated bishop there, a very responsible man, a very capable man. He wanted to testify and did not accept exile. This is something that is out of line with what we are currently experiencing. It is like bringing back the 1917 communist dictatorship or the 1935 Hitlerite dictatorship. They are a type of crass dictatorship, or to use a nice Argentinian expression, guarangas, uncouth.

Mr. SMITH. Ms. Jagger, thank you.

Ms. JAGGER. Yes.

Mr. SMITH. We are pretty much out of time, but we will get back to you with questions, if that is OK.

Ms. JAGGER. Sure. If I may just say simply what I would like to ask about Monsignor, if you allow me.

Mr. SMITH. OK.

Ms. JAGGER. According to Ortega, Bishop Alvarez Lagos is serving his sentence in La Modelo prison. I have recently been informed that no one close to Bishop Alvarez Lagos knows where he is. His family has not seen him since he refused to board the plane to the U.S. They have not been allowed to visit him, bring him his medicine, food, or even water. I am deeply concerned for his safety, and I am asking that the Ortega regime make a proof of life, and that you here in Congress demand that the Ortega regime present a proof of life.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Jagger follows:]



**Bianca Jagger**

**Founder and President**

**The Bianca Jagger Human Rights Foundation.**

**Testimony Before House Foreign Affairs Committee,**

**Subcommittee Hearing**

**March 22, 2023**

**'The Ortega-Murillo Regime's War Against the Catholic Church and Civil Society in Nicaragua: Bishop Alvarez, Political Prisoners, and Prisoners of Conscience'**

I would first like to thank Co-Chair Rep. Christopher Smith and Co-Chair Rep. Maria Salazar, for inviting me to testify, distinguished members of the subcommittee.

On Thursday 9th February, 222 political prisoners were expelled from Nicaragua to the United States by the dictatorial regime of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo. Among those who boarded the chartered plane were top opposition leaders: 6 presidential pre-candidates, students, 'campesinos' and business leaders, journalists and priests. But the most eminent prisoner, who Ortega and Murillo were eager to get rid of, Bishop Rolando Jose Álvarez Lagos, the Bishop of the Diocese of Matagalpa, refused to leave the country and accept expulsion. The bishop had repeatedly stated that he would not leave the country and abandon the people of Nicaragua, despite the government's repeated threat of 'exile or jail'. It is reported that he said "let them go free, I will pay their sentences," he was offering himself as a sacrifice for the good of others. Bishop Álvarez Lagos, following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, is ["the good shepherd who will lay down his life for his sheep"](#). He is the symbol of resistance in Nicaragua, never faltering in his struggle against tyranny and repression.

Ortega and Murillo made a major miscalculation by failing to recognise Bishop Álvarez Lagos' courage and conviction. On 7th of February, the regime brought forward the bishop's trial from 28th March to 15th February. I suspect they hoped that the prospect of being sentenced to a lengthy prison term would have frightened the bishop into accepting to leave the country. How little they know the bishop.

### **Making 222 Political Prisoners Stateless**

For those who left, the results were freedom and an end to the torture, and the cruel and inhuman treatment they endured in the dungeons of Nicaragua. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that the prisoners had been jailed “for exercising their fundamental freedoms and have endured lengthy unjust detentions.” A judge in Nicaragua said that the regime had decided to “deport” the prisoners to “protect peace and national security.” He said that they had been declared “traitors.” On that same day, the Nicaraguan National Assembly held an extraordinary session to amend the Constitution to strip the deported prisoners of their Nicaraguan citizenship, which is unconstitutional and in violation of Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Jan-Michael Simon, Chair of the United Nations Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua, compared the regime's actions to the crimes committed by the Nazis in the 1930s and 40s “[all the elements that are seen in Nicaragua, unfortunately, can be seen in the Nuremberg trials.](#)” The latest strategy of the Nicaraguan authorities has its historical precedents in Nazi Germany and the Stalin Soviet Union. In Nazi Germany, about 39 thousand people were deprived of citizenship. From July 14, 1933, the so-called law “on the abolition of naturalisation and deprivation of German citizenship” was in force, which allowed depriving people of citizenship. Among some of the most prominent were Bertolt Brecht, Albert Einstein, Erich Maria Remarque, Stefan Zweig, Hannah Arendt, Willy Brandt. The Soviet Union also adopted the advanced repressive practices of the allies under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. During the existence of the USSR, dozens of thousands of people were deprived of citizenship, including Trotsky, Solzhenitsyn, Rostropovich, Voinovich, Lyubimov and others.

### **Spurious Judicial Process: The Bishop is sentenced to 26 Years and 4 Months**

On 9th February, as a retaliation for his refusal to board the plane, Bishop Álvarez Lagos was transferred to the infamous Jorge Navarro prison, known as La Modelo, regarded as one of the most brutal in Latin America. The bishop is one of the 39 political prisoners that remain in Nicaragua.

On Friday 10th February, the day after Bishop Álvarez Lagos refused to board the flight to the U.S. he was condemned without due process and through a spurious judicial proceeding to 26 years and four months. His sentence was handed down by the judge of the second criminal district court of Managua, Nadia Camila Tardencilla, but read by magistrate Octavio Ernesto Rothschuh Andino, President of Chamber 1 of the Court of Appeals of Managua “the defendant Rolando José Álvarez Lagos is held to be a “traitor to the country, guilty of being the author of crimes to undermine the national security and sovereignty, spreading fake news through information technology, obstructing an official in the performance of his duties, aggravated disobedience or contempt of authority, all committed concurrently and to the detriment of society and the State of the Republic of Nicaragua.” In addition, they stripped Bishop Álvarez Lagos of his Nicaraguan citizenship, disqualified him for life from exercising public office at the service of the State of Nicaragua and decreed the perpetual loss of his civil rights.

Monsignor Silvio José Báez, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Managua denounced the sentencing of the bishop. “Irrational and unbridled hatred of the Nicaraguan dictatorship

against Bishop Rolando Álvarez. They are vengeful against him. They have not withstood his height morals and his prophetic coherence. Rolando will be free, God will not abandon him. They sink every day with their fear and evil”.

#### **Ortega’s Televised Attack Against the Bishop**

That same evening, Daniel Ortega held a rambling televised press conference to give his official version of the largest deportation in Latin American history. He was outraged at the bishop’s refusal to leave the country, accusing him of being a “terrorist”, “deranged”, “unhinged” and “arrogant”. Ortega confirmed that he sent Bishop Álvarez Lagos to La Modelo prison, because “he is an ordinary man.” “What we have is an [arrogant individual who considers himself the head of the Church in Nicaragua](#), the leader of the Latin American Church, and must think that he is in line to be the Pope.” “He is unhinged,” he said. “When he arrived at La Modelo he was a madman, incapable of having the courage of Christ, who endured flagellations and the crucifixion. He refused to accept being put in a cell where there are hundreds of prisoners. He is irritated because now he is in prison.”

On 15th February, Ortega and Murillo intensified their crackdown on dissidents to maintain their grip on power, putting into practice Murillo’s infamous phrase “[vamos con todo](#)” - “let’s go at them with everything.” The regime arbitrarily stripped another 94 political dissidents of their citizenship, accusing them of being “traitors to the homeland,” committing “criminal acts to the detriment of peace, sovereignty, independence and self-determination of the Nicaraguan people, being “fugitives from justice.” They also announced their properties would be confiscated. Among those targeted are prominent exiled Nicaraguans: Bishop Silvio Baez, distinguished human rights defender Vilma Núñez who remains in Nicaragua, award-winning authors Sergio Ramirez, Gioconda Belli and influential journalist Carlos Fernando Chamorro.

#### **Bishop Álvarez Lagos’ Early Years**

Bishop Álvarez Lagos, turned 56 in November 2022 whilst being held captive by the Ortega-Murillo regime. He was born in Managua to a Catholic family, and in his youth, during the 1980s, he refused to be drafted by the Sandinista army and had to flee to Guatemala to avoid arrest and lived there as a refugee. Bishop Álvarez has repeatedly made it known that he does not want to live in exile again. Looking back at this period in his life, the bishop told *La Prensa* “I think we belong to a generation of young people who had to conquer our freedom at the price of persecution and pain.” His vocation to the priesthood was evident from an early age and at 28 he was ordained as a priest. He was consecrated as a bishop on 2 April 2011, when he assumed the leadership of the Diocese of Matagalpa. The respect and affection his community has for him is immense. *La Prensa*’s chronicle reported that jubilant crowds lined the streets to watch his ordination rite.

#### **Bishop Álvarez Lagos Mediation During the Civil Unrest**

During Nicaragua’s civil unrest in 2018, which saw Bishop Álvarez Lagos lead the Episcopal team, who mediated the first ‘national dialogue’ between the Ortega regime and the opposition. The bishop gave explicit instructions before the parties sat down at the



negotiating table. “The national dialogue has only one goal: change. Change is inevitable, there is no other way, and there is no other purpose. [Change is coming and with it, the democratisation of the Republic of Nicaragua.](#)” Ortega used the dialogue to launch a deadly crackdown on the population with weapons of war, the police, riot police, military, and paramilitary forces to crush the rebellion. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) commissioned a [report by the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts](#) (GIEI) which condemned the Ortega-Murillo regime for ‘weakening the rule of law and committing crimes against humanity’ estimating that at least [355 people were killed, 2,000 people were injured and 171 arbitrary detentions](#), during those violent days. In March of the following year, the Ortega regime vetoed Bishop Álvarez Lagos from mediating or even witnessing the negotiations. Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes ended up being the sole representative of the Catholic Church, accompanied by the Apostolic Nuncio Stanislaw Sommertag.

#### **Bishop Álvarez Lagos’ Sermons and Homilies**

Bishop Álvarez Lagos’ sermons and homilies have frequently decried Ortega and Murillo’s systematic and grave human rights violations, brutal repression and religious persecutions. I admire his integrity, his prophetic voice, and his courage to speak truth to power. In one of his memorable sermons, he said "Jesus does not want a church interested in rubbing shoulders with those in power, by placing itself to their left or their right, a church that is not capable of thoroughly criticising the injustices that are being committed, that turns its back on the problems of the people, a church fearful of assuming its commitments. Jesus Christ does not want a subjugated church, but one that accompanies the people in their demands. Jesus Christ does not want a church that approaches power, seeking to negotiate or agree to obtain quotas and have influence; a church capable of keeping quiet in order not to lose the favours of the powerful, abandoning the weak; complicit in exploitation, oppression, discrimination, sugar-coating the words that people in power want to hear; a church that does not want to be a sign of contradiction when necessary; that does not dare to swim against the current, a corrupt church that does not raise its voice in the face of arbitrariness, that is not the church that Jesus Christ wants."

#### **Bishop Álvarez Held Captive**

[Seven Catholic radio stations](#), three Television networks and the Television network of the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua linked to the Diocese of Matagalpa, were closed in 2022. Following this, on 4th August 2022, Bishop Álvarez Lagos was held hostage in the clergy house of the Diocese of Matagalpa and was prevented from officiating mass in the cathedral. The bishop remained under house arrest due to the regimes charging him with “conspiracy” to the state and “spreading false news”. The regime’s security forces also prohibited his religious companions - five priests, two seminarians, two lay persons and one photographer - from leaving the house, while simultaneously preventing anyone from entering the premises to bring food, drinks, and vital medicines. Police encircled and blockaded the house for 15 days. Abruptly, in the early hours of 19<sup>th</sup> August 2022, special forces of the regime violently broke the doors and forced their way in to kidnap Monsignor Álvarez Lagos and his companions. He

was taken to an undisclosed location in Managua, whilst the priests, seminarians, laypersons, and photographer were sent to El Chipote prison.

#### **Support From Conferences of Bishops**

I would like to convey my gratitude to bishops throughout the world, who have issued statements calling for Bishop Álvarez Lagos' release, condemning the Ortega-Murillo regime's persecution of the Catholic Church and the repression of the people of Nicaragua. Their unwavering support has provided hope for those living under the dictatorship and will ensure that the bishop is not forgotten.

Bishop Lang, Chair of the Bishops' Conference Department of England and Wales, issued one of the most [powerful statements](#), "Over recent years the people of Nicaragua have endured deepening repression and violations of human dignity. Many have been unjustly imprisoned, subjected to violence, or killed for defending their basic rights. Others have been forced to flee the country in search of safety. We are united in prayer with all those who, confronted with these atrocities, continue to struggle for justice and peace. Among them, bishops, priests, seminarians, members of religious orders, and laypeople are facing persecution because of their work upholding the gospel." The [bishops in Spain](#) asked "the Nicaraguan authorities to listen to the voice of the people they serve, make their decisions in a spirit of service for the good of all and release prisoners incarcerated for political reasons." One of the strongest statements issued came from the Honduran Bishop Jose Antonio Canales who said "[Monsignor Rolando Álvarez is a thorn in the side \[of the regime\] precisely because he is so loved by his people.](#)" He added "In Nicaragua, they can fabricate any crime against you because there is control of all branches of government by the Executive". In contrast to those powerful statements, the Episcopal Conference of Bishops of Nicaragua (CEN) has never issued a statement condemning the Ortega-Murillo regime's relentless persecution of the Catholic Church, or called for the release of Bishop Álvarez Lagos.

#### **Pope Francis Speaks Out**

On 12th of February during his weekly blessing of the Angelus to pilgrims in Saint Peter's Square, Pope Francis issued a statement on Bishop Álvarez Lagos. "I have been much saddened by the news that comes from Nicaragua, and I cannot but remember with concern the bishop of Matagalpa, Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, whom I love so much, and who was condemned to 26 years in prison, and also the people who were deported to the United States," "I pray for them and for all those who are suffering in that dear country." He went on to say, "We ask the Lord, through the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, to open the hearts of those who have political responsibility and of all the citizens to a sincere search for peace, that is born from truth, justice, freedom, and love, and which is achieved through the patient exercise of dialogue".

On 22nd of February, Ortega launched a tirade of insults against the Catholic Church, describing it as an "[organised mafia](#)". He went on to say that "If we are going to talk about democracy, the people should first elect the priests... I don't believe in popes or kings. If they're going to be democratic, they must begin by electing the Pope, the cardinals, the bishops, with the votes of Catholics" and went on to accuse the church of being [allied with the Nazis during the Second World War](#).

Pope Francis, who had taken more than six months to mention Bishop Álvarez Lagos and address the dire situation the people in Nicaragua are facing, gave an interview to Spanish newspaper *ABC*, last December, where he said that “the Holy See never leaves. They kick her out. It always tries to save the people. And its weapon is dialogue and diplomacy.” But, on 10th of March, after Ortega’s deplorable attack on the Catholic Church and the Pope himself, [Pope Francis gave an interview](#) to Argentinian journalist Daniel Hadad, for Infobae, stating “with great respect, I have no other choice but to think that the person in power [Ortega] is mentally unbalanced”. For the first time the Pope spoke bluntly about the attacks of the regime against the Catholic Church, and expressed his solidarity with Bishop Álvarez Lagos. “We have an incarcerated bishop there, a very responsible man, a very capable man. He wanted to testify and did not accept exile. This is something that is out of line with what we are currently experiencing; it is like bringing back the 1917 communist dictatorship, or the 1935 Hitlerite dictatorship, they are a type of crass dictatorships, or to use a nice Argentinian expression, guarangas - uncouth.”

#### **Suspension of Diplomatic Relations With The Holy See**

In a dramatic turn of events, on 13th March, the Ortega-Murillo regime [proposed suspending diplomatic relations with the Vatican](#), following the Pope’s interview with *Infobae* where he condemned the regime and compared them to Nazi and Communist dictatorships. The diplomatic ties between Nicaragua and the Vatican have existed since 1908. The closure of the Vatican’s embassy in Managua could result in a rupture of diplomatic ties between the Ortega-Murillo regime and the Vatican, placing them in a small group of nations: 4 communist - Vietnam, North Korea, China and Laos; 8 islamic - Somalia, Oman, Mauritania, Maldives, Comoro Islands, Brunei, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia; and 1 Buddhist - Bhutan. All of these nations do not have ties with the Holy See. Despite the regime’s relentless attacks on the Catholic Church, the Pope has consistently spoken of the importance of maintaining dialogue. This recent move further demonstrates how the regime is increasingly isolating itself diplomatically. The regime expelled Monsignor Marcel Diouf, the Vatican’s chargé d’affaires; he left Nicaragua for Costa Rica on 17th March. Although the Holy See vacated their embassy, the care of the Apostolic Nunciature and its assets were entrusted to the Italian Republic following diplomatic convention. The consequence of Ortega’s abrupt and precipitous actions could turn Nicaragua into a political pariah.

#### **The Persecution of the Catholic Church**

The crackdown on the Catholic Church by the Ortega and Murillo regime seems to have no limit. Since July 2018, Ortega had repeatedly accused Catholic bishops of being “traitors” and “[coup plotters](#)”. According to a 2022 report titled ‘Nicaragua: A Persecuted Church’, by Martha Molina, there were 396 documented attacks against the Catholic church in the last four years. Recent measures taken by the regime add a new dimension to the systematic repression and silencing of the Church, its parishioners and the people of Nicaragua.

On 24th February the ‘Way of the Cross’, which recreates the passion of Christ in traditional processions all over the country, was prohibited by the police. The processions instead will be forcibly restricted by heavy police surveillance and only permitted to take place inside the churches or within their courtyards. The traditions, which date back hundreds of years, were due to take place every Friday during lent and holy week.

The regime has recently ordered the closure and legal dissolution of two universities in Nicaragua, with ties to the Episcopal Conference in Nicaragua (CEN), the Juan Pablo II Catholic University, with headquarters in Managua and branches in Chontales, Matagalpa and Granada and the Autonomous Christian University Association of Nicaragua (UCAN), with headquarters in León and branches in Chinandega, Estelí, Juigalpa Chontales, Masaya, and Matagalpa. The regime has stripped 19 universities of their legal status, including 7 of foreign origin, in addition to ordering the confiscation of their property since 2021. The impact will weigh heavily on the students as well as children and communities who rely on the universities for education, food and classes.

As a human rights defender who has tirelessly campaigned for the release of all the Nicaraguan political prisoners, I was overjoyed and relieved that **finally** the 222 political prisoners are now free from the yoke of the criminal Ortega-Murillo regime. This was the result of a combined effort of countless individuals throughout the world, NGOs, the international community, the Nicaraguan people who demanded their release and above all, the courage and resilience of the political prisoners and their families who never gave up. We must be thankful that our prayers were answered.

We must not be deceived by the so-called 'release' of the political prisoners, despite it being the first good news we have had in a long time. Let's celebrate but not forget that everything else remains the same for the people inside Nicaragua. They continue to be imprisoned by the brutal Ortega-Murillo regime: repression continues unabated on all fronts - no real opposition is permitted. Anyone who opposes the regime is either murdered, imprisoned, has to flee the country, or will be expelled. There is no freedom of the press; more than 3,000 NGOs have been stripped of their legal status and the Catholic Church continues to be under relentless attack. Most people are still suffering in a country, which has become a big prison, without hope for the future. This is evidenced by the nearly 600,000 Nicaraguans (8.7% of the population) who voted with their feet and left the country in the last 4 years. Migrating is becoming the only escape valve for many Nicaraguans.

#### **More Sanctions Are Needed**

More sanctions are needed. This is not the time to make concessions.

1. Members of Congress should pressure the Executive to implement the **Renecer Act**. Only 22 sanctions have been issued, despite the fact that we know sanctions work, because they reduce the regime's circle of power.
2. Review the **Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA)** in full, given the lack of compliance to the labour and environmental agreements, among other parts of the treaty. The suspension of the Nicaraguan regime should be considered. The steps and procedures stipulated by the agreement should be followed, in particular in Ch. 16 and Ch.17.
3. Require further compliance to strict controls on disbursements of international financial institutions. In particular, the IMF is the entity that sets the bar about which countries should continue to receive funding. The IMF is not fully adopting its own governance rules, as well as its framework of state capture.

4. US Congress should consider that there are US citizens affected by the removal of citizenship and private property, which is in violation of the Foreign Relations Appropriations Bill Section 527 (<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF10293.pdf>).
5. In particular, the USG needs to rapidly respond to the locking of bank accounts by Nicaraguan banks at the instructions of the Unidad de Analisis Financiero of the Nicaragua Government, which is in violation and a weaponization of the guidelines set by the Financial Action Taskforce (FATC) on anti-money laundering and financial crime prevention. The arbitrary discretion employed by the Nicaraguan regime can affect US citizens and businesses operating there.

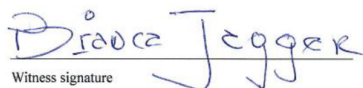
The U.S., European Union, Canada, Latin America, and other nations should coordinate efforts. The only dialogue with the regime should be to agree on a short-term road to reach democracy. Ortega and Murillo only respond to pressure.

#### **Where is Bishop Álvarez Lagos? I Demand A Proof Of Life**

According to Ortega, Bishop Álvarez Lagos is serving his sentence at La Modelo prison, one of the toughest in Latin America. Several cases of aggression have been registered against political prisoners by common criminals who entered their cells, robbed, beat, and injured them. I have recently been informed that no one close to Bishop Álvarez Lagos knows where he is. His family has not seen him since he refused to board the plane to the U.S. They have not been allowed to visit him, bring him his medicines, food or even water.

I am deeply concerned for his safety and security. The penitentiary and judicial authorities of the Ortega and Murillo regime are in breach of the [United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners](#), also known as the Nelson Mandela Rules, and are failing to comply with their obligation to report the bishop's fate and whereabouts, and to allow him to communicate with his family.

I am demanding that the Ortega-Murillo regime certify a 'Proof of Life' of Bishop Álvarez Lagos. I am also urging Daniel Ortega to allow me to come to Nicaragua to visit the bishop. He is innocent and his only crime is preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. The international community should condemn the Ortega-Murillo regime's cruel, illegal and unjust sentencing of the bishop and do everything in their power to obtain "proof of life" and ensure his immediate release. **His life is at stake.**

  
Witness signature

Mr. SMITH. Thank you so very, very much.  
I would like to now go to Mr. Maradiaga.

**STATEMENT OF FELIX MARADIAGA, J.D., PRESIDENT AND  
FOUNDER, FUNDACIN PARA LA LIBERTAD DE NICARAGUA**

Mr. MARADIAGA. Good afternoon. Let me begin by thanking Co-Chair Christopher Smith and Co-Chair Maria Salazar, also distinguished Members of Congress present here. Thank you for opening this House on several occasions to my wife, Berta Valle, and also to Victoria Cardenas, the wife of my dear friend, Juan Sebastian Chamorro. I would also like to acknowledge the presence of Berta; our daughter, Alejandra, over there; and my dear brothers, also political prisoners who were on the plane. There, they can raise their hands

[speaking in Spanish]. Thank you for being here. I am really emotional.

My written statement, which I will be summarizing, has been submitted for the record, if that is OK with you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SMITH. Without objection, it is part of the record.

Mr. MARADIAGA. Thank you.

As I Stated in my testimony during a congressional hearing, back in 2019, Ortega constituted a clear danger not only to the people of Nicaragua but also to the hemisphere. Ortega is a relic of the cold war, and he embodies a legacy of oppression against human dignity. After 611 days under extreme and inhumane prison conditions, I can only reconfirm those words.

On the day of my arrest, June 8, 2021, I was beaten by the police outside of the prosecutor's office. Once inside the notorious prison El Chipote, we were kept in complete isolation from the outside world. At some point I was even placed in a punishment cell simply for my decision to fast and pray in audible voice. No reading or writing materials were allowed, not even a Bible, which I insisted is fundamental to my Catholic faith.

Almost 4 years have passed since my previous testimony here and also my testimony at the United Nations Security Council, and despite all the efforts by the international community, the Ortega regime has only grown more ruthless. His ties with China, Iran, and Russia are stronger, and he has not been shy about expressing his hatred of the United States.

It is time to move on to a new stage of greater pressure where all the tools of diplomacy are used with all their might, including the closure of direct financing channels to the dictatorship.

The new phase of the Ortega repression has focused on persecution of the Catholic church. It must be said with total clarity, today in Nicaragua there is a religious persecution.

On February 9, 41 days ago, the regime expelled 222 political prisoners who flew to the United States under deportation. The former political prisoners who boarded that plane are Nicaraguan patriots who never thought of living outside our beloved country. These former political prisoners are facing great vulnerability and, therefore, I respectfully ask you to consider granting an accelerated path toward political asylum. In addition, we ask the administration to sign a new TPS assignment that benefits thousands of our brothers who are forcing to exile during our kidnapping.

Bishop Rolando Alvarez, the bishop of my own diocese, I come also from Matagalpa, refused to board that plane. He refused to be forced into exile, and he refused to be released because other 37 political prisoners were remained locked up. Such a courageous act of peaceful resistance cannot be ignored by the world.

I am here before you to ask you for your greatest effort to put pressure on the Ortega regime through all available diplomatic measures for the immediate and unconditional release of Monsignor Alvarez and all political prisoners in Nicaragua.

Bishop Alvarez is in prison simply because, from the pulpit, he has expressed the following beliefs, and these are direct quotes from his homilies: A Christian cannot have false neutralities. He who remains silent in the face of human rights violation has already decided.

Another of his phrases from one of the churches surrounded by paramilitaries was the following, and I quote: Why are they armed? Why do they stir the hearts of a simple and hardworking people? Why are they besieging the church as if it were a military barrack? No one here is conspiring against anyone.

All these are his exact quotes.

Other repressive acts against the Catholic church in Nicaragua has been the expulsion of the Vatican nuncio, detention of over 12 members of the church, including 7 priests. Other 18 religious were expelled from the country and dozens of religious media have been shut down.

In addition, in several locations the Sandinista police has forbidden parishioners from receiving the Eucharist inside the temple, and does not allow religious celebrations in the open, such as the recent prohibition of the Via Crucis.

For us Catholics, the Way of the Cross is a sacred devotion that commemorates Jesus Christ's last day on Earth as a man. For Christians around the world of all denominations, the crucifixion of Jesus is the ultimate symbol of nonviolence and sacrifice. We are reminded of his words: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Perhaps for that reason, it is no coincidence that the peaceful protests of April 2018 found in the Christian faith, in our faith, a profound inspiration of nonviolent resistance.

Monsignor Alvarez is in prison because he was the only voice left free to preach an inalienable truth, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

These principles so beautifully expressed in the United States Declaration of Independence have inspired entire nations. They inspired me throughout my life as a former political refugee here. But these principles are also undermined by dictatorships around the world, not only by Ortega. These are principles that transcend religions, transcend races, borders, and nationalities. Your democratic solidarity here in Congress will be instrumental in helping us defend these principles and achieve the freedom we deserve.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Maradiaga follows:]

**Statement by Felix Maradiaga**

(President and Founder, Fundación para la Libertad de Nicaragua)  
Joint Subcommittee Hearing on Nicaragua  
House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Subcommittees: Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International  
Organizations  
Western Hemisphere  
March 22, 2023

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the sub-committees. It is an honor to be here today.

My written statement—which I will be summarizing—has been submitted for the record.

I want to start by thanking Congress for its continued bipartisan support and attention to the critical situation of Nicaragua, which has clearly become the most severe human rights crisis in the Western Hemisphere. The important role of the House and the commitment of dozens of house representatives with Nicaragua is admirable.

I want to express my special gratitude for opening this House on several occasions, to my wife Berta Valle and to Vicky, the wife of Juan Sebastian. Together, they were both relentless advocates for our freedom and the freedom of all political prisoners. I would not be here if it wasn't for the perseverance of Berta, Vicky and the many people and friends who listened to them.

However, far from a complete freedom, my beloved nation continues to be oppressed by a ruthless tyrant, Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo. As I stated in my testimony during a congressional hearing back in June 2019, three months before I returned to Nicaragua knowing myself that I could face unjust and arbitrary detention: “Ortega and his inner circle constitute a clear and present danger not only to the people of Nicaragua, but also to the entire hemisphere. Ortega is a relic of the Cold War and he embodies a legacy of oppression against human dignity.”

Almost four years have passed since that previous testimony and the Ortega regime has only grown more ruthless. His ties with China, Iran and Russia are closer, and he has not been shy about expressing his hatred of the United States and against any international institution that criticizes his methods of oppression.



Despite multiple efforts by the Organization of American States and the United Nations, the regime has further isolated itself. Ortega has displayed a contempt for the international community, never before seen in the recent history of Western diplomacy. For example, on my recent visit to Geneva in the context of the UN Human Rights Council sessions, several senior diplomats agreed that even the most extreme autocracies make at least an attempt to feign respect for international treaties. In the case of Ortega, over the last three years, there is no known official response from the regime to the dozen private communications that United Nations bodies have sent. This is just one example of a reality that many of us have been warning about: The Ortega regime is on its way to becoming a kind of North Korea in our hemisphere.

Previously, in September 2018, I also testified before the United Nations Security Council. On that occasion, I warned that the Ortega regime was committing crimes against humanity and that for this reason urgent action was required from the United Nations to stop Ortega's onslaught against the citizens who were demonstrating in the streets of Nicaragua. The member states of the Security Council said on that occasion that the forum to resolve the crisis should be the Organization of American States. However, a short time later, Ortega completely ignored all the OAS resolutions and eventually broke relations with the OAS. All the efforts of political dialogue have failed. Ortega has used the goodwill of the international community to destroy all forms of opposition and civic resistance within Nicaragua. In this regard, it is essential that the international community move to a new phase of diplomatic pressure, and that it do so without timidity.

Ortega has already closed all the doors to any sincere dialogue. Therefore, any electoral solution, under the current circumstances, is unthinkable. The Nicaraguan opposition has made all the necessary attempts to find a peaceful and political solution that would allow a path towards democracy. Among those efforts there have been two frustrated attempts at dialogue. In addition, in 2021, the main opposition leaders agreed to participate in a primary election process to choose a single candidate. We did so even in the midst of repression and without guarantees of a free and fair electoral process. We did it precisely to demonstrate our willingness to explore all the democratic solutions to the crisis. Ortega, for his part, resorted to further repression and the imprisonment of all the main opposition candidates and other civil society leaders. By arresting us all, Ortega has made it clear that he has no chance of winning a free and competitive election. He also has no political will to do so because his sinister plan is to consolidate a family dictatorship.

The most recent victim of that plan is the Catholic Church of Nicaragua, which is the only institution that stood in his way. Before, Ortega and his repression agencies had been persecuting, imprisoning, and extrajudicially killing peasants, students, and activists who seek to peacefully stop the dictatorship. The new phase of repression can only be defined as religious persecution.

I know from painful personal experience throughout my life, that dictatorships cannot be dismantled with timid methods. There are people in Nicaragua willing to fight peacefully for freedom, but we cannot do it alone. The persecution of the Catholic Church is part of the perverse plan of the regime to silence all voices that advocate democracy. The most recent report from the UN Group of Experts, which says that the regime has committed crimes against humanity, opens the doors for a new phase of diplomatic pressure.

In the face of this, Nicaraguans have joined together to restore liberty, justice and democracy. We, the Nicaraguan people are fighting for our freedom. We are not asking the international community to solve our problems, but since our struggle is non-violent, we need robust international support in the form of targeted sanctions against human rights violators. In that regard, effective international pressure requires coordinated actions by key allies in the western hemisphere and around the world.

However, for our civic resistance to be effective, we ask for a more coordinated engagement from the countries in the region. In this regard, I want to congratulate Chairman McCaul's, together with Chairman Menendez, recent letter to the Presidents of Guatemala, Honduras, Salvador, and Costa Rica requesting more transparency and accountability in CABELI funding to Ortega. We also welcome the sanctions on the gold sector imposed in October 2022. This actions were important but that more pressure on individuals close to Ortega should follow. Through the amendment of Executive Order 13851, the administration created the mechanisms for further restrictions on trade which must, in effect, be used. More specifically, the NICA and RENACER Acts are powerful instruments that should be used fully by the administration to put more pressure on Ortega by exerting US influence in international financial institutions to stop loans to the regime.

My release—and the release of other 221 Nicaraguans who were arbitrarily imprisoned—will never be a complete freedom precisely because there are still 37 political prisoners in Nicaragua, including Monsignor Rolando Alvarez, Bishop of my own Diocese. Nor can there be complete freedom, when an entire population

lives in a police state. Our freedom and the denied freedom of those in prison, cannot be separated.

On 9 February, 41 days ago, the regime expelled 222 political prisoners who flew to the United States under “deportation”, a legal figure which, under the Nicaraguan constitution, is only applicable to foreign nationals. On that same day, Bishop Alvarez refused to board that plane. He refused to be forced into exile. He refused to be banished from the country he loves. But in addition, he refused to be released if other political prisoners remained locked up. Such a courageous act of peaceful resistance cannot be ignored by the world. I am here before you, to ask for your greatest effort to put pressure on the Ortega regime, through all available diplomatic measures, for the immediate and unconditional release of Monsignor Alvarez and all political prisoners in Nicaragua.

Bishop Alvarez, has been sentenced to 26 years in prison. He is in prison simply because from the pulpit he has exercised his religious freedom to preach a gospel that upholds the following beliefs:

“A Christian cannot have false neutralities. He who remains silent in the face of human rights violations has already decided.” Another of his phrases, from one of the churches surrounded by paramilitaries, was the following: “God said, love one another. So why are they armed? Why do they stir the hearts of a simple and hard-working people? Why are they besieging this church as if it were military barracks? No one here is conspiring against anyone. Thinking differently enriches us, not impoverishes us. Thinking differently does not divide us, it unites us.” All of these are exact quotes from his homilies.

Other repressive acts against the Catholic Church in Nicaragua, has been the expulsion of the Vatican nuncio, detention of over 12 members of the church, including seven priests. Other 18 religious were expelled from the country and dozens of religious media have been shut down. In addition, on several occasions the Sandinista Police has forbidden parishioners from receiving the Eucharist inside the temple and does not allow religious celebration in the open, such as the recent prohibition of the “Via Crucis.”

For us Catholics, the Way of the Cross is a sacred devotion that commemorates Jesus Christ's last day on Earth as a man. For Christians around the world of all denominations, the crucifixion of Jesus is the ultimate symbol of nonviolence and sacrifice. We are reminded of his word: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God”. Perhaps for that reason, it is no coincidence that the peaceful

protests of April 2018 found in the Christian faith a profound inspiration for nonviolent resistance.

Monsenor Alvarez is in prison for speaking truth to power. He is in prison because he was the only voice left free to preach an inalienable truth: “That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

These principles, so beautifully expressed in the United States Declaration of Independence, have inspired entire nations. But they are also principles that are undermined by dictatorships around the world. These are principles that transcend religions, races, and borders. Your democratic solidarity will be instrumental in helping us defend this principles, and achieve the freedom we deserve.

Mr. SMITH. Dr. Chamorro.

**STATEMENT OF DR. JUAN SEBASTIAN CHAMORRO, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CIVIC ALLIANCE FOR JUSTICE AND DEMOCRACY**

Dr. CHAMORRO. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Chairwoman Salazar. Chair Smith, if I may summarize the statement.

My name is Juan Sebastian Chamorro, and I was kidnapped by the police from my house the night of June 8, 2021. I was captured in front of my wife and my daughter, who left the country afterwards. My family did not know anything about me until I was able to see my sister August 30. That is almost 3 months after my arrest.

As political prisoner, I suffered arbitrary detention, arbitrary jail, inhumane treatment, threats, and constant interrogations. I was condemned to 13 years in prison in a fake trial. I was banished from my country and stripped from my nationality.

My story is a story of hundreds of Nicaraguans who decided to defend freedom, justice, and democracy. One year and 8 months, 611 days behind bars, kept in captivity, suffering injustice, but all those days only reinforced my determination to fight for freedom and to fight for democracy.

The lack of freedom and the lack of democracy in Nicaragua is the result of an absolute destruction of the State of law in Nicaragua, which started after the rise of power of Daniel Ortega in 2007. Today, as a result of this authoritarian project, in Nicaragua there is no law, there is no media, and there are no civil rights.

The repression against the Catholic church in Nicaragua is unprecedented in the history of Latin America. Nicaragua is one of only 14 countries without diplomatic relations with the Holy See and the only one in the region.

During the popular and peaceful protests of April 2018, church leaders stood firm in front of the abuses, the death, and violence that erupted from the government.

From the beginning, Bishop Alvarez was a critic of the regime, and soon began to be the focus of police harassment, which led to his house arrest August 19, 2022. Alvarez was not the only one captured. Five other priests, five seminarists, and support personnel from Alvarez's diocese were taken. We shared jail with them. We saw their suffering, but also we saw their strength, given by the faith and the strong ideas on principles of their leader, our Pastor Alvarez.

So the question here is why Ortega's war against the church. The answer is very simple. After putting all the opposition in jail, repressing all forms of protests, the dictator had to deal with the last standing voice defending freedom, defending peace, and defending human dignity. Ortega had to silence the voice of the church in order to impose his own voice of hate and violence.

Members of the joint committee, Ortega's violence goes beyond members of the church. By prohibiting processions during Holy Week, he is repressing millions of Nicaraguans who march every year, every Good Friday with devotion to express their faith.

Ortega has closed hundreds of church-affiliated charities, leaving them without support, thousands of people who depend on those

NGO's for their education, their health, and their well-being. This is unfair and this is inhumane. Innocent victims should not pay the price of the stubbornness of a single family to remain in power.

I asked one of the priests in jail what the police claimed to be was his crime. He said the police captured him because of something that he said in his sermon. When a priest is put in jail because of this, how lower can a dictatorship can go?

Unfortunately, members of this committee, I have to say that Ortega's dictatorship can go even deeper. He knows no limits.

Many of us paid with our own freedom the act of resistance against tyranny and repression. We need the international community to help us Nicaraguans in our fight for democracy and freedom. It is crucial to maintain pressure against those responsible for crimes, deaths, and abuses. I believe that justice will prevail but only if we maintain as a unified force to combat oppression.

Finally, Mr. Chairman Smith, Chairwoman Salazar, members of the committee, I would like to thank Congress, the administration, and the American people for the support we have received since our departure from Nicaragua and arrival to the United States on that plane in February. I am also thankful for the efforts to reunite our families and to expedite our legal situation.

Thank you, especially to you, Ms. Salazar.

I just would like to finish with this sentence: That from this city and from this Hill shines the light of freedom that illuminates millions of people in the world who suffer from the chains of injustice.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Chamorro follows:]

Written Statement presented to the House of Representatives  
Committee on Foreign Affairs

“The Ortega-Murillo regime’s war against the Catholic Church and civil society in Nicaragua:  
Bishop Alvarez, political prisoners and prisoners of conscience”

By  
Juan Sebastián Chamorro Ph.D.

Political activist and  
former Candidate for the Presidency of the Republic of Nicaragua

March 22th, 2023.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity.  
Thank you, Members of Congress, for putting attention of what is happening in Nicaragua

My name is Juan Sebastián Chamorro. I was kidnapped by the police from my house the night of June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021. I was captured in front of my wife and daughter, who left the country afterwards. My family did not know anything about me until I was able to see my sister August 30<sup>th</sup>, that is almost 3 months after my capture.

As political prisoner I suffered arbitrary detention and jail, inhumane treatments, threats, constant interrogations and subject to punishments if I did not obey the rules. I was condemned to 13 years in prison in a fake trial, I was banished from my country and stripped from my nationality.

My story is the story of thousands of Nicaraguans who decided to defend freedom, justice and democracy. One year and eight months, or 611 days in captivity suffering injustice only reinforced my determination to fight for freedom and democracy.

The lack of freedom and democracy in Nicaragua is the result of an absolute destruction of the state of law in Nicaragua, which started after the rise of power of Daniel Ortega in 2007.

Today, as the result of this authoritarian project, in Nicaragua

1. There is no law.
2. There is no independent media.
3. There are still several political prisoners in jail, including Monsignor Alvarez
4. The prospect of continuing suffering by millions of Nicaraguans is very strong.

The repression against the Catholic Church in Nicaragua is unprecedented in the history of Latin America. Nicaragua is the only country that has broken diplomatic ties with the Holy See in more than a century. Not even the most brutal dictatorships in Latin America had the boldness to do so. As one diplomat put it, one of the principles of Pontifical diplomacy is to stay in country no matter what, unless the mission is expelled. This is exactly what happened, making Nicaragua one of only 14 countries without diplomatic relations with the Vatican, and the only one in the region.

Ortega's attacks to the Catholic Church can be traced back to the eighties, where priests were incarcerated and expelled from the country. An important attack was the treatment against the Holy Father, Saint John Paul the Second in April of 1984, when the Government organized a protest in the middle of a solemn mass.

The exile of Monsignor Baez was a clear sign that Ortega was aiming at the hierarchy of the Church. Church leaders like him stood firm, in front of the abuses, the death and the violence that erupted to stop the peaceful popular uprising in April 2018. Monsignor Alvarez, also a member of the Episcopal Conference, was also a critic of the regime and soon began to be the focus of police harassment which led to his house arrest August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

Alvarez was not the only one captured. Four other priests, five seminarists and support personnel from Alvarez archdiocese were taken. We shared jail with them and saw their sufferings but also



their strength, given by the faith and the strong ideals and principles of their leader, our pastor Alvarez.

So, the question is: why Ortega's war against the Church? The reason is simple. After putting all the opposition in jail, repressing all forms of protests, the dictator had to deal with the last standing voice defending freedom, peace and human dignity. Ortega had to silence the voice of the Church in order to impose his message of hate and violence.

Mr. Chairman, Ortega's violence goes beyond members of the Church. By prohibiting processions during Holy Week, he is repressing millions who march, every year on Good Friday, with devotion to express their faith.

Ortega has closed hundreds of Church-affiliated charities, leaving without support thousands of people who depended on those NGO's for their education, health, and wellbeing. This is unfair and inhumane. Innocent victims should not pay the price of the stubbornness of a single family to remain in power.

I asked one of the priests what the police claimed was his crime, he said the police captured him because of something that he said in his sermon. When a priest is put in jail because of this, how lower can a dictatorship can go? Unfortunately, Mr. Chairman, the Ortega's dictatorship can go deeper, he knows no limits.

We Nicaraguans and deeply religious, and the Catholic Church plays a fundamental role in our society. I believe Ortega has made a fundamental mistake, just as he did it in the eighties, to confront the Church. Back then, it was one of the reasons behind his failure in the elections of 1990. Now, he has made the same mistake, and the attack against the Church will accelerate the final demise of his regime.

Many of us, Mr. Chairman, paid with our own freedom the act of resistance against tyranny and oppression. We need the international community to help us Nicaraguans, in our fight for democracy and freedom. It is crucial to maintain pressure against those responsible of crimes, deaths and abuses. I believe that justice will prevail, but only if we maintain as an unified force to combat oppression. The international community and the US in particular, have taken tremendous steps towards the liberation of Nicaragua, we need your support for the rest of this voyage.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank Congress, the Administration, and the American people for the support we have received since our departure from Nicaragua and arrival to the US in that plane in February. I am also thankful for the efforts to reunite our families and expedite our legal situation. Thanks to the United States for that commitment to freedom and justice.

From this city shines the light of freedom, illuminating millions throughout the world who are still suffering from the chains of injustice.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. SALAZAR. We know it.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, Dr. Chamorro. Let's hope we live up to that hope and expectation you have of us as well.

Ms. ULLMER.

**STATEMENT OF DEBORAH ULLMER, REGIONAL DIRECTOR  
FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN PROGRAMS, NA-  
TIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE**

Ms. ULLMER. Thank you, Chairman Smith, Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, and Representative Wild. Thank you for this opportunity to address the members of the joint subcommittees on this important and timely hearing on the repression in Nicaragua.

My name is Deborah Ullmer, and I am the Latin American regional director for the National Democratic Institute, and I have worked and lived in Nicaragua.

NDI's global experience of working in over 70 countries with more than 55 offices over the past 40 years shows us that when people have the choice, they choose democracy. However, they do not always have that choice. Unfortunately, that is the case in Nicaragua today. Instead, the choices offered by the dictatorial couple of Daniel Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, are silence, prison, or forced exile.

I am honored to sit here alongside my friends, Berta, Felix, and Juan Sebastian, and to be joining the fierce human rights advocate Bianca Jagger.

The situation in Nicaragua is deeply personal to me. My husband's name appears as the first name on the list of the 94 who were stripped of their citizenship on February 15.

As the honorable Members of Congress surely understand, Nicaragua under the Ortega-Murillo regime represents not just a moral and human rights challenge, but also a threat to the security of the United States. As Nicaragua becomes more autocratic, it is deepening its ties to China and Russia, granting them influence less than 2,000 miles from our border.

Additionally, Latin American autocrats are learning from one another. As Venezuela moves to pass a restrictive NGO law modeled after Nicaragua, Belarus, and Russia, they publicly praised Ortega-Murillo regime for their censorship practices.

In addition, there are disturbing signs of closing civic and political space in northern Central America, where democracy supporters, as well as those working to undermine democracy, are closely watching the United States and how the international community responds to the repression and the orchestrated democratic demise of their neighboring country. In this regard, Nicaragua threatens to destabilize Central America.

As the ongoing abuses against the Catholic church and the broader society demonstrate, there is no time to waste in developing an effective strategy for stymying the dictatorship's negative influence in the region.

I would like to propose a few areas of bipartisan engagement, if I may.

First, the upcoming second Summit for Democracy on March 29 and 30 provides an opportunity for democratic governments in

Latin America to stand together. In particular, the U.S. can work with Costa Rica and other democracies in the region to expand the alliance for development in democracy and advance high-level regional dialog.

Second, the U.S. must continue to use its voice, vote, and diplomacy within the Organization of American States to hold Nicaragua accountable for violations of the democratic charter.

Third, the international community should call for the renewal of the mandate of the U.N. Group of Experts on Nicaragua to enable continuous monitoring and documenting of State abuses and provide recommendations for accountability and justice for the victims of repression. In particular, I want to call to attention the continuous attacks and systematic violence against the indigenous communities in the northern Caribbean coast. And we must not forget the 37 remaining political prisoners, including Bishop Alvarez.

Fourth, the U.S. Government has diplomatic and economic tools to ensure that the international funding and trade are not propping up Ortega-Murillo's regime, including the bipartisan RENACER Act. In this regard, the U.S. should continue to focus sanctions on gold mining, energy, lumber production, sectors that threaten the economic interests of the Nicaraguan regime and the military.

Fifth, NDI commends the bipartisan efforts by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee to urge the Presidents of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to increase scrutiny of lending of the Central American Development Bank of Economic Integration to the Ortega-Murillo regime.

The U.S. should also use its diplomatic tools to dissuade the CABEI board and democratic partners from other regions from continuing lending to Nicaragua until actions are taken by the regime toward a path to restore democracy in concert with Nicaraguan civic and political activists.

Finally, Ambassador Kevin Sullivan and the U.S. Department of State are to be commended for their considerable efforts to ensure the safe transfer of the 222 former political prisoners to the United States and for their partnership that they have developed with the Nicaraguan diaspora in the U.S. to meet legal, housing, and mental health needs of the former prisoners, many of who come from modest, rural economic backgrounds. However, more than half of this group is living in vulnerable housing situations today.

In this regard, I applaud you, Chairwoman Salazar, for your efforts to expedite the political asylum process. In the meantime, though, I urge Congress to grant Federal resources so that these heroes can access mainstream benefits and reduce their day-to-day struggles and can concentrate on reuniting with their families.

We also urge the administration to assign new TPS status for the Nicaraguans fleeing the repression.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Ullmer follows:]

# State of Civil and Political Rights in Nicaragua

**Presented at**

"The Ortega-Murillo Regime's War Against the Catholic Church and  
Civil Society in Nicaragua: Bishop Álvarez, Political Prisoners, and  
Prisoners of Conscience"

Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights and  
International Organizations and  
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs

**Submitted by**

Deborah Ullmer  
Regional Director for  
Latin America and the Caribbean  
National Democratic Institute

**22 March 2023**



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Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro and members of the Subcommittees on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations and the Western Hemisphere, thank you for this opportunity to address the Subcommittees as part of this important and timely hearing on the "The Ortega-Murillo Regime's War Against the Catholic Church and Civil Society in Nicaragua: Bishop Álvarez, Political Prisoners, and Prisoners of Conscience."

I have worked for more than 25 years carrying out programs to strengthen democracy and human rights in Latin America and the Caribbean, including living and working in Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

The organization I represent – the National Democratic Institute (NDI) – is a non-profit, non-partisan, non-governmental organization that works in partnership around the world to strengthen and safeguard democratic institutions, processes, norms, and values to secure a better quality of life for all. NDI's multinational approach shows that while there is no single democratic model, certain core principles are shared by all democracies, including people's ability to exercise their political and civic rights and responsibilities freely.

NDI has worked in Latin America and the Caribbean for nearly 40 years, supported by several international assistance organizations, including the United States Agency for International Development, the National Endowment for Democracy, the State Department, the Swedish International Development Assistance Agency, Global Affairs Canada, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Howard G. Buffett Foundation. Today, NDI has six national offices in Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. We regularly engage other countries in regional programs on political parties, democratic governance, citizen participation, elections, gender, women and democracy, leadership, and democracy and technology. NDI's work with civic activists, reform-minded government officials and legislators, and political parties across the democratic political spectrum at national and local levels provides us with diverse perspectives into the challenges facing the region. Our work and partnerships span senior political leaders to grassroots activists and inform the observations that follow.

## State of Democracy in Latin America

From NDI's global experience of working in over 70 countries with more than 55 field offices: when people have the choice, they choose democracy. However, they do not always have a choice. Unfortunately, that is the case in Nicaragua today.

While Latin America "remains the most democratic emerging region globally — scoring below only Western Europe," according to the International [IDEA's Global State of Democracy 2022](#) report, over the past 16 years, prospects for freedoms have dimmed in the Americas. Growing threats include corruption, questioned elections, profound political polarization, social and political conflict, mis/disinformation, organized crime, and irregular migration. In 2021, Nicaragua joined Cuba and Venezuela as entrenched autocracies in the region. According to the Inter-American Dialogue, more than 600,000 Nicaraguans have fled the country in desperation since 2018 due to economic hardship and political repression caused by the regime of President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo.

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In addition, there are disturbing signs of closing civic and political space in northern Central America, where supporters of democracy are fighting for open and honest governments. They are watching how the international community responds to the repression and orchestrated demise of democracy in Nicaragua. On March 10, [Pope Francis](#) said that “the imprisonment of Catholic Bishop Rolando Álvarez reminds him of Hitler’s dictatorship.” In this regard, it is promising that more Latin American democracies have condemned what the [United Nations Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua](#) denounced as “crimes against humanity: murder, imprisonment, torture, including sexual violence, deportation, and politically motivated persecution.”

### Current State of Civil and Political Rights in Nicaragua

April 2018 seemed to herald a democratic turning point in Nicaragua’s history when widespread spontaneous grassroots protests began over poor handling of fires in indigenous reserves and later over social security reforms. The moment turned dark, however, as a threatened Ortega-Murillo government responded with an onslaught of repression that resulted in more than 325 deaths. The victims were mostly young men and women who perished at the hands of the police and pro-regime thugs, according to numerous human rights reports. Violent repression against opponents of the Ortega-Murillo authoritarian regime continues today.

In late 2020, the regime approved draconian laws that undermined fundamental freedoms and eroded the country’s rule of law. The legal system was used to delegitimize and essentially wipe out Nicaraguan civil society en masse; more than 3,000 national and international civil society organizations, independent media, charities, trade associations, and universities were deregistered and forced to close, including NDI (with an office registered since 2006). In November 2021 and 2022, illegitimate presidential and municipal elections took place after opposition candidates were summarily arrested and jailed. Combined, the sham elections completed the country’s descent into a one-party state.

On February 9, 2023, the regime released 222 Nicaraguan political prisoners to the U.S. This action likely resulted from high-level U.S. diplomacy, targeted sanctions against Ortega-Murillo’s family and their inner circle, and international pressure. While releasing the political prisoners did not provide an immediate solution to the regime’s tightening, brutal repression, it did provide Nicaraguans some hope for a U.S.-Nicaragua bilateral dialogue about a democratic future, even if momentarily. However, the Nicaraguan National Assembly subsequently stripped the former political prisoners of their citizenship and assets.

Additionally, after refusing to get on the flight to the U.S., Bishop Álvarez was sentenced to 26 years at La Modelo, a maximum security prison. A week later, the Nicaraguan Supreme Court moved to strip an additional 94 Nicaraguans of their citizenship, brand them fugitives, and order their assets confiscated, which not only violates Article 15 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the Inter-American Human Rights Convention of the right to citizenship but also demonstrates that the dictatorship is willing to continue to provoke by their repression a brain drain and economic disaster.

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Today, the choices offered by Ortega-Murillo are simple: silence, prison or forced exile. The 222 political prisoners (including students, journalists, priests, civic activists, and former presidential candidates) who have just emerged from a traumatic, life-threatening experience face enormous personal challenges. These include reuniting with their families, resettling their lives and families, finding employment to make up for lost income or canceled pensions, and taking up their activism from abroad. The release of the civic and political leaders will enable voices previously silenced by their imprisonment to join with fellow dissidents spread out across Costa Rica, the United States, and other countries to chart the way forward.

However, we must not forget about the remaining 37 political prisoners, including Bishop Álvarez, and the families of those expelled from their country or forced into exile, nor the most vulnerable groups who continue to suffer repression. In particular, NDI calls attention to Nicaragua's Indigenous communities, who continue to suffer violent attacks over land disputes. On March 12, 2023, at least six members of a Nicaraguan Indigenous group were killed and others wounded in an attack by apparent settlers. This is just the latest in a years-long string of assaults on Indigenous communities in the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua – particularly in the Bosawás Biosphere Reserve in the Northern Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region. The attacks have left at least 63 persons dead, 46 disappeared, and numerous tortured, along with houses razed and families displaced since 2015, according to the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Nicaraguan human rights and environmental activists highlight that many settlers moving onto the lands are former soldiers seeking to raise cattle, as well as partake in illicit logging and mining interests.

The regime's tacit support of settlers through impunity from the law and deregistration of charity groups, including the Catholic group Caritas, is part of the regime's broader pattern not just to silence everyday citizens but also to prevent politically neutral activists from helping to ensure basic access to health services, water, and food for low-income, and mostly rural, coastal communities. The Ortega-Murillo regime even views non-partisan social service providers as a threat to their drive for total control of the country, erasing all fundamental freedoms in the process.

### **Growing Illiberal Influence in Nicaragua**

Authoritarian leaders learn from each other and are adept at finding alternative international partners, such as China and Russia, that help them despite their repression and isolation from democratic countries. Nicaragua broke its diplomatic ties with Taiwan in December 2021 after the Organization of American States (OAS) and the community of democracies rejected the legitimacy of the presidential elections. Since China and Nicaragua resumed diplomatic relations, both countries have signed several trade agreements, according to different media reports. Nicaragua has had long ties with Russia, mostly centered on diplomatic solidarity and military relations. Notably, the Russian Dragunov, also known as the "sniper rifle," was used by the pro-regime thugs against civilians during the 2018 civil protests, according to Amnesty International's report [\*\*"Shoot to kill: Nicaragua's strategy to repress protest."\*\*](#) More recently, the President of the Russian Duma visited Nicaragua the day after Russia invaded Ukraine. In addition, the Russians have built a joint counter-narcotics training center and have installed a land-based satellite station in Managua, which according to US officials, is being used to spy on democratic activists within Nicaragua and likely throughout the hemisphere.

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## Opportunities to Advance Democracy

NDI applauds actions taken to date against Nicaraguan officials committing human rights violations by the Biden Administration and U.S. Congress. Yet, the Ortega-Murillo regime continues to take unprecedented steps to consolidate its dictatorial power over all Nicaraguans. Now more than ever, it is essential to call out the ongoing repression and violations of fundamental human rights and freedoms endured by Nicaraguans, particularly those who worked to defend democracy at tremendous personal costs. This includes the 222 released political prisoners, the 94 additionally and subsequently stripped of their citizenship and assets, the 37 remaining political prisoners, including Bishop Álvarez, and all of their family members. The U.S. and the international community should consider the following actions to continue to address ongoing human rights violations in Nicaragua.

- ▶ The Second Summit for Democracy on March 29 and 30, co-hosted by the Biden Administration and the leaders of Costa Rica, the Netherlands, South Korea, and Zambia, provides an opportunity for democratic governments in the Latin American region to stand together. This includes showing support for democracy activists, independent media, faith and private sector leaders. In particular, the U.S. can work with Costa Rica and other democracies in the region to expand the Alliance for Development in Democracy and advance high-level regional dialogue toward a democratic transition in Nicaragua.
- ▶ The U.S. must continue to use its voice, vote, and advocacy within the Organization of American States (OAS) and with member nations to hold Nicaragua accountable for violations of the OAS' Democratic Charter. The international community should call for the renewal of the mandate of the UN Group of Experts on Nicaragua to enable continuous monitoring and documenting of Nicaraguan government abuses and to provide recommendations for accountability and justice for victims of repression. This includes the key issues of corruption, human rights abuses against the Indigenous and Afro-descendent communities, and violence against women. Reaffirming democratic values and backing with actions will be key as illiberal countries such as China and Russia seek to expand their negative economic, political, and security role in Nicaragua.
- ▶ The U.S. Government has the diplomatic and economic tools to ensure that international funding and trade are not propping up the Ortega-Murillo regime, including the bipartisan Reinforcing Nicaragua's Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform Act of 2021 (RENACER Act). In this regard, the U.S. should continue to focus sanctions on the gold mining and energy and lumber production, sectors that threaten the economic interests of the regime. It will also send an important message to neighboring governments already demonstrating dictatorial tendencies.
- ▶ NDI commends the bipartisan efforts by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Menendez and the House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman McCaul to urge the presidents of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to increase scrutiny of lending by the Central American Development Bank of Economic Integration (CABEI) to the Ortega-Murillo regime. The U.S. should use its diplomatic tools to also urge CABEI Board members to re-consider continued lending to Nicaragua until actions are taken by the regime toward a path to restore democracy in concert with Nicaraguan civic and political activists.



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- ▶ NDI also highlights the efforts of Nicaraguans – both in the country and in exile – to find common ground on a path for peaceful change when a political opening occurs. These efforts can be bolstered by sustained U.S. democracy assistance that supports independent journalists, and civic, environmental, human rights, and youth activists, and the democratic opposition to 1) shine a light on the crimes against humanity being perpetrated by the Nicaraguan regime; 2) monitor international financial investment bank loans; 3) disrupt information manipulation; and 4) generate a consensus toward a democratic transition. A return to democracy will likely only succeed when there are Nicaraguan efforts bolstered with international support.
  - ▶ Finally, the U.S. Department of State is to be commended for its considerable efforts to ensure the safe transfer of the 222 former political prisoners to the U.S. and for the partnership that it has developed with the Nicaraguan diaspora and U.S. civil society organizations to meet the legal, housing, health, and mental health needs of the former prisoners, many of whom come from modest, rural economic backgrounds. While the humanitarian parole for two years allows the former prisoners to remain in the U.S. and apply for expedited work visas, this group's suffering has been compounded by being stateless, the confiscation of their assets, and threats of reprisals against loved ones left behind. We hope that their refugee/political asylum applications can also be expedited so that the former prisoners, as well as the group of 94 stateless individuals, can access mainstream benefits and reduce their day-to-day struggles. We also urge the U.S. to continue to identify ways to expeditiously reunite families.

Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, and members of the Subcommittees on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations, and the Western Hemisphere, thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Ms. Ullmer.

Let me just start off by saying how grateful all of us are, and I say that in a bipartisan way, for the tremendous work all of you have done. I mean, you are heroes. And to put up with so much abuse is just—and to be resilient the way you are is inspiring to all of us. You are true, true leaders. And someday, there will be a free and Democratic Nicaragua, and you will be their walking point. So it is so encouraging to hear you.

And, you know, you mentioned a moment ago about the new phase of repression against the church and against political prisoners—well, and against the church. We need a new phase in Washington of activism. Yes, we have three fine laws, all very fine laws, and Ms. Salazar played a key role in the latest one.

But there needs to be, I think, a relooking at everything, especially as we notice that Ortega has recently had the Iranian Foreign Minister there in Managua on February 1st. He has now opened up an outpost in Crimea, forging more of a relationship with Russia. And, of course, he no longer supports Taiwan and has reneged on that Democratic country. And it is a country, even though the PRC does not like to even think of it that way. So he is realigning himself.

And I think, Ms. Ullmer, your last statement about the CABEL bank, you know, some of the numbers we have seen is that the Ortega regime, in the last few years, has got 3.49 billion, and there is still 1.97 billion available for usage. That needs to be cutoff immediately. I mean, these kinds of actions call for very, very strong response. If not, the dictatorship of Ortega, his dictatorship, will just wait it out, wait until the coast clears and people aren't as outraged as they should be. We need to sustain that outrage, but take much more meaningful action.

So any thoughts you have in regards to additional laws? Do we need to revisit CAFTA? And, you know, that would be very difficult. There are some difficulties in doing that. But we need to look at every way forward to put the pressure on Daniel Ortega.

There needs to be visits. You know, the international community, including us, need to say—minimally, the ICRC needs to get in and see Bishop Alvarez and the other 37 political prisoners as they should have gotten in to see you. We need to try to get down there. I would love—and I would ask Ortega right now. I will come down. And I would not be alone.

Ms. SALAZAR. I want to go, too.

Mr. SMITH. I know you would. And to visit the prisons. And I have actually been in prisons. I have got into Perm Camp 35, where they found Sharansky was in the 1980's. You know, Gusmao in Indonesia, I got into his gulag and met with him while he was in captivity. And then Frank Wolf and I went and we visited with a number of Tiananmen Square activists in Beijing Prison Number One right after Tiananmen Square.

So Ortega could open up the door, and we are asking him right now to let us come and visit and ascertain the well-being or lack thereof of Bishop Alvarez and the others.

And let me just finally say, and then anything you would like to say. You know, I have been in Congress 43 years. I have seen a series of dictatorships rise and fall, particularly in the East bloc

countries. One of the countries that I focused on so robustly was on Romania and Nicolae Ceausescu. And I remember, for 10 years, we kept pushing because he went after the church and churches and the Jewish synagogues with such a hatred of God. And it is what Solzhenitsyn said it was. It is not atheism. It is a hatred of God and his creatures, us, the human beings.

So I think we need to really ratchet up the pressure. I am glad the Pope has spoken out. We were asking him to speak out on your behalf, and now he has truly found his voice, and that needs to be sustained. And you did mention how the charities—how are the poor and those struggling making it without the faith-based entities that just so compassionately provide all that charitable work in Nicaragua? You might want to answer that as well. But any comments, please.

Mr. MARADIAGA. Thank you for your words. I would like to offer some ideas. I know that my colleagues here have some additional insight. But I would like to start focusing on one particular issue after the time that Juan Sebastian, Medardo Mairena, another of the very important leaders of the opposition in Nicaragua who was among the 222, also two former political prisoners and human rights defenders, Yaritza and Solange, who suffered in prison and highlighted a particular situation of women in the prisons of Nicaragua. So we composed a delegation and spent time with missions at the U.N. Security Council and many other diplomatic missions in Europe.

So to that particular point, I think that transatlantic cooperation is very, very important. I cannot stop highlighting the importance of multilateral action. And why? Well, because Ortega, for years, has been using—of course, as an excuse—the difficult history of Nicaragua and the United States. But now we see that even former allies of Ortega are speaking loudly. So we have a very important window of opportunity to work, first of all, with Latin American countries. I welcome the actions of countries Colombia, Brazil, Argentina. The voice of Chile is very important.

This was a point that I highlighted about 3 years ago, and we found it very difficult to mobilize partners in South America. And we have that window of opportunity. And we are seeing the same thing with Europe.

So trying to build these new diplomatic tools together with European and South American countries is very, very important because, for years, Ortega has been playing that game of trying to excuse himself because of the so-called persecution of the United States in the context of a cold war that he is trying to revive. So that is one point.

The second point is that, by expelling us from the country, Ortega is trying to replicate what many dictators have done over the years, which is basically shut down the opposition by sending us outside. It is really, really hard to operate from abroad. It is really, really hard to keep a voice when you are stripped of your nationality. When you are in a country that—as much as we admire and like the U.S., our plans have been always to live, work, and serve our people back in Nicaragua. So anything you can do through acts of Congress.

And I know that the two cochairs have been very important in their leadership in that particular action. Anything you can do in giving a platform for this group of former political prisoners in terms of a fast track toward political asylum, in terms of getting travel documents so we can travel around the world and tell this story. I cannot stop telling how hard it is to travel under these circumstances. So by not traveling, Ortega is trying to shut down our voices.

And I understand the bureaucracy is complicated, but those are just immediate ideas. I am sure that my colleagues here are going to have additional insights. Thank you.

Mr. CHAMARRO. I would just like to add to my colleague's comment about the humanitarian crisis that, unfortunately, this wonderful trip brought us to the U.S. but also separated families. Husbands, wives, children, elderly are in Nicaragua now, and they are being used by the dictator as hostages. So this is an extremely serious concern that we have for our—all the people that came in the plane, that some actions are needed to put their families together. And I appreciate the efforts of Representative Salazar, in particular, to write the administration to expedite these processes because we have women who have their children back home, and they need to be united—reunited. So I just want to stress this humanitarian crisis that we are also facing. Yes. Thank you.

Ms. ULLMER. Thank you. Chairman Smith, you mentioned DR-CAFTA. We do not actually need a new law. In RENACER, there is a specification there, as Representative Salazar knows, to review DR-CAFTA. I do think it should be reviewed. They are violating the Democratic clause of the trade.

Second, we have called in the past for a special envoy to coordinate the different Federal institutions and the actions, coordinate sanctions, coordinate diplomacy, and coordinate Democratic assistance so that everything is in lockstep.

And finally, I just want to mention on this last point that Juan Sebastian just mentioned in reuniting the families. We have found how difficult it is because Ortega also stripped passports from family members when some of the family members were trying to flee. So they do not have travel documents, and therefore they cannot even apply to our humanitarian parole.

So I would urge everything that the U.S. embassy in Managua and others can do to help pressure to obtain those travel documents, particularly for the children, which we are finding—and to the community of democracies in the region to help provide a safe passage so that they can be reunited with their family members. Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. I yield to Chairwoman Salazar.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you. Well, you know, I am not Nicaraguan, but I feel myself very close to you as a journalist.

You have been here for what, 42 years? 43 years? 43. Jesus.

Mr. SMITH. 43. Who is counting?

Ms. SALAZAR. While you were in Congress serving the country, I was a journalist. And I was in Nicaragua for many years, so I know the story very well. And I cannot explain to you how delightful it feels for me to be able to be in front of you. Really, as I said in the beginning, I never really thought—I had my doubts, and I

am sure that you did too—that you were going to be able to get out of that dungeon. So now I am going to ask you a few questions because I do want to hear what happened.

But my first question is to all of you. To both of you. It is that, Somoza, in his 45 years of dictatorship, never dared to touch the Catholic church. That was sacred. And Somoza was not a very good guy. So my question is, what does Ortega know or is willing to risk by doing what he is doing against such a powerful institution? You guys are the two most Catholic marianos countries in the hemisphere. So he knows that by touching the Catholic church, he is touching a very deep nerve. Why does he dare to do that? Either one of you.

Mr. CHAMARRO. As I said in my testimony, the message of the leaders of the Catholic church were very powerful. Especially during April 2018, they defended with a strong voice. And Ortega does not appreciate that. He does not like criticism. Of course, this is something that started to build in 2018. He did not touch the priest in 2018. But then he sent into exile Monsignor Baez. That was the first sign that he was attacking the hierarchy of the Catholic church. So he started elevating the heat, so to speak, until he had no other choice than to put into house arrest the monsignor. But it is with the expectation that he will take the plane.

And then the reason why the—Ortega in this press conference starts to—as Bianca was saying, he was very violent against the Bishop. So I think it is a sense of hate. He does not want to be criticized. I think that is a big mistake that he also did in the 1980's. He attacked the Cardinal Rual (ph) who later, you know, passed lines. So that was one of the mistakes. The other one was to get in trouble with the U.S. as well. So now he is repeating the two things.

Ms. SALAZAR. Good. So he can wind up like he did in 1989.

Mr. CHAMARRO. So I would expect that these mistakes are going to help to accelerate the demise of the regime.

Mr. MARADIAGA. I would like to add some perspective. I fully agree with everything Juan Sebastian has said. But in addition to that, it is very important to understand Ortega from his own perspective. It is very hard because none of us will ever think the way he thinks. But this guy is a tyrant. This guy is really willing to bet anything to push his plan, and his plan is nothing else but a dynastic dictatorship. And he knows that the Catholic church is the only institution in his way—standing in his way. That is one thing.

Also, the second thing is that he—from his perspective, international community is weak. He perceives international organizations—and I say this based on the interviews that I have done to some people, some of them among the 222 that, at some point, were part of the regime and found the regime, as you clearly defined it, very satanic. And because of their Catholic faith, they decided to abandon the regime. So we have been talking to some of them.

And Ortega believes that the international community is weak and postmodern, that he, in a way, can push this, and he is betting on establishing a regime in Latin America that I can only describe as something similar to North Korea.

Ms. SALAZAR. The international community is the United States. Therefore, he is seeing the Biden administration as weak, which I

have. And I am a very bipartisan member. I have asked the White House to pronounce itself and to say to Ortega and to Murillo, you cannot steal the country. And we have not heard it. I am glad that President Biden signed the RENACER law, but I think a stronger statement from the White House would have been helpful.

So my question is, what stops Ortega from continuing to ransack the country?

Mr. CHAMARRO. Well, first of all, the importance of putting more and more pressure on the international front. This report on experts mentioning, for the first time, *crímenes de la humanidad*, crimes against humanity—I think it is a step toward the final destination of all these cases in an international course.

Ms. SALAZAR. What could really hurt him? Economic sanctions?

Mr. CHAMARRO. I think the resources—the importance of keep sanctioning individuals that are responsible for the crimes, the judges, the police officers, the institutions that are controlled by the family, and that they are able to get resources to help their administration are fundamental.

Ms. SALAZAR. So if we make a list of individuals from the police, the judges, people that are in charge of the repressive apparatus, and we create that list just like we did with Venezuela, will that hurt him?

Mr. CHAMARRO. It is hurting already, I think. It is hurting because this is weakening the unity of the party because many of those officials fear after the individual sanctions what is going to happen to them and their families. So it is fundamental to find those cracks within the State apparatus, which I think—and this is something that probably Felix shares with me. We were in this jail, and we saw how weak the Ortega government was in the sense of support, even from his own—

Ms. SALAZAR. Where did you see the weaknesses? Where did you see the weaknesses?

Mr. CHAMARRO. I think the people from the government, many public officials, are really, really—they do not want to—they do not want this to continue. Many of them are Catholics. And that the force—the source of the force of the government of Ortega is having this through the arms of the army and the military. But there are thousands of people who are still working there for necessity. They are really fed up with what is going on. And that is a weakness that we perceive.

Ms. SALAZAR. Either one of you, you were the only country in Latin America that was able to get rid of a communist dictatorship through free and fair elections, thanks to a guy by the name of Ronald Reagan and Julieta Chamarro (ph), right? What you guys used to call La Vida Maria.

We know that the opposition has been decimated. The question is, what can we, the United States, do knowing that you guys armed yourself in something called the Contras, that you guys are very brave, and that maybe that will be the only way to get rid of another communist dictatorship, the Sandinista move?

So my question is, do you see any possibilities of having Contra No. 2?

Mr. MARADIAGA. I hope not. And let me respond to your question by an extraordinary coincidence. 10 years ago, I met in Nicaragua

this amazing young lady. She is now a special envoy on people with disabilities. Sara Minkara. I was on her board. And a week ago, when I went to Geneva, I saw Sara, and we are now talking about 2,000 Nicaraguans who have been injured and have disabilities. 10 years ago, we were having the same conversation with Nicas with disabilities because of the Contra war. So my faith, my idea—and all of us have shared that—is that we need to find every diplomatic measure to avoid a civil conflict because Nicaragua is very volatile.

So back to your question, I think it is a clear and present danger. We Nicaraguans are not necessarily the most peaceful country in Latin America based on our history. 70 armed conflicts in 200 years. So it is very—it is highly likely if we do not find a Democratic and peaceful, nonviolent path.

So what to do? Provide resources for these nonviolent voices. Find everything available in the diplomatic toolkit. I think that we need to push really hard on the pension funds of the Nicaraguan Army. It is something that has not been mentioned. I think that is another thing. And, of course, the RENACER Act provides all those tools. Thank you.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thank you.

Thank you, Chair.

Ms. JAGGER. Excuse me, may I, Congressman?

Mr. SMITH. Oh, yes. Bianca, go ahead.

Ms. JAGGER. Congressman Chris Smith.

I would like to come back to Monsignor Alvarez to say, again, how deeply concerned I am for the safety and security, and to say the penitentiary and judicial authorities of the Ortega and Murillo regime are in breach of the United Nations standard minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners, also known as the Nelson Mandela rules, and are failing to comply with their obligation to report the Bishop's fate and whereabouts and to allow him to communicate with his family.

In addition, one more time, I would like to say that I am demanding that the Ortega-Murillo regime satisfy the proof of life of Bishop Alvarez Lagos. And I also am urging Daniel Ortega to allow me to come to Nicaragua to visit the Bishop. He is an innocent man, and his only crime is preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I am appealing to him because, in 1979—and I think that I have said that before to you, Congressman Smith—is that Somoza allowed me to visit the jail, the same jail, where Bishop Alvarez is today. And that it will be a good thing, as he says that he is a Christian and that the person that he admires the most is Jesus Christ. This Easter time would be the right time for him to allow the Red Cross, myself, or anyone—any member of his family to visit him.

But with regards to the question that has been asked about what else can be done, I think that Members of Congress should encourage the executive to implement the RENACER Act. Only 22 sanctions have been issued, despite the fact that we know sanctions work because they reduced the regime's circle of power.

Review the Dominican Republic Central America Free Trade Agreement. I am always surprised that I will be advocating this. That in full, given the lack of compliance to the labor and environmental agreements among other parts of the treaty, the suspension

of the Nicaraguan regime should be considered. These steps and procedures as stipulated by the agreement should be followed, in particular, number 16 and 17.

And the other important thing that I think that some of the other witnesses have mentioned is they require that further compliance to strict controls of the disbursement of international financial institutions. In particular, the IMF, who is the entity that sets the bar about which country should continue to receive funding. The IMF is not fully adopting its own governance rules as well as its framework of State capture.

And U.S. Congress should concede that there are U.S. citizens affected by the removal of citizenship and private property, which is a violation of the Foreign Relations Appropriations Bill.

I will say that, in particular, the USG needs to rapidly respond to the locking of bank accounts by Nicaraguan banks at the instructions of the Unidad de Analisis Financiero of the Nicaraguan government. And I think that it is important that the U.S., the European Union, Canada, Latin America, and other nations should coordinate efforts. The only dialog with the regime should be to agree on a short-term road to reach democracy.

Ortega and Murillo only respond to pressure. And let's not forget that GBS is critical for the 60,000 to 70,000 Nicaraguans who are today illegally in the United States. Thank you very much.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much.

Ms. WILD.

Ms. WILD. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. And thank you all for being here.

I know I said it in my opening remarks. I think that it is notable that you are here for the inaugural joint hearing of the Subcommittee on Global Health and Human Rights, of which I enjoy the pleasure of being the ranking member, as well as the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere. Obviously, this is a very important topic for us, the fact that this is our first hearing.

Dr. Chamarro, I also want to thank you for your profound words about what we do here on Capitol Hill and its impact on repressed or oppressed people around the world. We try. Those of us on this committee or subcommittees strive for that. And I think it is really important that, at a time when the United States is very much involved in supporting another country that has been experiencing crimes against humanity, that we recognize that there are other countries in the world where this is happening and that we shed light on those that are lesser known.

If I have time—just so you can be thinking about this, Mr. Maradiaga, because I want to go to Ms. Ullmer next. I did want to followup on your point about pushing on the pension funds of the Nicaraguan Army. But I do not know that I am going to have time for it. But I wanted to give you that as a heads up.

Ms. Ullmer, you know, I want to talk for a moment—or ask you specifically about what is happening to civil society organizations in Nicaragua. We understand that at least 3,100 such organizations have been shut down since 2018. And I know you know what civil society organizations are, but for the benefit of those who may be listening who may not fully understand what I mean by that term, these are voluntary citizen groups that are an important



source of information in many countries for people to understand what is happening in their government, sometimes to challenge what is happening in their government, to monitor government policies, and hold government accountable. It ranges from professional associations and foundations, to independent research institutes, faith-based organizations, labor unions. These can all be considered civil society organizations.

Here in the U.S., just so that our American listeners can relate to this, that would include the Rotary, The Conservation Fund, Human Rights Watch, the American Bar Association, and The Heritage Foundation. So civil society organizations play an important role here in the United States as well as in countries around the world.

So with that as my preface, what I would like to ask you, Ms. Ullmer, is, can you describe the regime's crackdown on these kinds of organizations and what role it has been playing in the destruction of civic life in the broader authoritarian regime?

Ms. ULLMER. Thank you, Ranking Chairwoman Wild. NDI was also stripped of its registration not too long ago.

I worked in the country back in 2005, and we started seeing the Democratic closure since 2008. It did not happen—it happened rapidly since 2018, but I want to make that point. Because since 2008, civil society closures started to happen under Ortega-Murillo. It started with election observation rights. The election observers—national election observers who were fielding the largest election observation in 2008 from five municipal races were kicked out of the polls. These are citizens, right? It is all types of NGO's that have been closed.

And there are two different types of repercussions. One is the humanitarian repercussion, which is extensive. Because of the Catholic charities, Caritas, and others who have also lost their registration, the NGO's that have been canceled are being cutoff from critical services. This includes water and sanitation programs, construction and maintenance of roads, medical care, psychosocial care, and elderly care. The NGO's focusing on promoting women's rights, indigenous rights, LGBTQI+ rights, providing space for individuals and groups to safely engage and work jointly on issues that matter to Nicaraguans.

Under the regime, citizens and the few NGO's that remain will continue to need resources to prosper and resources that the government has taken away. But there has also been efforts for Democratic change, and these NGO's have also been closed.

And so I call on Congress and others to please continue Democratic assistance. Many times, our own government and others shy away, right, when they think nothing can be done in the country. We have to continue to support Nicaraguans inside and those now that are on the outside to come to a consensus on what their Democratic future looks like.

I would say that this support includes independent journalists, civic human rights, environmental, and youth activists among others, and the Democratic opposition to shine a light on the crimes against humanity that are being perpetrated by the regime, to monitor international financial investment bank loans, to disrupt

information manipulation, and to generate a consensus toward a Democratic transition. Thank you.

Ms. WILD. Thank you. I appreciate that.

I want to give my colleagues an opportunity. So if we get a second round, I will come back with that question. But I also invite my colleagues, if they want to ask that question, go ahead. I won't be offended.

And I yield back.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Ms. Wild.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. Thank you, Mr. Chair. This does not seem to be working. Is it? OK. This is odd. OK.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. And I think we would all welcome an opportunity to dig deeper into this and go down. So I heard that come up earlier.

I want to thank you all for being here today. And, of course, I want to recognize Mr. Maradiaga and Dr. Chamorro, in particular, for what you all have endured, for your resilience, for your truth, and for your bravery in sharing your stories.

Ortega's systematic silencing of civil society and use of crimes against humanity to eradicate political opposition has been incredibly alarming and calls for a robust and targeted response. In any country, it is the activists, grassroots, NGO's, religious organizations, and civil society groups that speak truth to power and channel resistance to oppressive policies. And as we explore how Congress can continue to confront Ortega's authoritarianism, I believe any effective response to the regime's consolidation of power will have to involve supporting and securing space for civil society.

You know, Ortega has arrested or exiled opposition candidates, regime critics, journalists, and human rights activists. To me, it sounds so much like Putin. And we have an obligation to stand up and say that.

I would like to hear more about the repression that is taking place in Nicaragua. Widespread human rights violations, the shuttering of NGO's, and the expulsion of political prisoners is—unfortunately, it has been well-documented. But what is equally concerning to me and is less documented are the threats to the indigenous and Afro-Nicaraguan communities who already face disproportionate violence, persecution, and discrimination by their fellow citizens and the State which sanctions it.

So, Ms. Ullmer, can you speak to how the Ortega regime's repression has impacted these vulnerable and historically marginalized communities, both those still in Nicaragua and those who have been forced to flee, and what recommendations do you have for Congress to better support human rights defenders in these communities?

Ms. ULLMER. Thank you for your question. As you mentioned, Nicaragua's indigenous communities continue to suffer violent attacks over land disputes. Earlier this month, in fact, at least six members of a Nicaraguan indigenous group were killed and others wounded in an attack by apparent settlers. This is just the latest in a year's long string of assaults on indigenous communities on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, particularly the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve in the northern Caribbean coast.

The attacks have left at least 63 persons dead, 46 disappeared, and numerous tortured, along with houses razed and families displaced since 2015 according to the United Nations Human Rights Office and the high commissioner.

Nicaraguan human rights activists and environmental activists highlight that many settlers moving onto the land are former soldiers seeking to raise cattle as well as partake in illicit logging and mining interests. The U.S. can sanction those military and those former military members who are committing these crimes against humanity and stealing their land and causing a dire effect on the community's livelihood. Thank you.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. Thank you. And I just have one additional question. As we have seen the attack on Brazil's capital in January, we know that illiberal tactics can be replicated, and strong men learn from strong men.

So, Mr. Maradiaga and Dr. Chamorro, do you believe that other countries sliding toward authoritarianism, like El Salvador and Guatemala, might try to implement repressive strategies seen in Nicaragua? And what warning signs should we be tracking here that, you know, will allow us to see if they are indicating that they are going down this route?

Mr. CHAMARRO. That is a very important question because it leads to what is going on in other countries. And my recommendation is to be aware of the smallest sign of authoritarianism. Ortega did not become the dictator that he is right now overnight. He basically started with changing this law, appointing these other people, and suddenly—or throughout the first years of his administration, he started to amass all this power. And many people in Nicaragua were silent about this and indifferent.

So my recommendation to avoid things like Nicaragua happening elsewhere is to be very aware of signs of attacking the institutionality, the State of law, the rule of law in neighboring countries, and the respect for human rights and respect for rights in general, and try to make as much noise, as much problem as possible to those early signs because these are a symptom of—this is unfortunately—for Latin American history, strong men have been always present. Somoza is a good example, although Ortega has gone beyond what Somoza did.

But it is a pattern that you will see in dictatorships being formed and developing. And the importance of international community, the U.S., to raise flags when things are happening at an early stage because it might be possible to save the situation while those institutions are still independent. But when you lose the independence of the judiciary, for example—which is the case that Ortega did it underground back in the 1990's by getting some judges in local districts like that. This was the first sign, and we did not see it, unfortunately, until it was too late. And now the Supreme Court is basically, you know, a puppet of Ortega.

So to be aware of all these signs that are always present, you know, and defend institutions. Defend the rule of law and defend independence of powers. I think it is fundamental to keep an eye on that. And the role of NGO's, dealing with them. In democracy, institutions are fundamental.

Mr. MARADIAGA. If I may add, yes. The answer is yes. I see some signs. And to add to the very insightful points of Juan Sebastian, one is election transparency. Deborah and I worked for many, many years in Nicaragua on that particular point. And I think that that is the very first sign of the path toward dictatorship.

And we saw that when many, many international organizations left Nicaragua. The U.S. was the only lifeline to local transparency organizations. So my own institute created in 2003 by Mr. Javier Melendez and all the people who joined that institute, it was the first think tank closed and shut down in Nicaragua in 2018 precisely because of our work in transparency. So that is one sign.

Also, persecution of civil society in media. Also, the disregard of fundamental human rights. For example, the presumption of innocence under the excuse of law and order and self-determination. I think that those are signs that are becoming more and more common.

Also, I am sad to say that, as many other people, I came to Washington many, many times here. My first meeting was actually in 2007. And it was sad to see, in these same halls, many lobbyists paid by Nicaraguan conglomerates fighting against the ideas that, at that time, we were pushing with some other human rights organizations. So I think that monitoring very carefully who lobbies for those groups here in Washington because these groups tend to have allies, believe it or not, even in this country.

So I think it is very important to—with all due respect, you are asking me for ideas. So I think that lobbying for criminals and lobbying for these authoritarian autocrats is inexcusable. Thank you.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. [Speaking foreign language.]

And I will yield back my time.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much.

I would like to yield to French Hill.

Mr. HILL. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman and Madam Chair. Thank you for this combination hearing.

And it is depressing to me that we, once again, are here in the Capitol hearing about the criminality and outrage created by the regime in Ortega in Nicaragua. But I am glad you are here. I am glad you stood up for your country. And I am glad you are sharing the story with the American citizens and with leaders in Congress. It is just a shame that it has continued like this.

I sort of consider another—it is not a frozen conflict. You know, that is a European term. We have frozen conflicts in Syria. We have a frozen conflict in Venezuela. But this is not a frozen conflict. This is an active regime working against its own citizens in the western hemisphere actively against the interest of, not only the people of Nicaragua and the regions of Central America, but, of course, the United States. And I find that, as I said, depressing. But I am glad you are here.

So the European Union and the United Kingdom have joined us in sanctioning the Ortega regime. And in my four terms in Congress, I have seen—we apply sanctions many times on many bad actors. But what concerns me is lack of enforcement. Not only by the United States, by the private sector in the United States, but also in Europe and in the United Kingdom in this particular example.

And Chair Smith knows well, we see no better example other than the Caesar sanctions in Syria against the Assad regime, an area I know well. And in addition to that, we have got the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act. But again, we are using voice and vote. And this is good. We need to use voice and vote. Mr. Davidson and I serve on the House Financial Services Committee. We are big on telling the IMF and the World Bank how to operate. But the point is, we do not control those operations. And so we need to try to fill these gaps that we see in this.

And that is why I am very interested, Mr. Chairman—the leadership by Chair McCaul and Ranking Member Rish—in pressing the governments in Central America to restrict lending from the Central American Bank For Economic Integration. This is an entity that clearly is not living up to its charter. And while we do not have, again, a voice or vote or board membership there, we can use our influence to press the governments that do, including Taiwan, to take significant action.

Also, in 2021, the IMF general allocation of special drawing rights awarded the Nicaragua regime, the Ortega regime, \$330 million. And I fought against that mightily in that timeframe, and I have legislation that I hope we can implement, H.R. 605, the Special Drawing Rights Oversight Act, which changes how the IMF awards special drawing rights and that we do not give central bank assets to criminal regimes. Russia, China, Iran. And the Treasury's response is, well, they are sanctioned so they cannot use them. Well, that is not how the world works behind the scenes. So I hope we can do that.

And then obviously, I commend the Pope for his actions. And, you know, once again, what has happened in Nicaragua has demonstrated that Christians are the most persecuted religion on the planet, and that includes here in this country as well. So we all pray for the church and Nicaragua and Cardinal Zen in China.

So how do we strengthen our sanctions? I would like to hear from each one of you. How does the United States working with Europeans—how can we make stronger sanctions be more effective at pressing this regime?

Please.

Mr. MARADIAGA. Yes. I would like to respond to that combined with a question that Congresswoman Kamlager provided before with the persecution of minorities as an example of how these regimes work.

One of the conditions for loans and grants in terms of climate change, for example, is that local communities actually request its funds. And prior to my arrest, I was able to document that many of these requests were created by fake local community leaders. How does it work? Well, in Nicaragua, based on the autonomy law, these communities are organized based on their ethnic group.

So Ortega simply asks for someone that calls himself part of an Afro-Caribbean community or the Mosquito community. They simply displace and erase the locally elected members of these minorities to simply fill the checklist of these international funds. And these international organizations say, oh, we cannot sanction or cut these funds in terms of helping the environment because it is our request for the community.

So simply by looking to those little details, simply by pushing and pushing more and not allowing these autocrats to hide themselves in technicalities, I think would be a great step forward. Thank you.

Mr. HILL. Thank you. That is helpful. Does anyone else want to add to that? And then I will ask a final question.

Mr. Chairman, thanks for your willingness to let me be slightly over.

Can we remove Nicaragua from the Free Trade Agreement—Central American Dominican Free Trade Agreement, and how do we do that?

Ms. Ullmer, do you have a comment on that?

Ms. ULLMER. Thank you. Yes. On the sanctions, we should be focusing more sanctions on lumber, gold mining, and energy production. That will threaten their economic interest. Not just of the regime, but also the military.

Felix mentioned earlier, we haven't touched the military pensions. They have their funds invested in the United States. We need to focus on that. I think it is also going to send an important message to the neighboring countries where we are sanctioning as well.

In terms of DR-CAFTA, yes, RENACER calls for the review of DR-CAFTA. I do think we should review it. Thank you.

Mr. HILL. Thank you.

And thank you, Mr. Chairman and Madam Chair. I yield back.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Hill.

I would like to now yield to Mr. Davidson.

Mr. DAVIDSON. Thank you, Chairman, Chairwoman. Thank you for hosting this hearing. And thank you all for traveling here, and frankly for your fight to really make your country and our relationship with Nicaragua stronger, and really just to solidify the kind of values that really—so many people in Nicaragua hold, but sometimes seems at odds with the values that their government holds. So that is not uncommon around the world. The people are pretty good. Sometimes the government, not so much. And so thanks for fighting against that in Nicaragua.

Kind of picking up where Mr. Hill left off, the Central American Bank For Economic Integration is a principal provider for Nicaragua's economic development, especially in infrastructure projects. And in the last few years, CABI has lent Ortega \$3.5 billion. So—out of a GDP, at least nominally, of about 14 billion. So a pretty substantial portion of cash inflow into the Ortega regime.

Mr. Maradiaga, do you think the Ortega regime would be able to carry out its widescale crackdown on dissonance without this cash?

Mr. MARADIAGA. It would make it certainly more difficult to him. You know, these tyrants will always find all the tools of repression. But certainly, these resources are definitely helping him to continue the repression.

Mr. DAVIDSON. Thank you for that. So it is obviously hard, as multiple folks today have pointed out, for us since we do not have a board seat directly on these dollars. And, of course, we have lots of other things. Mr. Hill highlighted sanctions and other tools. They do not seem to quite be getting at it.

I really, Ms. Ullmer, liked your comment about the pensions and other things that we might ought to take a look at. But within CABEL itself, how do we influence our allies, you know, to send a message—not just with human rights, not just with—but particularly, you look at, you know, Bishop Alvarez sitting in jail. In the midst of this, people are putting money there. And at some level, isn't it kind of additionally risky to put such a concentration—a disproportionate amount of CABEL's assets to be deployed in Nicaragua? How do we influence that as the United States?

Mr. CHAMARRO. I think CABEL's Central American bank—so they have a rule of distributing all the available funds among the original founder members of the bank.

So I think one fundamental issue is to ask CABEL to follow what many organizations throughout the world do, and that is to follow guidelines, environmental guidelines, human rights guidelines, for example, that are not present in this particular bank. So I think by pressing, politically speaking in international forums for CABEL to follow those guidelines, will be important.

The other thing is that the money that CABEL lends comes from elsewhere. Some other sources. So to put pressure on those who finance CABEL to restrict their funding following those guidelines.

And finally, I think a fundamental issue here is to ask CABEL to obey procurement rules, international procurement rules, because we have found that this is a source of corruption for contracts. So we want those rules to be constructed, of course, because it will help communities, but we do not want to—we want those companies who construct to do it following procurement guidelines, international guidelines, and do it in a competitive way.

So we have found that many of the contractors there using CABEL's money are associated to the regime. So by following those rules—which I think are not that hard to ask because it is what most lending institutions in the world do—you know, I think we might find a way of maintaining those projects and making sure that the benefits go to the people and not to the regime.

Mr. DAVIDSON. Thank you for that. Very constructive, and it gives us a lot to work with there. But for me, just understanding—and maybe for my constituents back home—you know, you see a country like Nicaragua, an overwhelmingly Catholic country, what does Bishop—what does Ortega have to gain from jailing Bishop Alvarez and banning the way of the cross? What is his goal there?

Mr. MARADIAGA. Well, as we have sustained previously, it is the only institution that is basically stopping him from his plans. And Juan Sebastian had talked about this. And I think that Ortega has already done his mathematics on this. And he really wants to turn Nicaragua into the utmost authoritarian regime in the hemisphere.

So he thinks—his calculation is that, even though the cost is very high, the international community will not act as thoroughly as we expect that it will happen. I used the term “weak and postmodern” precisely because that is the term a high-ranking Sandinista person who defected used in my private interview. He said that that is basically how Ortega and his wife proceed in terms of community. They think that these type of events that we are having right now—precisely because it is based on the rules of transparency,

they think that it is basically politics. And he will not really react in a robust, strong, diplomatic measure against—

Mr. DAVIDSON. Shame on us. As our committee chairman has said often, weakness invites aggression. And you see that being reinforced there with Ortega.

You know, it also seems like his approach with the Catholic church has kind of been validated with the way the People's Republic of China—you know, the Chinese Communist Party is kind of getting their own rule with the Catholic church. Is that essentially what he is trying to do, is create sort of a variation from the Catholic faith? As long as the regime approves it, it is OK?

Mr. MARADIAGA. Yes. In a way, it works in that way. And we are seeing things that are replicas of what has happened. For example, in China with Tibet. I am sorry for the comparison.

But when we see, for example, that the Sandinista party many, many years ago—this is not recent—has been, for example, trying to divide the Catholic church and sponsoring high-ranking members of the church at some point that were not as straightforward against him, and creating also parallel churches of all denominations sponsored by the regime.

So we are seeing a very similar play in other parts of the world. The average Nicaraguan really does not necessarily know all these very confidential things that the regime has been trying to do with some faith-based organizations until 2018 when, basically, the mask went down. So for years, Ortega had invested many, many resources and tried to sell himself as a Christian in solidarity with the government. *Cristiano en solidaridad*. That is what he used to say.

So for the average Nicaraguan, the use of Christianity and solidarity as part of the government motto implied that this support of local churches was part of his policy. But it was actually him trying to buy in some Catholic organizations and Evangelical organizations until people like Monsignor Baez or like Monsignor Alvarez put a stop to this. And that is what he is fighting back.

Mr. DAVIDSON. Yes, thanks for that explanation. It really makes a difference. And thankfully, here in America, our First Amendment protects not just the freedom of religion but the free exercise of religion. And we hope that you can freely exercise your full faith in Nicaragua. And it is an honor to be able to be a part of that with this hearing.

Chairman, thank you.

And thank you for your testimony.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, Mr. Davidson, for your very incisive questioning.

I would like to yield to Ms. Wild. We are going to do a second round, if that is OK by you. If you do not have the time, we certainly understand it.

And—OK. Ms. Wild.

Ms. WILD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I promise you I will be brief. Well, it is almost the dinner hour, and I am sure these people have a lot of—everybody has a lot to do. We are going to go off to votes after this, so we are just—so I told you I was going to come back to you, Mr. Maradiaga.



Thank you, Ms. Ullmer, for referencing my question about how we push on the Army's pension funds. And you mentioned that their funds are invested in the United States. I am often amazed at the investments from bad actor countries that we see in institutions in the United States. Banking, investment funds, that kind of thing. And so much of it really seems to fly in the face of what we are often working against.

But I wanted to give you the chance, sir, if you have anything to add to that about how do we push back on those pension funds.

Mr. MARADIAGA. Well, I think that Ms. Ullmer has clearly given concrete ideas, but I will add one more. Generals have been sanctioned, but not the Army as an institution. So that is something I would like to add.

So we have seen sanctions from the U.S. and from international organizations and governments, not only to individuals or institutions. Why is that important? Well, the companies associated to the military pension fund were given plenty of time to prepare. So, for example, many of them sold their assets. They have a lot of cash.

So by sanctioning the institutions, not only the individuals, many of these tools that they use to hide their money will be more complicated for them.

Ms. WILD. Thank you, sir. I have to tell you, I authored and have introduced in every Congress that I have been in—the Philippines Human Rights Act was just reintroduced. The parallels are frankly quite amazing. The crackdown—and the PHRA that I just spoke of specifically addresses the fact that the U.S. provides considerable aid in the form of military and otherwise—it is a different situation. It is a different part of the world and all of that. But it does concern me very much.

And so thank you for that information, both of you, and thank you for bringing that point up because nothing talks like money talks. Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. If I could, I would just say to Ms. Jagger, if you have any answers to any of the questions that have been posed, please. You are not here physically. We cannot see you. But please speak out because, again, we so deeply respect your opinion and your insights.

I do want to also make a point that Jared Gensler has been very, very helpful in this whole process. And I cannot say enough—both of you gentlemen know that your wives went all over Capitol Hill. They testified and went to the press. They were so heroic and so persuasive. So I cannot thank them enough for what they did to make all of us aware and fully sensitized to the plight that you were enduring in prison. So that is just fantastic. Yes.

Mr. MARADIAGA. Yes, if I may add.

First, thank you so much for speaking about the wonderful and very (inaudible) job that Vicky and Berta has done. Thank you so much. I cannot highlight how important that was. I would not be here if it were not for the people that listened to them.

And, also, I do not know if Mr. Gensler is here in the room, but I would like to appreciate his wonderful pro bono work, and also highlight the fact that he and his team with Perseus Strategies are preparing a very comprehensive report on political prisoners that I will invite members to read whenever the report is ready.

Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Without a doubt.

Let me just ask one final question, then go to my colleagues. I know Ms. Salazar is coming back as well.

Where is the United Nations in terms of raising its voice, not just with a report that shows up and collects dust somewhere, but where they really—like the U.N. Human Rights Council which, unfortunately, is often run by rogue nations—and I have been to Geneva many times and been disappointed by their lack—I was actually there parallel when Armando Valladares was able to get an investigation into the Cuban prisons. It was not very successful in terms of its implementation, because people spoke to the U.N. investigators only to be retaliated against. But I was there with him for about a week in the eighties when he was looking to get that done, and it was just amazing how, when you get somebody like you gentlemen, all of you, doing your work, the U.N. could do far more, it would seem to me, if they would become more focused on this. Let me—so that would be the first question.

The second would be, I was very much involved with the former Yugoslavian court which, obviously, put Slobodan Milosevic—he died, as you know, before he was actually convicted. He never thought for a moment, because I met with him during those wars in Serbia, in Belgrade, and he never thought anybody would ever touch him, ever. He was so bombastic and arrogant. And then there he was, almost like the Nazis at the Nuremburg War Crimes Tribunal, awaiting his fate before a tribunal.

In like manner, we saw in Rwanda, and especially in Sierra Leone, an amazing court in Sierra Leone. And I have gotten to know David Crane very well, the chief prosecutor in Sierra Leone. And nobody ever thought Charles Taylor would get 50 years for his crimes against humanity that he committed.

And I am just thinking, you know—and I have had David at hearings in the past. One of them was to try to, last year, get a General Assembly vote because the U.N. Security Council would be vetoed by China and Russia, to take up Putin. Yes, the ICC just came out with a very narrow attack on him, which he certainly deserves, with regards to Ukrainian children, but it should have been far more than that. It should have been a long time ago.

But a hybrid court convened by the General Assembly, it seems to me—and it was David Crane who thought of that at one of our hearings. What kind of mechanism might exist to finally at long last to hold Ortega to account in a court of law? The OAS may or may not have that capability. I do not think it would do it. The United Nations, maybe not, unless it was a General Assembly resolution in a hybrid court where it convened to really bring forth these crimes against the Nicaraguan people, you gentlemen, your families. It could be—and all the deaths that he is responsible for, he and his top leadership.

It seems to me—I am thinking of asking David to come back for another hearing to look at Nicaragua to see what we could be doing vis—vis a mechanism like the ICC, although I am not sure they would take it up, but some entity.

Your thoughts?

Dr. CHAMORRO. Mr. Chairman, I am not an expert on the United Nations, but I do know one thing. Ortega has been very arrogant, just like Milosevic himself, in saying that the Organization of American States is an instrument of the foreign powers and things like that. So by leaving or taking cases to the United Nations, you take away that argument that he is trying to use, because he also mentions the sentence of the Hague back in the eighties. And now you have got this same organization, the United Nations, that kind of gave him a sentence that he mentions all the time, now sentencing him now.

So that takes wind out of the sails of his argument that the United Nations is this universal system that is going to be neutral, because basically the—the importance of the United Nations, in other words, is the political implication that he is facing. It is no longer this organization that was helping him back in the eighties, according to his rhetoric.

So I think the—and, by the way, the Organization of American States have done a tremendous job within the last 3 years. The permanent counsel has been dealing with the case of Nicaragua so many times, so many condemnations, and now we are in the phase that we have exhausted this line of work and now we have to go to the universal system.

So I think it is a natural way of proceeding and also will be a political blow against Ortega. Obviously, we have the veto situations, China, Russia is obviously going to be supporting Ortega as well.

Mr. SMITH. Again, there is no veto in the General Assembly.

Dr. CHAMORRO. Well, that is a very good point. And the fact that Putin was put on this international court system might raise the eyebrows of Ortega for future actions against him, because you have more—you have the commutations by this organization, independent organization of the killing, the assassinations, the use of violence, especially in April to June, July, 2019, that demonstrates a policy of examination of protestors.

So here we have a very strong case in terms of—in the evidence gathered during those months regarding the assassinations, we have a very strong case for crimes against humanity for sure.

Mr. MARADIAGA. I want to recognize that we are running out of time, but just to add on the very insightful points of Juan Sebastian. Nicaragua is still part of the Roman Statute, so that makes things very complicated. However, member States can pursue action.

So I would like to highlight the fact that Ortega is creating a tremendous burden for the neighboring country of Costa Rica. I want to acknowledge the fact that Costa Rica has been amazing as a country in receiving so many of our brothers and sisters into Costa Rica. But that is something that can be tackled in international courts precisely because of the collateral damage that Ortega is creating to neighboring countries. And that provides, technically speaking, a path.

No. 2, the fact that we have been decreed Stateless opens another door in the fact that by not having actually a nationality, those of us who are now based in countries such as the United States or Spain, Argentina can pursue legal action in countries

that have universal human rights systems that Juan Sebastian has described.

So going back to your question, anything Congress can do in providing a fast track to those of us who have no nationality at this point and to Nicaraguan refugees here in the United States, so in the near future that legal protection of our status in terms of the situation of being Stateless can have very big implications for future cases in international penal courts.

Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. I understand.

Oh, yes.

Dr. CHAMORRO. No, no.

Mr. SMITH. Bianca, you wanted to add something?

Ms. JAGGER. Yes, please.

Mr. SMITH. Please.

Ms. JAGGER. Congressman, I would like to mention that the importance of the U.N. Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua that compare the Nicaraguan regime strategies to the crimes committed by the Nazi in Germany in the 1930's and 1940's.

I think that it is of critical importance that the mandate be renewed and to understand how important, especially, we take into account that a warrant of arrest has been issued against Putin.

I would like to bring attention to the geopolitical role of Nicaragua, the geopolitical role with respect to Russia, with respect to China, with respect to Iran. For example, we have soldiers, Russian soldiers, today in Nicaragua. Nicaragua is a recipient of Russian military aid for quite a few years. Let's not forget that Putin was in Nicaragua about 3 years ago and that about a month ago the foreign affairs minister from Iran was in Nicaragua. It is not happening by pure chance.

It is important to look at some of the studies that have been done recently that compare what is happening in Nicaragua with regard to some of the policies where they are stripping the nationality of Nicaraguan citizens to what is happening in Belarus. Is that being a combination that the Russians are looking forward? Would that policy have been really conceived by the government or by the regime of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, or is there a hand behind that that signals to Russia?

But as well, it is important as well the role that China could play in Nicaragua. Recently, Honduras had broken relations with Taiwan, just like Nicaragua did a while back, and has signed and has established a relationship with China.

So I think that it would be really important that we understand that, although Nicaragua is a very small country that does not have any oil, Nicaragua can cause a lot of damage and can be a threat to the region, not only in Central America or in the Americas as a whole, but as well as for the United States.

And with regards to one of the members were asking what kind of sanctions could be imposed on Nicaragua, I would like to bring to your attention that Nicaragua is the third largest export of meat to the United States and that we are talking about the crimes committed against indigenous people. And why are those crimes being committed? They are being committed because they want to take possession of the land, and they want to use it for cattle ranching.

Why is America allowing Nicaragua to be the third largest exporter of meat to America, meat that it is tainted with blood?

Mr. SMITH. I yield to my good friend and colleague, Ms. Kamlager-Dove.

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am having such a great time listening. I love Mr. Maradiaga's acknowledgement of climate change. And I feel like I just heard Ms. Jagger say we should become vegetarians, so I love it.

I also really appreciated the chair's acknowledgment of the women, the wives. And I represent Los Angeles. A third of my district is all kinds of beautiful brown: Nicaragua, Guatemala, Panama, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico. And I learn so much from, you know, the women, las mujeres.

So, Ms. Ullmer, I would love it if you could maybe speak to the disproportionate impact that this autocrat's policies have had on the safety of women in Nicaragua. And if there is any additional time, just any additional thoughts on how the United States could coordinate and work with other countries to have a Latin American-led solution to the crisis.

I am certainly a fan of us supporting rather than trying to come in and save the day. That has some historical issues for me, but would love to hear.

Thank you.

Ms. ULLMER. Thank you for that question.

The treatment of women in jail was different than the treatment of men. They were isolated. All of them were in isolation. Second, there is evidence of sexual violence as well as they were being hauled off to jail.

The women are the bearers of the households. So by attacking the citizenship, by attacking and stripping them of their assets, and by declaring their heads of households or their spouses fugitives, they are unable to care for their families inside of the country.

It is of no little consequence that the two women—three women, actually, who were first raided for the confiscation of their houses were all women, right. Sofia Montenegro, Azahalea Solis. These are women who have worked as feminists all their lives, worked with trade unionists, and Vilma Nunez, who is the premier human rights activist. They were all attacked, right. And they have had to—some have had to flee the country, but this is undermining society. They are tearing apart the social fabric of Nicaragua.

To your second question, Latin American solution, absolutely. Brazil, I would note, at the United Nations taking on an important role in the Security Council, they have spoken out against the stripping of citizenship. I think they are a strong ally. Felix also mentioned Chile, Argentina, Colombia, even Mexico have spoken out against the stripping of citizenship. There are allies there, and I welcome more and more Latin American voices around us.

Thank you.

Mr. MARADIAGA. If I quickly may add some point.

Our families are—many of our families are still in Nicaragua, and they are used as hostages. But for mothers who are here in the United States with their children in Nicaragua, it is just heart-breaking to see that. Some of the children have been forced to go

undocumented to neighboring countries to seek protection. They do not have any passports.

So to your question, if something can be done—because the United States has already accepted these women into the U.S., but their children are back in Nicaragua. And since their nationality was erased, they have no passports. And as much as the U.S. wants to help, if these children do not have passports, they cannot travel;

So probably finding a solution, working together with neighboring Central American countries that have accepted these children, but they do not have documents to travel, so I think that that would be something very specific in which you can be very, very helpful to the former political prisoners who are women and they are having their children behind.

Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you.

I want to thank you so very much for your testimony, for your leadership, brave and heroic as it is. We need to do our part. We need to followup. There is much that you have conveyed to all of us that we need to work on in a bipartisan way, and we will. So I cannot thank you enough.

And to Ms. Jagger, thank you for your leadership as well. It is extraordinary.

But the hearing is adjourned, and I thank you.

I would just note that members have 5 legislative days to submit comments for the record.

Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 6:20 p.m. The subcommittees adjourned.]

# APPENDIX



## JOINT SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

**Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations  
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere  
Christopher Smith (R-NJ), Chairman  
Maria Salazar (R-FL), Chairwoman**

*Revised*

March 21, 2023

### TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to be held by the Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations and the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere in Rayburn House Office Building 2200 at 4:00 pm on March 22, 2023. This hearing will be available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>.

**DATE:** Wednesday, March 22, 2023

**TIME:** 4:00 p.m.

**LOCATION:** Rayburn 2200

**SUBJECT:** The Ortega-Murillo Regime's War Against the Catholic Church and Civil Society in Nicaragua: Bishop Alvarez, Political Prisoners, and Prisoners of Conscience

**WITNESSES:** Bianca Jagger  
Founder and President  
Bianca Jagger Human Rights Foundation

**\*\* Felix Maradiaga, J.D.**  
Former Nicaragua Presidential Candidate  
and Former political prisoner

**\*\* Juan Sebastián Chamorro Garcia**  
Former Nicaragua Presidential Candidate  
and Former political prisoner

Deborah Ullmer  
Regional Director for Latin America and  
the Caribbean Programs  
National Democratic Institute

**\*\*Witnesses Updated**

\*NOTE: Witnesses may be added.

**By Direction of the Chairwoman and Chairman**

*The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202 -226-8467 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.*



To fill out this form online: Either use the tab key to travel through each field or mouse click each line or within blue box. Type in information.

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**  
MINUTES OF FULL COMMITTEE HEARING

Note: Red boxes with red type will NOT print.

Day Wednesday Date March 22 Room Rayburn 2200

Starting Time 4:00pm Ending Time 6:20pm

Recesses ☐ (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_)

Presiding Member(s)  
*Rep. Chris Smith*

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Televised ☐

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☐

Stenographic Record ☐

To select a box, mouse click it, or tab to it and use the enter key to select. Another click on the same box will deselect it.

**TITLE OF HEARING:**

*The Ortega-Murillo Regime's War Against the Catholic Church and Civil Society in Nicaragua: Bishop Alvarez, Political Prisoners, and Prisoners of Conscience*

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:**

*Reps. Smith, Salazar, Buck, Huizenga, Davidson, McCromick, Self, Wild, Stanton, Manning, Kamlager-Dove.*

**NON-COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:**

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: (List any statements submitted for the record.)

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE \_\_\_\_\_  
or  
TIME ADJOURNED \_\_\_\_\_

Note: Please include accompanying witnesses with their titles, etc. (please note the fact that they are accompanying witnesses)

Clear Form

Full Committee Hearing Coordinator

HFAC  
Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International  
Organizations & Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

118<sup>th</sup> Congress

ATTENDANCE

Meeting on: Nicaragua "The Ortega Regime's War Against the Catholic Church  
 & Civil Society"

Date: March 22, 2023

Convened: 4:00pm

Adjourned: 6:20 pm

Representative	Present	Absent	Representative	Present	Absent
Mr. Smith	X		Mrs. Wild	X	
Mrs. Salazar	X		Mr. Castro		X
Mr. Buck	X		Mr. Stanton	X	
Mr. Green		X	Mr. Bera		X
Mr. Huizenga	X		Mrs. Jacobs		X
Mr. Davidson	X		Mrs. Manning	X	
Mrs. Radewagen		X	Mr. Moskowitz		X
Mr. Hill	X		Mrs. Kamlager-Dove	X	
Mr. McCormick	X				
Mr. James		X			
Mr. Self	X				

## RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

**Congressional Hearing  
The Ortega-Murillo Regime's War Against the Catholic Church and Civil Society in  
Nicaragua: Bishop Alvarez, Political Prisoners, and Prisoners of Conscience  
Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations  
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
March 22, 2023**

**Questions for the Record for Dr. Felix Maradiaga  
Representative Joaquin Castro**

Mr. Maradiaga, thank you for your bravery, courage, and for all you have endured to stand up for democracy and human rights.

1. In response to a question by Chairman Smith, you highlighted the importance of the work the UN and other multi-lateral organizations are doing to highlight human rights violations and support the Nicaraguan people.
  - **What role should the UN, OAS (given Nicaragua will no longer be a member), and other international bodies play in addressing human rights abuses, supporting those who have fled, and facilitating renewed political negotiations?**
2. You were one of the 222 political prisoners released to the United States, who later had their citizenship stripped. Unfortunately, you have a unique perspective on the government's recent actions, and as such, I have a few additional questions.
  - **What do you think were the motivations for this prisoner release?**
  - **How does this move impact the democratic movement within and outside Nicaragua?**
  - **Many of those expelled continue to have family members in Nicaragua. To what extent are family members of those who have been expelled subject to government harassment and intimidation? How should the United States work to protect and reunite family members or those closely associated?**

**Questions for the Record for Mr. Juan Sebastián García Chamorro  
Representative Joaquín Castro**

1. In your testimony, you emphasized the importance of the United States fast-tracking legal protection for Nicaraguans, given their dire situation. The United States has created a humanitarian parole program to respond to the urgent needs of Nicaraguans and many of us are expecting the administration to announce a re-designation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Nicaragua.
  - **What immigration policies should the United States implement to reflect the rapidly changing and extremely difficult challenges Nicaraguans face?**
  - **Are the humanitarian parole and TPS designations enough to respond to the needs of Nicaraguan asylum seekers?**
2. You were one of the 222 political prisoners released to the United States, who later had their citizenship stripped. Unfortunately, you have a unique perspective on the government's recent actions, and as such, I have a few additional questions.
  - **What do you think were the motivations for this prisoner release?**
  - **How does this move impact the democratic movement within and outside Nicaragua?**
  - **Many of those expelled continue to have family members in Nicaragua. To what extent are family members of those who have been expelled subject to government harassment and intimidation? How should the United States work to protect and reunite family members or those closely associated?**

**Questions for the Record for Ms. Deborah Ullmer  
Representative Joaquin Castro**

In your response to questions, you emphasized ways in which we can continue to support civil society in Nicaragua.

1. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI) have been in Nicaragua for more than a decade, partnering with local organizations and communities to support democratic institutions, political participation, and good governance. NDI, in particular, has prioritized working with minority groups such as women, youth, and LGBTQI+ individuals.
  - **What successes and challenges have you faced in this work that can inform how the United States, including Congress, can better support organizations within and outside of Nicaragua?**
  - **How can the United States engage with what is left of active civil society in the country to more effectively address economic and social challenges and build support for democracy and human rights?**
  - **What recommendations do you have for Congress to better support human rights defenders in vulnerable communities? How can U.S. assistance be better targeted to address their specific contexts?**

To Rep. Castro:

First of all, thanks for the interest in the testimony and it is an honor to respond to the additional questions:

1. In your testimony, you emphasized the importance of the United States fast-tracking legal protection for Nicaraguans, given their dire situation. The United States has created a humanitarian parole program to respond to the urgent needs of Nicaraguans and many of us are expecting the administration to announce a re-designation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Nicaragua.

- **What immigration policies should the United States implement to reflect the rapidly changing and extremely difficult challenges Nicaraguans face?**

**The TPS re-designation is extremely important given the harsh conditions nicaraguans face. My concern is not actually on the legal steps taken by the US, but the time limits. I do not see a change in the political conditions that are provoking the exile of nicaraguans, so a short lived program would leave many people without the possibility of seeking for an asylum.**

- **Are the humanitarian parole and TPS designations enough to respond to the needs of Nicaraguan asylum seekers?**

**I would like to stress about the humanitarian crisis that emerged from the 222 flight. Most (not my case, as my wife is already here) of the prisoners left their love ones behind. Administrative measures can be taken to expedite the process of family reunification. There is a lot of anguish among those who came.**

2. You were one of the 222 political prisoners released to the United States, who later had their citizenship stripped. Unfortunately, you have a unique perspective on the government's recent actions, and as such, I have a few additional questions.

- **What do you think were the motivations for this prisoner release?**

**I do not think there was a single motivation but a series of factors behind. The International pressure, the response from some Governments that Ortega thought were going to be moderate but in fact denounced the regime (Chile and Colombia in particular), sanctions also played an important role and the political costs, internally and externally, of having us in jail.**

- **How does this move impact the democratic movement within and outside Nicaragua?**

From the positive side, it allows us to continue our work to denounce the dictatorship. On the other hand, it complicates our job, as working from exile brings additional problems.

- Many of those expelled continue to have family members in Nicaragua. To what extent are family members of those who have been expelled subject to government harassment and intimidation? How should the United States work to protect and reunite family members or those closely associated?

The harassment is real: the regime is denying travel documents, they are confiscating properties, and erasing records. The US can expedite, via administrative means, the parole process. The letter sent by Rep. Salazar was very specific on what can be done.

**Questions for the Record for Ms. Deborah Ullmer  
Representative Joaquin Castro**

In your response to questions, you emphasized ways in which we can continue to support civil society in Nicaragua.

1. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI) have been in Nicaragua for more than a decade, partnering with local organizations and communities to support democratic institutions, political participation, and good governance. NDI, in particular, has prioritized working with minority groups such as women, youth, and LGBTQI+ individuals.

- **What successes and challenges have you faced in this work that can inform how the United States, including Congress, can better support organizations within and outside of Nicaragua?**

NDI worked in Nicaragua for more than 30 years and maintained an office in Managua from 2005 through 2019. We had the privilege of working with brave and committed activists at key moments in the country's political history. NDI was forced to close its office due to the Ortega-Murillo repression. The government canceled NDI's legal registration in August 2021.

Despite the challenging conditions, NDI continues to support civil society partners who have shown great resilience to successfully adapt their work to respond to emerging challenges and continue to serve as influential actors calling for a return to democracy in their country by building alliances to advance common democratic objectives. Nicaraguan groups have continued to counter political repression by sustaining and strengthening their advocacy efforts, adapting tactics and strategies to the authoritarian environment, and preserving space for civil society engagement at the local level. Flexible and rapid funding mechanisms and continual support are essential to ensure responsive programming in an ever-changing context.

NDI's partners in the country face immense obstacles, as is often the case in repressive, authoritarian environments. The Ortega-Murillo regime has continued to close civic space and shutter civil society organizations. In 2022 alone, the government closed more than 3,000 national and international non-governmental organizations. The organizations closed by the regime and those forced to close due to repression and the need to leave the country for safety reasons, provided critical services, including social programs important to the daily lives of Nicaraguans. The organizations also focused on promoting women's, indigenous, and LGBTQI+ rights, providing space for individuals and groups to safely work jointly on issues that matter to Nicaraguans. Citizens and the few organizations that remain operational will continue to need resources, which the regime has taken away.

- **How can the United States engage with what is left of active civil society in the country to more effectively address economic and social challenges and build support for democracy and human rights?**

Sustainable social, political, and economic change will occur only through the efforts of Nicaraguans. To support democracy activists still working under difficult conditions in the



country, the U.S. can engage with grassroots civic networks comprising women's and youth groups, unions, academia and the private sector to effectively address community economic and social challenges. By working with these networks, the U.S. can build support for democracy and human rights as democratic actors work to restore the social fabric and instill democratic values at the local level in an authoritarian environment.

In addition, the U.S. should aim to strengthen democratic networks at the community level. This includes marginalized populations (Indigenous, Afro-descendants and LGBTQI+ individuals), groups necessary to construct an inclusive agenda for change in Nicaragua. Keeping civic leaders engaged and motivated cultivates democratic values and practices at the local level.

These local democratic networks not only respond to the communities but also provide on-the-ground data and relevant information on what is happening in their communities that can inform the strategies of the organized opposition within and outside the country. The U.S. can support the links between local networks and the democratic opposition as they create a democratic political alternative to the Ortega-Murillo regime.

- **What recommendations do you have for Congress to better support human rights defenders in vulnerable communities? How can U.S. assistance be better targeted to address their specific contexts?**

The Ortega-Murillo regime continues to take unprecedented steps to consolidate its family dictatorship. In the current context, with many prominent democratic leaders now outside of the country, U.S. democracy assistance can contribute to promote coalition-building efforts among democratic activists in exile to address fragmentation and establish clear unified strategies to provide viable democratic alternatives to the regime. Moreover, it is important to continue to support convergence spaces for democratic actors in the country and in exile to ensure that leaders in exile are well informed of dynamics on the ground and the everyday issues facing citizens in Nicaragua to be able to accurately advocate and respond to these needs.

Now more than ever, it is essential to call out the ongoing repression and violations of fundamental human rights and freedoms endured by Nicaraguans, particularly those who worked to defend democracy and promote and protect the human rights of vulnerable communities at tremendous personal costs. U.S. democracy assistance that supports independent journalists, civic, environmental, human rights, and youth activists, and the democratic opposition can bolster the efforts of these courageous human rights defenders. A peaceful return to democracy will likely only succeed when international support backs Nicaraguan efforts.