

AN URGENT APPEAL TO LET BISHOP ALVAREZ GO

HEARING BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZA- TIONS OF COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS FIRST SESSION

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AN URGENT APPEAL TO LET BISHOP ALVAREZ GO

Thursday, November 30, 2023

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL
HUMAN RIGHTS, AND INTERNATIONAL
ORGANIZATIONS,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:15 a.m., in room 2200, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Christopher H. Smith (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. SMITH. This hearing of the Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations will come to order.

Today we appeal to President Daniel Ortega let imprisoned Catholic Bishop Alvarez go. Release him from prison. Out of an abundance of concern for Bishop Alvarez's welfare and health, let him come to the United States or to the Vatican or somewhere else, or stay right in Nicaragua where he can again serve the people, preach the good news of the Gospel, and care for the weakest and most vulnerable.

Bishop Alvarez's life and ministry has been an inspiring example of compassion, kindness, integrity, and selfless service. In his homilies he speaks of an enduring gratitude and, quote, "serenity in our hearts that could only come from God, the peace that surpasses all understanding."

He encourages us to be, quote, "be convinced that everything is happening for our good because God loves us and because we love him." He preaches love and forgiveness and that, quote, "Christ calls his disciples not to harbor resentment and to always forgive," close quote.

He conveys hope, holiness, humility to the people of Nicaragua and to the people of the world. Bishop Alvarez is an innocent man enduring unspeakable suffering. Today we appeal to President Daniel Ortega, release him from prison. Let Bishop Alvarez go.

We will hear testimony today from members of the church—and thank you for you being here, Ms. Ullmer—who will speak in the case of the members of the church who have actually experienced the Ortega regime's oppression firsthand.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here to share their stories. I thank you for your bravery, your tenacity, and faithfulness in the pursuit of peace and reconciliation and for inspiring us with your indomitable faith in God.

It is crucial that the world hears your voices and learns the truth of what is happening in Nicaragua including the truth about the prison conditions and treatment of Bishop Alvarez.

The international community can no longer turn a blind eye to what is happening to the people in Nicaragua, including and especially people of faith.

It has been my experience over the last 43 years as a Member of Congress that dictatorships often rely on forgetfulness or compassion fatigue. Where there's outrage at first it begins to abate and then the terrible misdeeds that are being done by that individual or by his or her regime then it's just somehow the people turn the page. That will not happen here as regards to Nicaragua.

The regime, as we know, has closed Catholic radio stations and universities, obstructed access to places of worship, banned public way of the cross processions, and frozen the bank accounts of hundreds of Catholic institutions.

Prisoners' requests for Bibles have been denied. Bishops and priests as well as worshipers have been harassed and detained and the religious order of sisters founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the Missionaries of Charity, has been expelled.

Bishop Alvarez is now, we think, the only known cleric to remain imprisoned by the regime and it's time to let him go. Just last month 12 priests were sent from imprisonment in Nicaragua to exile in the Vatican. Bishop Alvarez was not among them. Why?

Bishop Alvarez has consistently encouraged Nicaraguans not to fall into the temptation of despair and instead be, quote, and in this in his words, "inundated with the hope of Christ who defeated death." Does this sound like a man who is guilty of treason or any crime? Of course not.

I would like to share some additional words from the bishop spoken in a homily after he was placed under house arrest in August 2022.

He said, and I quote, "Painful experiences do not happen in vain. They do not fall into a void. These experiences are offered to the Lord and God returns them in blessings for us."

Bishop Alvarez encouraged the faithful saying, and I quote him again, "Evil is defeated by the power of good. Good is always more powerful. God is eternally powerful. Evil is tremendously limited even though it makes more noise," close quote.

He also encouraged people to be long suffering and to die unto oneself where it, quote, "It is the hope of the grain of wheat that dies that this is the only way it can produce much fruit."

Bishop Alvarez admonishes all people of goodwill to have hearts full of forgiveness that mirror the mercy of God. I am in awe of his courage, faithfulness, and kindness.

I know so many others in Congress—House, Senate, Democrat Republican, people in the White House—we are in awe of his goodness and his extraordinary strength.

Instead of lashing out in bitterness at his captors, including President Ortega, Bishop Alvarez has called for forgiveness, renewal, and hope. Bishop Alvarez deserves to be respected and revered and free, not persecuted and incarcerated. We again appeal to President Daniel Ortega let Bishop Alvarez go. Release him from prison.

The video of Bishop Alvarez released this week by the government of Nicaragua raises serious questions and concerns about his wellbeing. He has lost weight. Is he ill? Is he being provided proper nutrition and basic medical care? We have no idea what is going on day to day.

The conspicuous array of food and drink on the two tables in the government video is eerily reminiscent of a trip Congressman Frank Wolf and I made back in 1989 to Perm Camp 35, the infamous Soviet political prison in the Ural Mountains that had the great people like Natan Sharansky as prisoners there.

After meeting and videotaping two dozen undernourished, and I mean gaunt undernourished prisoners, the camp warden took us to the cafeteria. Every table had an abundance of food on it.

Some had bites of bread that were half eaten as if there was a fire drill and everybody ran out the door, and the garbage cans were filled with overflowing with excess food, an absolute Potemkin village, and we let them know that nobody was fooled by such a charade.

There are many questions that demand answers and I suspect that the answers will only paint a more dire picture of the bishop's imprisonment in La Modelo, one of Latin America's most notorious prisons.

I would note parenthetically I've repeatedly requested to be able to visit Bishop Alvarez. Bianca Jagger and others have joined in. We have asked let us go see him and that is—we have not even gotten a response.

I ask the U.S. Government, and that includes Congress and, of course, the executive branch, as I did in our subcommittee hearing in March is the United States doing enough.

Delay is denial when you're languishing and suffering in a prison. Sickness and all kinds of horrible things can happen to people in a prison, particularly a political prison.

The United States needs to act quickly and use every single tool at our disposal. We have passed the Nicaragua Human Rights and Anti-Corruption Act of 2018, the Nicaraguan Investment Conditionality Act, and to reinforce Nicaragua's adherence to conditions for electoral format. They're good. I'm glad we have. We're all part of that. It was a bipartisan effort.

Despite the regime's egregious human rights abuses, however, Nicaragua remains a member of the Dominican Republic Central American Free Trade Agreement, or CAFTA-DR. Congress needs to seriously reexamine Nicaragua's membership in CAFTA-DR in light of the current situation and consider the full scope of economic tools at our disposal.

So, again, today with these amazing witnesses that will in a moment be providing expert testimony we appeal to President Ortega let Bishop Alvarez go.

I would like to—my good friend and colleague Ms. Wild will be back momentarily. She had another hearing where she had to make some comments and check in but she will be right back as other members will be here shortly as well.

So I would like to introduce our witnesses beginning first with—and we're doing this for obvious reasons. I mean, you see that there's a barricade for privacy. We know that there is always the

concern about retaliation. So thank you again for your bravery for being here.

But Prisoner of Conscience No. 1 is a Nicaraguan national, a member of the Catholic Church who has been criminally convicted by the regime and now living in exile. Prisoner of Conscience No. 2 is a Nicaraguan national, a member of the Catholic Church who has been criminally convicted by the regime—and, again, when they say criminally these are political convictions—and also living in exile.

We have a parent of a prisoner of conscience. She is a Nicaraguan national, a member of the Catholic Church and a relative of a prisoner of conscience in Nicaragua.

Deborah Ullmer is the regional director for the Latin America and Caribbean at the National Democratic Institute. She has served as the chief of party for the USAID Office of Transition Initiatives program in Nicaragua.

Ms. Ullmer has spent approximately 12 years working and living in Latin America. She earned her BA from my state, I'm happy to say, political science in modern languages from Seton Hall University and graduate courses in Latin America studies at the American University School of International Service.

I would like to now yield to my good friend and colleague, Congresswoman Wild.

Ms. WILD. Timing is everything. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for calling this important hearing today.

To our witnesses thank you for your courage in testifying here today. You have endured unimaginable sacrifices and we stand with you in solidarity.

Since this subcommittee's previous hearing in March on the human rights crisis in Nicaragua the Ortega/Murillo regime has continued to operate through the patterns we documented in that last hearing, stifling the voices of the Nicaraguan people by suppressing all forms of dissent, criminalizing civil society and flagrantly violating international law by stripping Nicaraguan political prisoners of their citizenship.

Bishop Rolando Alvarez remains imprisoned in appalling conditions on a 26-year sentence along with other faith leaders, human rights activists, and opponents of the regime of all political stripes and backgrounds.

And last week the Ortega/Murillo's withdrawal from the Organization of American States officially took effect, further isolating the country from the surrounding region and the world at the same time as it deepens relations with authoritarian governments in Russia and beyond.

In a spirit of partisanship and solidarity—I'm sorry, in a spirit of partnership and solidarity, not interference, I commit to our brave witnesses today and their family members my dedication to continuing to work together to ensure that the people of Nicaragua are not forgotten.

Together let us redouble bipartisan efforts in defense of the people of Nicaragua. Thank you Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much.

I'd like to now ask our first Exiled Prisoner of Conscience No. 1 if you could provide your testimony.

STATEMENT OF EXILED PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE NO. 1

[The following statement and answers were delivered through an interpreter.]

EXILED PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE NO. 1. From my point of view the problem we have in Nicaragua began with the pastoral letter of May 21st, 2014, in which the bishops raised problems with social, political, and economic nature in Nicaragua with the aim that these aspects were taken seriously into account by the government for a better coexistence and to work for a real peace in Nicaragua.

I was kidnapped. Why do I say this? Because the proper procedures were not followed. I was not shown a court order. There was no prior investigation.

Everything was arbitrary and I was even arrested in the street by two members of the police and six members of the security troops who accompanied me to the police unit where I was later transferred to the El Chipote prison.

I was interrogated and I was accused of giving hate speeches, of organizing an uprising. I was following orders from Monsignor Rolando and they asked me what were those orders.

How much money did Bishop Rolando receive from the U.S. Government and the European Union? Do you know how much money the bishop and priest received? Who else advised the bishop?

Do you know what the clergy did in their meetings? When they met in the parishes what did they say? Was it really about spiritual retreats or was it about bad mouthing the government? Who was in charge of the media? Did we receive money from the Chamorro Foundation and how much did we receive?

One of the prison commissioners asked me in one of those interviews with whom else do they meet and who do they do it with. Could I give them the name of the priest, lay people and the positions they had in the organization?

They always addressed the monsignor as if he were the thinking head and the organizer of the failed coup d'etat and wanting to organize a new coup. The aforementioned shows the great ignorance that the government and other authorities have of the prophetic role and the evangelical commitment of the bishops.

We were accused of being members of an organized crime gang and that the leaders were the bishops, and above all they said Rolando. I was accused of undermining the dignity of the State and of Nicaragua, of spreading false news.

I hope that this testimony will be useful for future efforts for the liberation of Monsignor Rolando Alvarez. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Exiled Prisoner of Conscience No. 1 follows:]

Testimonial

From my point of view the problem we have in Nicaragua, began with the Pastoral Letter May 21, 2014, in which the Bishops raised problems of social, political and economic nature in Nicaragua, with the aim that these aspects were taken seriously into account by the government for a better coexistence and to work for a real peace in Nicaragua.

Why do I say this? Because the proper procedures were not followed: I was not shown a court order, there was no prior investigation, everything was arbitrary and I was even arrested in the street by two members of the police, and six members of the security troops, who accompanied me to the police unit where I was later transferred to the El Chipote prison.

I was interrogated and I was accused of giving hate speeches, of organizing an uprising. I was following orders from Monsignor Rolando and they asked me what were those orders?

How much money did Bishop Rolando receive from the US government and the European Union? Do you know how much money the bishop and priests received? Who else advised the bishop? Do you know what the clergy did in their meetings? When they met in the parishes, what did they say? Was it really about spiritual retreats or was it about badmouthing the government? Who was in charge of the media? Did we receive money from the Chamorro Foundation and how much did we receive?

One of the prison commissioners asked me in one of the interviews, with whom else do they meet and how do they do it? Should I give them names of priests, lay people and the positions they had in the organization? They always addressed the Monsignor as if he were the thinking head and the organizer of the failed coup d'état and of wanting to organize a new coup.

The aforementioned shows the great ignorance that the government and other authorities have of the prophetic role and the evangelical commitment of the bishops.

We were accused of being members of an organized crime gang and that the leaders were the bishops, and above all they said Rolando.

I was accused of undermining the dignity of the state and of Nicaragua, of spreading false news. I

hope that this testimony will be useful for future efforts for the liberation of Monsignor Rolando.

Mr. SMITH. We're now hearing from Exiled Prisoner of Conscience No. 2, and the reason why we're not naming names is obvious, I think, to all. It's to protect you and family members and other friends back in Nicaragua.

STATEMENT OF EXILED PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE NO. 2

[The following statement and answers were delivered through an interpreter.]

EXILED PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE NO. 2. I am Nicaraguan. I arrived in the United States on February 9th, 2023. We were 222 expelled from the country, most of them political prisoners, members of human rights organizations, and a group of lay people and priests who had been imprisoned for defending human rights and exercising their prophetic mission of announcing the Gospel and denouncing injustices.

These injustices increased in April 2018 when armed paramilitary groups and police violently repressed young people who were protesting in the streets of some departments of the country against the social security reforms carried out by the government.

Bishop Rolando Alvarez and some of his clergy came to the defense of the demonstrators and some of the churches served as shelters and clinics for young people fleeing repression and wounded by police and ruling party members.

I was kidnapped by the national police in Nicaragua. I say kidnapped because that day at 3 in the morning a group of riot police violently entered the building of the Episcopal Curia and without presenting any arrest warrant they took us out of the rooms and placed us in the conference room of the Curia.

There were five priests, among them the Bishop of the Diocese of Matagalpa, Monsignor Rolando Alvarez Lagos, a deacon, two seminarians and a lay man, a total of nine people who had been locked up for 15 days because on August 4th the national police locked them in that building.

I was transferred to the cells of the Auxilio Judicial de Managua, a jail better known as Nueva Chipote. Our rights were violated because they did not tell us anything about the reason for our arrest.

They stripped us naked, forced us to wear prison uniforms, and transferred me to one of the cells. That same day the interrogations began. There were more than 30 interrogations which could take place at any time of the day, even in the early hours of the morning.

They blackmailed me and threatened the lives of my relatives because they wanted me to declare that the bishop was a member of an organization that wanted to promote a coup d'etat against Daniel Ortega and that he received money from the U.S. Government and the European Union.

Other interrogations had to do with the homilies that the bishop had said in some Eucharists and in which according to them he was inciting people to rise up to protest against the government.

The homilies are all on social networks and in them he simply exercises his freedom of expression and advocates for the defense of the human rights of Nicaraguans.

It is clear that this is manipulated by the same government that does not like to hear the truth and the voice of the Catholic Church.

So from that date began an open persecution of Catholic institutions such as Caritas and John Paul II University and more recently the Central American University—UCA—thus affecting university autonomy and academic freedom in the country.

While the interrogations were taking place the trial against the group that was in the Episcopal Curia was also taking place. The trial from the beginning was full of irregularities, illegalities, and vices.

The prosecutor's office, the police, and the judges colluded so that in the end the accusation was practically the same for the majority of the 222 including the priests and the bishop.

In the same way once the sentence was pronounced we were accused of treason and all our civil rights were taken away to the point of not even presenting us at the Civil Registry Office.

As I pointed out earlier, we were taken out of jail on the night of Wednesday, February 8th, around 10:30 p.m. and taken on three buses to an unknown destination until we were on the tarmac of the Air Force airport and it was explained to us that we were leaving for exile in the United States. When we were in Washington the next day we realized that the bishop was not on that plane. He is being held in the prison known as La Modelo in Tipitapa, Managua, Nicaragua.

I hope that this testimony can be used to negotiate the release of my bishop, Rolando Jose Alvarez Lagos. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Exiled Prisoner of Conscience No. 2 follows:]

PERSONAL STATEMENT

(To read)

TESTIMONIAL

I am Nicaraguan. I arrived in the United States on February 9, 2023. We were 222 expelled from the country, most of them political prisoners, members of human rights organizations and a group of lay people and priests who had been imprisoned for defending human rights and exercising their prophetic mission of announcing the Gospel and denouncing injustices. These injustices increased in April 2018 when armed paramilitary groups and police violently repressed young people who were protesting in the streets of some departments of the country, against the Social Security reforms carried out by the government.

Bishop Rolando Alvarez and some of his clergy came to the defense of the demonstrators, and some of the churches served as shelters and clinics for young people fleeing repression and wounded by police and ruling party members.

I was kidnapped by the National Police of Nicaragua; I say kidnapped, because that day, at 3:00 a.m., a group of riot police violently entered the building of the Episcopal Curia and without presenting any arrest warrant, they took us out of the rooms and placed us in the conference room of the Curia. There were 5 priests, among them the Bishop of the Diocese of Matagalpa, Monsignor Rolando Alvarez Lagos, a deacon, two seminarians and a layman, a total of 9 people who had been locked up for 15 days, because on August 4 the National Police locked them in that building.

I was transferred to the cells of Auxilio Judicial de Managua, a jail better known as the "Nuevo Chipote". Our rights were violated because they did not tell us anything about the reason for our arrest, they stripped us naked, forced us to wear prison uniforms and transferred me to one of the cells. That same day the interrogations began, there were more than 30 interrogations, which could take place at any time of the day, even in the early hours of the morning. They blackmailed me and threatened the lives of my relatives, because they wanted me to declare that the Bishop was a member of an organization that wanted to promote a coup d'état against Daniel Ortega and that he received money from the US government and the European Union. Other interrogations had to do with homilies that the bishop had said in some Eucharists, and in which, according to them, he was inciting people to rise up to protest against the government, the homilies are all on social networks and in them he simply exercises his freedom of expression and advocates for the defense of the human rights of Nicaraguans. It is clear that this is manipulated by the same government that does not like to hear the truth and the voice of the Catholic Church, so from that date began an open persecution of Catholic institutions, such as Caritas and John Paul II University and more recently the Central American University UCA, thus affecting university autonomy and academic freedom.

While the interrogations were taking place, the trial against the group that was in the Episcopal Curia was also taking place. The trial from the beginning was full of

irregularities, illegalities and vices, the Prosecutor's Office, the police and the judges colluded so that in the end the accusation was practically the same for the majority of the 222, including the priests and the bishop. In the same way, once the sentence was pronounced, we were accused of "treason" and all our civil rights were taken away to the point of not even presenting us at the Civil Registry office.

As I pointed out earlier, we were taken out of jail on the night of Wednesday, February 8, around 10:30 p.m., and taken on three buses to an unknown destination, until we were on the tarmac of the Air Force airport and it was explained to us that we were leaving for exile in the United States. When we were in Washington the next day, we realized that the bishop was not on that plane. He is being held in the prison known as La Modelo, in Tipitapa, Managua, Nicaragua.

I hope that this testimony can be used to negotiate the release of my bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you so very much. They are very, very—both of your testimonies are just extraordinary. Thank you.

I'd like to recognize a parent of a prisoner of conscience and thank her for being here today.

STATEMENT OF PARENT OF PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE

[The following statement and answers were delivered through an interpreter.]

PARENT OF PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE. I will omit my name for security and identify myself as a Nicaraguan in exile. My life and that of my family changed on April 16th, 2018, when the government of Nicaragua made reforms to social security, at which time my family and I joined the protests along with thousands of Nicaraguans.

Since that day we received threats, persecution, and continuous siege by the police, the Sandinista militants, and paramilitary groups. We participated in different marches, civic sit-ins, and witnessed brutal attacks by the Sandinista police against students and civil society.

At the same time we witnessed the participation of the Catholic Church as a mediator and defender of human rights and I will now cite some events.

In the city of Matagalpa on May 15th the Sandinista police and paramilitary groups attacked the young demonstrators and it was the Catholic priests that interceded and achieved a cease-fire.

The Catholic Church opened the doors of its churches to protect the life and integrity of the students and demonstrators. On May 30th, Nicaraguan Mother's Day, a march was organized in support of the mothers of the assassinated youths.

Thousands of Nicaraguans participated and among them my family and myself, and as the march progressed gunshots were heard. The dictatorship had snipers and they shot at the civilian population that was participating in the marches.

One of my sons and other young people set out to help the wounded. My husband, one of my sons, and I managed to get to our house.

However, my other son could not. He took refuge in the cathedral of the Catholic Church and in the early morning of the next day my husband and I managed to get them out of the cathedral.

One of my sons was kidnapped by paramilitaries in the middle of 2018 and at the time of his kidnapping two Catholic priests were passing by who immediately informed us of the kidnapping.

The same day of his kidnapping my son was transferred to the torture prison El Chipote. The mothers remained outside the prison day and night accompanied by several priests.

We did not know if our sons were alive or dead and it was not until Bishop Rolando Jose Alvarez arrived at El Chipote and asked to see the kidnapped young men that I knew that my son was alive.

Bishop Rolando Alvarez together with all the clergy of the diocese of Matagalpa celebrated a mass outside of El Chipote for the freedom of the kidnapped and for the peace of Nicaragua.

As the dictatorship was opening trials for the kidnapped they were being transferred to the Modelo prison. The Catholic Church made arrangements so that we could see them.

The visit took place in a large cell where there were many rusty iron bars. The condition of the cell was deplorable, very dirty. I saw my son tortured. His whole body was beaten and with many insect bites.

Right next to us there were some young men maybe between 15 and 16 years old and you could see the torture that they had been subjected to. I remember that one of them lifted up his pants and showed me his calf. It had been burned with acid, and he could not bend the fingers of his hands due to the tortures that he was subjected to.

On July 13th the Sandinista police attacked with firearms the students who were at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua. The students took refuge in the Divine Mercy Catholic Church.

With my husband we went to try to help the wounded students but we did not succeed. The police presence and the attack prevented us from entering. That day two students died.

In 2018 I suffered a direct attack against my physical integrity. I received a phone call informing me that there was an arrest warrant against me and for that reason I had to leave my country.

All this accompaniment of the church toward the people of Nicaragua has provoked persecution by the government. I hope that my testimony will serve as a basis for taking forceful action against the Ortega/Murillo regime and that Bishop Rolando Jose Alvarez will be freed and that the persecution against the Catholic Church and the laity will stop.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Parent of Prisoner of Conscience follows:]

November, 2023

PERSONAL STATEMENT

I will omit my name for security and identify myself as a Nicaraguan in exile.

My life and that of my family changed on April 16, 2018 when the Government of Nicaragua made reforms to Social Security, my family and I joined the protests along with thousands of Nicaraguans. Since that day we received threats, persecution and continuous siege by the police, Sandinista militants and paramilitary groups. We participated in different marches, civic sit-ins and witnessed brutal attacks by the Sandinista police against students and civil society.

At the same time we witnessed the participation of the Catholic Church as a mediator and defender of human rights, and I will cite some events.

- In the city of Matagalpa on May 15 the Sandinista police and paramilitary groups attacked the young demonstrators, the Catholic Priests interceded and achieved a cease fire.
- The Catholic Church opened the doors of its churches to protect the life and integrity of the students and demonstrators. On May 30, Nicaraguan Mother's Day, a march was organized in support of the mothers of the assassinated youths, thousands of Nicaraguans participated, among them my family and myself, as the march progressed gun shots were heard, the dictatorship had snipers and they shot at the civilian population that participated. My eldest son and other young people set out to help the wounded. My husband, one of my sons and I managed to get to our house, however, my oldest son could not, he took refuge in the Cathedral of the Catholic Church. In the early morning of the next day my husband and I managed to get them out of the cathedral.
- One of my sons was kidnapped by paramilitaries in mid-2018, at the time of his kidnapping two Catholic priests were passing by who immediately informed us of the kidnapping.
- The same day of his kidnapping my son was transferred to the torture prison El Chipote, the mothers remained outside the prison day and night, accompanied by several priests, we did not know if our sons were alive or dead, it was until Bishop Rolando José Álvarez arrived at El Chipote and asked to see the kidnapped young men, until that moment I knew that my son was alive.
- Bishop Rolando Alvarez together with all the clergy of the Diocese of Matagalpa, celebrated a mass outside the Chipote for the Freedom of the Kidnapped and for the Peace of Nicaragua.
- As the dictatorship was opening trials for the kidnapped, they were being transferred to the Modelo prison, the Catholic Church made arrangements so that we could see them. The visit took place in a large cell where there were many rusty iron bars, the condition of the cell was deplorable, very dirty, I saw my son tortured, his whole body was beaten and with many insect bites. Right next to us there were some young men maybe 15, 16 years old, you could see the tortures they had been subjected to, I remember that one of them lifted up his pants and showed me his calf, it had been burned with acid, he could not bend the fingers of his hands due to the tortures.
- On July 13 the Sandinista police attacked with firearms the students who were at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua, the students took refuge in the Divine Mercy Catholic Church. With my husband we went to try to help the wounded students, but we did not succeed, the police presence and the attack prevented us from entering; that day two students died.
- In 2018 I suffered a direct attack against my physical integrity. I received a phone call informing me that there was an arrest warrant against me, for that reason I had to leave my country.

All this accompaniment of the Church towards the people of Nicaragua has provoked persecution by the Government.

November, 2023

I hope that my testimony will serve as a basis for taking forceful action against the Ortega-Murillo Regime and that Bishop Rolando José Álvarez will be freed and that the persecution against the Catholic Church and the laity will stop.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, and let the record note that before us is a mom who through her tears, which the audience cannot see, is crying out for her son, for the other young people who were killed and tortured.

As you just said, you know, the use of acid and that your son's body was so beaten and filled with insect bites, I mean, that needs to be known by everybody in this town and everybody around the world.

So thank you for bringing that forward to us. You know, the love of a mother is just incredible and your testimony is so moving. Thank you.

I'd like to now turn to Ms. Ullmer.

**STATEMENT OF DEBORAH ULLMER, REGIONAL DIRECTOR
FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, NATIONAL
DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE**

Ms. ULLMER. Thank you. Thank you, Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wild, and members of the Subcommittee of Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations.

Thank you for this opportunity to address the subcommittee as part of a followup to the March 22d hearing calling for the release of Bishop Rolando Alvarez, who has become the courageous face of resistance in Nicaragua.

I am honored to testify again in my capacity as regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean at the National Democratic Institute and wish to express my solidarity with the brave former prisoners of conscience and the mother who accompany us here today.

The fact that their faces are protected from the public's view here in the United States is emblematic of the State of repression in Nicaragua today.

The ongoing expulsion, arbitrary deprivation of citizenship, arbitrary detentions, and illegal confiscations of the property of hundreds of Nicaraguenses' critics they highlight the seamlessly relentless repression in the country.

As I mentioned to the honorable Members of Congress in March, the situation in Nicaragua is deeply personal to me. My husband's name appeared first on the list of 94 Nicaraguans stripped of their citizenship on February 15th. I'm happy to say that today he is a U.S. citizen.

But the Ortega/Murillo regime last week confiscated our house in Managua. I take inspiration from Bishop Alvarez's words that painful experiences like these do not happen in vain.

As Nicaragua becomes increasingly totalitarian its ties to China and Russia deepen. Nicaragua serves as a political and military base for these illiberal influences in Central America.

In fact, the Ortega/Murillo regime has been successful in advocating for China and Russia to serve as observers in regional bodies including the Central American Parliament—PARLACEN—and the Central American Integration System, SICA.

In this regard the Ortega/Murillo regime threatens to broaden the influence of malevolent actors in Central America. NDI applauds important actions taken to date against Nicaraguan officials committing systematic human rights violations.

Unfortunately, the Ortega/Murillo regime continues to dismantle democratic institutions, erase the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, and consolidate its dictatorial power.

It is essential to call out the ongoing crimes against humanity and violations of fundamental human rights and liberties endured by the Nicaraguans including Bishop Alvarez.

But we must not also forget about the 81 remaining political prisoners jailed since April 2018 including the mother who is here today. Their family members, as she just stated, are also suffering reprisals.

The group of human rights experts on Nicaragua tasked by the United Nations Human Rights Council to conduct investigations into human rights violations and abuses committed in the country since April 2018 express deep concern about the situation of Bishop Alvarez, who is in solitary confinement and in detention that gravely contravenes the Nelson Mandela rules for the treatment of prisoners.

The U.S. and the international community should consider the following additional actions to continue to address ongoing human rights violations in Nicaragua.

First, despite Nicaragua's recent formal withdrawal from the Organization of American States the country and government remain bound to human rights obligations under international conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which Nicaragua is a signatory.

As such, ongoing investigations and public reporting by the U.N. group of experts remain crucial to ensure international scrutiny of the deteriorating crises and exert pressure on U.N. member States to demand accountability and justice for the victims of atrocities, particularly human rights abuses against indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.

In particular I want to call attention to the recent arrest of Brooklyn Rivera, a Miskito indigenous person and leader of the YATAMA Party, right ahead of the March 2024 regional elections.

As verified by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, the status of Mr. Rivera's health and whereabouts are unknown.

Second, the U.S. should work with democracies in the region to create a Friends of Nicaragua group to advance high-level regional dialog toward a democratic transition.

Furthermore, the U.S. should work with Canada, European Union, and other allies to ensure a coordinated, consistent, and a holistic response to the crises including sanctions which prioritizes human rights in consultation with the Nicaraguan civil society.

Third, the U.S. Government has diplomatic and economic tools to ensure international financing and trade are not propping up the Ortega/Murillo regime including the bipartisan NICA and RENACER Acts and Executive Order 14088.

In this regard the Administration should fully use all of its tools at its disposal to sanction sectors that bolster the economic interests of the Nicaraguan regime including CAFTA-DR.

The U.S. rightly sanctioned Nicaragua's attorney general earlier this year for confiscating property from the government's political opponents without a legal basis.

The U.S. should also consider sanctions against the Nicaragua Central Bank for profiting from the confiscations not only of Nicaraguans but now of U.S. citizens, along with the private banks that have branches in the United States for either colluding with the regime either directly or by their inaction.

Fourth, NDI congratulates the Administration for its recent action to restrict visas for the operators of aviation companies facilitating chartered flights for Cuban and Haitian migrants to Nicaragua from where they seek a perilous travel to the north.

The U.S. should also consider sanctioning the Nicaraguan Institute for Civil Aeronautics for participating in and profiting from these flights.

Finally, NDI commends the bipartisan efforts by this committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to increase scrutiny of lending by the Central American Development Bank of Economic Integration, CABEL.

A new investigation by the Organized Crime and Corruption Report project raises questions about the bank's lending practices to, quote, "a club of friends who prioritize politics over sound investments and rely on the bank to access cheaper funding from international markets."

The U.S. has an opportunity to work with the new and first woman executive president of CABEL, Ana Gisela Sanchez from Costa Rica, to reconsider continued lending to Nicaragua until actions are taken to restore democracy. This will also send an important message to neighboring governments already demonstrating concerning authoritarian practices.

I join with the Nicaraguans' calls with our former prisoners of conscience and the mother who is here today and yours, Chairman Smith, to let Bishop Alvarez go.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Ullmer follows:]

State of Civil and Political Rights in Nicaragua

Presented at

“An Urgent Appeal to Let Bishop Alvarez Go”

Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Submitted by

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Regional Director for

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wild and members of the Subcommittees on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations, thank you for this opportunity to address the Subcommittees as part of this hearing on “An Urgent Appeal to Let Bishop Alvarez Go,” a follow-on to the March 22 hearing on “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 seven national offices in Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, 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 [IDFA’s Global State of Democracy 2022](#)

report, over the past 16 years, prospects for freedoms have dimmed in the Americas. Since then, numerous challenges to democratic governance have emerged, including:

- a rise in authoritarianism and an increased preference for populist leaders who dismantle democratic institutions in their wake,
- efforts to delegitimize election results by corrupt governments that bend the rules of the game in their favor and abuse power to benefit themselves,
- a deepening use of the military and states of emergency to deal with gangs and organized crime,
- a prevalence of false information and illiberal influences like China and Russia,
- the wielding of the judicial system against government critics, and
- migration due to crime, poverty, climate change and other vulnerabilities, resulting in humanitarian crises in the region.

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.

Nicaragua is ranked by numerous surveys as one of the least free countries in the region. According to Manuel Orozco, Director of the Migration, Remittances, and Development program at the Inter-American Dialogue, more than 800,000 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. 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 Latin American democracies have condemned what the [United Nations Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua](#) (GHREN) denounced as “crimes against humanity: murder, imprisonment, torture, including sexual violence, deportation, and politically motivated persecution.” The ongoing expulsion, arbitrary arrests and detentions, restrictions of freedoms, and confiscation of property of hundreds of Nicaraguan critics highlight the seemingly relentless repression in the country.

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 Nicaragua's rule of law. The legal system was used to delegitimize the country's civic organizations. According to a [September report by the GHREN](#), the regime has escalated its persecution against dissent, essentially shuttering civic, religious and educational institutions. More than 3,300 national and international civil society organizations, independent media, charities, trade associations, and universities were deregistered and forced to close, including the prestigious Central American University (UCA) and the Central American Institute of Business Administration (INCAE), and international organizations like 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.

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 81 political prisoners (jailed since April 2018), 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. On October 18, 12 Catholic priests who had been arrested as part of the recent crackdown on the Catholic Church were released and transferred to Rome in an agreement brokered by the Vatican.

NDI also calls attention to Nicaragua's Indigenous communities, who continue to suffer violent attacks over land disputes. Delays in land restoration procedures and the alleged establishment of parallel governments, replacing legitimate Indigenous representatives elected by traditional assemblies, continue to cause uncertainty in the tenure of Indigenous Lands. From August 2022 to June 2023, the GHREN [documented](#) eight cases of violent attacks on Indigenous Peoples, especially in Mayangna Sauni at the core of the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve. In July, the [UN's flagship climate](#) fund suspended payments to a \$117 million forest protection project over escalating violence against Indigenous people. 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 [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights \(IACHR\)](#) granted precautionary measures in favor of regional legislator Brooklyn Rivera, a Miskitu indigenous person and the leader of the YATAMA (*Yapti Tasba Masraka Nanih Aslatakanka*, "Children of Mother Earth United") party. He was arrested on September 29, and is believed to be suffering health issues; his whereabouts have been unknown since then. His substitute representative in Congress, Elizabeth Henríquez was also arrested. On October 3, the regime revoked YATAMA's legal status, bringing to an end a 36-year-old Indigenous movement that served as the only political force in the Caribbean coastal region in the lead-up to the March 2024 regional elections. This is just the latest in a years-long string of assaults on Indigenous communities in the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua.

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. Even Miss Nicaragua, now Miss Universe Sheynnis Palacios, did not escape retaliation.

On November 11, *Confidencial* reported that Murillo dismissed more than 900 people from the judiciary, equivalent to approximately 10 percent of the government workforce. The removals

included senior judges, appeals judges, area directors, judges in central and local courts, and administrative and service personnel. The sweep has been attributed to divisions among factions of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), with those not perceived as sufficiently loyal to Murillo being expelled. Furthermore, as reported by *Confidencial*, on October 31, the National Assembly voted to move the public property records from the Supreme Court's purview to the office of the Attorney General. As such, the Attorney General's office has become the "judge, jury and executioner" of the illegal property confiscations.

Nicaragua's withdrawal from the Organization of American States (OAS), a process initiated by the Ortega-Murillo regime more than two years ago, took effect on November 19. Ahead of its withdrawal, the OAS approved a resolution stating that even if it is no longer an OAS member, Nicaragua "remains bound to respect all human rights reflected in customary norms; all human rights contained in the multilateral human rights conventions to which Nicaragua is a party, as well as those derived from general principles of international law."

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 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](#)." The President of the Russian Duma visited Nicaragua the day after Russia invaded Ukraine. In September, Nicaraguans joined congressional delegations from Cuba, Venezuela, and Central America in what was billed by the Russian Duma as the "First Russia-Latin America Parliamentary Conference." 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.

Opportunities to Advance Democracy

NDI applauds actions taken to date against Nicaraguan officials committing human rights violations by the Biden Administration and bi-partisan efforts in the U.S. Congress. Yet, the Ortega-Murillo regime continues to dismantle democratic institutions, erase the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, and consolidate its dictatorial power over all Nicaraguans. Now more

than ever, it is essential to call out the ongoing crimes against humanity 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 81 remaining political prisoners, including Bishop Álvarez, and all of their family members suffering reprisals. The U.S. and the international community should consider the following additional actions to continue to address ongoing human rights violations in Nicaragua.

- Nicaragua's isolation from regional and international organizations reduces existing checks-on Ortega-Murillo's power. Despite Nicaragua's withdrawal from the OAS, however, the country and government remain bound to several human rights obligations under international instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Nicaragua is a signatory. As such, ongoing investigations and public reporting by the GHREN remain crucial to ensure international scrutiny of the deteriorating crisis and exert pressure on UN member states to provide accountability and justice for victims of atrocity crimes, particularly human rights abuses against women, and the Indigenous and Afro-descendent communities. 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. should work with Latin American democracies in the region to create "A Friends of Nicaragua Group" and advance high-level regional dialogue toward a democratic transition in Nicaragua. Furthermore, the U.S. should work with Canada, the European Union, and other allies to ensure a coordinated, consistent, and holistic response to the crisis which prioritizes human rights protection and democratic reform, in consultation with Nicaraguan civil society.
- The U.S. Government has diplomatic and economic tools to ensure that international funding and trade are not propping up the Ortega-Murillo regime. In this regard, we applaud the bi-partisan Senate bill introduced in June to reauthorize and amend the 2018 Nicaraguan Investment Conditionality Act (NICA Act) and 2021 Reinforcing Nicaragua's Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform Act (RENACER Act) to "enhance sanctions on sectors of the Nicaraguan economy that generate revenue for the Ortega family." NDI also commends the Biden Administration for Executive Order 14088 "Taking Additional Steps to Address the National Emergency with Respect to the Situation in Nicaragua," which amended Executive Order 13851, to expand Nicaragua sanctions authorities to individuals and entities operating in identified areas, such as the gold sector. The Executive Order also allows for the imposition of future restrictions on

trade with Nicaragua. We urge the Administration to use all tools available to pressure the regime.

- NDI supports the Administration for its recent action to restrict visas for the aviation operators of companies facilitating chartered flights for Cuban and Haitian migrants to Nicaragua from where they seek to travel overland to the United States. The U.S. should also consider sanctioning the Nicaraguan Institute of Civil Aeronautics, which is facilitating the weaponization of migration.
- NDI commends the bipartisan efforts by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Menendez and the House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman McCaul to increase scrutiny of lending by the Central American Development Bank of Economic Integration (CABEI) to the Ortega-Murillo regime. A new investigative project by [The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project](#) raises questions about CABEI's lending practices to "a club of friends who prioritize politics over sound investments and rely on the bank to access cheaper funding from international markets." The U.S. has the opportunity to work with the first woman Executive President of CABEI, Ana Guissella Sánchez Maroto from Costa Rica, 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. This will also send an important message to neighboring governments already demonstrating authoritarian tendencies.
- 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 of conscience, 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 obtain 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. NDI praises the introduction of the bi-partisan “Nicaraguan Political Prisoner Support Act” so that the former prisoners and their immediate family members can have access to mainstream benefits and reduce their day-to-day struggles.

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wild and members of the Subcommittees on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations, thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, Ms. Ullmer.

Thank you for that tremendous testimony, for that very important prescriptive list of actions that we, the House, Senate, and the executive branch need to undertake and your thought—and I'll ask your question about it—and I will go to Ms. Salazar, the chairwoman of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, for her comments and remarks and she is a tremendous advocate for human rights and freedom.

But I thank you for calling on a collaboration with the other nations. Again, the idea of people looking askance and having compassion fatigue or anything like that we need to double down rather than do business as usual. So thank you so much for that.

Proud to recognize our distinguished chairwoman of the Western Hemisphere Committee, Ms. Salazar.

Ms. SALAZAR. Thanks to you, Mr. Chairman, and you are the distinguished one, Representative Smith, for putting together this hearing and always caring about the people from Nicaragua.

I have asked you for permission to do this hearing in Spanish because that way it's going to be easier for you. I know that you're going to have a translator and if not I can translate my words. But you have a translator.

And because the reason why Chairman Smith asked me to do it in Spanish is so we can transcend the walls of the United States Capitol and get to the people of Nicaragua and to everyone who's interested in this beautiful country.

Let's see if—all right. So——

The INTERPRETER. Oh, sorry. I'm going to—my bad. I'm sorry, Congresswoman.

[Laughter.]

Ms. SALAZAR. I will speak in Spanish for everybody that's listening and to us outside of these walls. I want to get in a rhythm here so that you can do the translation correctly for the rest of the members.

This is a hearing that Congressman Smith is holding for all those Nicaraguans that want to see freedom in their homeland. We thank all three of you that are here for your sacrifice.

What is inconceivable is that Daniel Ortega meddles or interferes with the Catholic Church, something that not even the dictator Somoza was willing to do, and he's holding as a prisoner one of the most important members of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua for more than a year now.

And the question is how does Ortega know that he can do this to somebody of such importance in an institution that is twice as popular and has more confidence than the Ortega regime in Nicaragua. How does Ortega know that he can do this?

For whoever wants to answer.

EXILED PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE NO. 2. I believe that in his mind that we are—we're enemies. He thinks that we're enemies among us. He thinks that us—he thinks that we have promoted the supposed coup d'etat.

But my question really is this. When he was in prison and many others like him, the Sandinista guerrillas, did he forget that it was the Catholic Church that interceded for his liberation and the liberation of all of them?

In other words, the Catholic Church exists to defend human rights and the dignity of the human person.

Ms. SALAZAR. He forgot. Very convenient. Is he acting under the knowledge that there is no political cost to pay for doing what he's doing to the Catholic Church or does he know that there is a cost?

EXILED PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE NO. 2. He knows there is a cost but he does not care. He just does not care.

Ms. SALAZAR. Can the Catholic Church get him out of power and if so how? Could they do it as it happened to Somoza?

EXILED PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE NO. 2. We cannot. It's not our mission. We're not a political party. That's not what the role of the church is.

Ms. SALAZAR. But Bishop Obando y Bravo, back in the day, did actually accomplish that the Sandinistas did not gain power through elections.

EXILED PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE NO. 2. I think that as a citizen certainly that was the case. But in terms of the church as an institution the doctrine of the Church is not that. It is not our mission. We are not at war with any government. We just raise a prophetic voice.

EXILED PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE NO. 1. Our mission is to preach the social teachings of the Church, nothing else. We are not a political party. Our mission is always to just preach the gospel with all its consequences whatever they may be.

Ms. SALAZAR. What are the soft spots or vulnerabilities of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo? If they do not fear God what do they fear?

EXILED PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE NO. 1. Nothing. Nobody. They themselves think that they are God and that's it.

PARENT OF PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE. They are afraid of losing power. That's it.

Ms. SALAZAR. Finally, what do you think that the U.S. can do so that Nicaraguans can have democracy in their country?

EXILED PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE NO. 2. For me, the very fact that we're holding this hearing is incredibly important for us. Being such a small country having this opportunity to rise up to an international stage and to make it known what is happening in our country this already creates consciousness in our country.

That is different from what is seen through social media that are so tailored, or tourists that visit our country and look at everything as if everything is normal and that nothing is happening and that's not the case. That's it.

Ms. SALAZAR. If that is the case, here we are the two chairmen of the two subcommittees for the Western Hemisphere and for Human Rights speaking clearly to the international community and specifically to the regime of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo that we will not rest so long as we're in this position and we will not forget that they are two heartless dictators and they have stolen the country, a country that used to be the grain provision for all of Central America, that had democracy thanks to Violeta Chamorro, that was able to get away from the dead weight that are Sandinistas that maybe for now are back in power but this will not last forever and we are committed, both of us, and the full com-

mittee of Foreign Affairs for the United States of America that this will be the case.

Do you agree? Absolutamente. Thank you, Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. SMITH. You could go on forever. I deeply appreciate Chairwoman Salazar's incisive questioning and her passion and her unbelievably deep commitment to fundamental human rights and that the people of Nicaragua deserve those rights.

They deserve better than what they are getting now and our witnesses clearly have made it so clear that there needs to be change and I can tell you, you know, notwithstanding the myriad of crises that we have in the world today whether it be the challenges of conflict, Hamas, the problems we're having, obviously, in Ukraine and the conflict there, the crimes against humanity and genocide being committed by Xi Jinping in Xinjiang and other human rights abuses in China, the threats to Taiwan—all of it in no way, shape, or form crowds out our focus and our concern for the people of Nicaragua, for the bishop, for all of you, and we will redouble our efforts going forward.

We're looking for additional levers and, again, thank you, Ms. Ullmer, for your recommendations on very specific things that we could be doing and we will do it and we're going to—you know, I would just note for the record that Juan Sebastian Chamorro is here with us today.

He was imprisoned because he was a candidate running against Ortega. His wife Victoria had testified at a hearing we had 2 years ago.

He testified last spring, and these are the best and the bravest and the brightest of Nicaragua who are just calling for democracy and freedom, and all of you have paid such a price for it and I just cannot say how deeply respectful and encouraged we are by your ongoing resilience and strength.

We will continue this effort. We're going to meet and talk about next steps but right now we're requesting and appealing to Ortega to let the bishop go and I think your point, Exiled Prisoner No. 2—I'd love to say your name but you know why—for reminding us how the church as peacemakers.

You know, the Beatitudes cannot be clearer when Jesus said blessed are the peacemakers. You stepped in and helped Ortega himself as a church—as our church—because I am a Catholic as well, and as was pointed out by the parent of our prisoner of conscience the church stepped in as peace makers to protect children, the young people, the students, and got a cease-fire.

I mean, that's what the church does. As you said so clearly, you're not a political party. The church isn't a political party anywhere but is a force for enormous good and compassion and love and reconciliation. So, again, thank you for that.

Do you have any—yes?

Ms. SALAZAR. Chairman, the Bible also said that the Devil is coming to kill, steal, and destroy and resist it. So we are resisting Devil according to the Scriptures.

[Spanish language spoken.]

Ms. SALAZAR. So you can translate—like, please do the translation.

The INTERPRETER. I'm sorry, Congresswoman. I got caught up with your rhetoric. But—

Ms. SALAZAR. It's like the Bible says that you have to resist the Devil because it comes to kill, steal, and destroy and Murillo and Ortega are the Devil on Nicaragua. So that's why we are resisting them.

The first thing that they should do is to let the bishop free. Let him out so he can come to the exile and continue living his life of serving the Nicaraguan people out of Nicaragua, something that he should not be doing.

I do not understand why he has to go into exile. He was born in Nicaragua and he wants to stay in Nicaragua so why does he have to leave? They are the ones who should be leaving.

I yield back.

Mr. SMITH. Let me just ask very briefly about that video that we all watched and it was—the timeliness of it was interesting at best.

As I pointed out in my opening comments I have seen—because I have visited prisons and gulags for my entirety of my time in Congress and there's always an effort to try to portray, you know, incredibly humane conditions when you visit.

You know, they do put on a show and that video to me, seeing all of that food laid out for Bishop Alvarez, was just a bridge too far. I mean, it was a Potemkin village, like I said in my opening comments.

So maybe if you could speak to the prison conditions. You, a prisoner—mom of a prisoner of conscience, your son, you pointed out just how horrific it was and then the fact that he was tortured, you know, I think people need to know that and you did—you know, thank you for—and I know you spoke through your tears when you told us that.

But people need to know the truth and thanks for being a truth bearer on that. But that video—I watched that three times and I said, are you kidding me. You know, you think we're just going to say oh, everything's just fine. He's sitting in a cushy chair. The television set is on and there's platters of food right in front of him.

It did not look like he had much food before that and he was not eating either. So I—but and, again, and I do not want to repeat myself but it reminded me exactly what I saw at Perm Camp 35 with Frank Wolf in 1989.

I did not mention this but they even had in this so-called cafeteria, which the political prisoners there including Natan Sharansky never saw. They had a—like, when you go to McDonald's you see the caloric count of every food item—you know, the hamburger equals how many—they had that up there and I said, you know, who do you think you're kidding.

So I just—you know, if you could maybe speak to that video if you'd like and about the bishop. You know, I think there's been an attempt to confuse, that somehow he wants to stay in prison.

I do not think that's the case. He wants to be free and I think—and that might mean coming here. It might mean going to the Vatican. But, you know, as Congresswoman—Chairwoman Salazar pointed out, I thought of another Scripture as she was speaking.

You know, when it said what does it profit a man to gain the entire world and lose his soul, I mean, is this all worth it? All this

power and having—you know, do not they have enough riches? Don't they have enough power as well as their cronies?

You know, try reaching out to people and get in their shoes. A little empathy would certainly go a long way. But if you could speak to the video.

EXILED PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE NO. 2. Just as you have mentioned, Congressman Smith, that video is nothing but a show that's been put on by the regime. We lived it ourselves.

When we had visitors at the prison it was exactly the same situation. A room would be prepared so that the family members would feel at ease with our conditions and that they could see that we're all OK.

They would ask them to smile for the cameras because there would be a picture taken of the visit and that they should also smile. I mean, not just us but also our family members.

So we're fully aware that this is nothing but a show. I mean, even the food that was there was exquisite and not what we would receive. The day of our visit we will always have that, like, spread of food laid out but it was never given to us.

What is very noteworthy is that the officers of the prison that would serve the food and would be very kind to us or nice when speaking to us in those days were the same ones that would later be at the courthouse testifying lies against us.

PARENT OF PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE. Speaking in my capacity as a family member of a former prisoner the videos and the pictures are the biggest humiliation that we can get.

Family members are submitted to abuse. Whenever we had the opportunity to visit and going in you would be fondled. Some women were stripped down naked, and I can definitely recall that in one opportunity one mother was late to the visit and they told her, if you want to give food to your son you have to dance. You have to dance the song Daniel Se Queda—Daniel Stays. The mom had to do it so that she could feed her son.

MR. SMITH. One question to Ms. Ullmer. You gave, again, that excellent prescriptive list of things we could be doing and I thank you for that.

You mentioned the importance of the central bank and, you know, we have seen with Iran and with other sanctioning—sanctions that have been imposed by our government over the years that that's when you really get their attention.

You know, GSP, all those things, are all important. The CAFTA—that would be an area, and I hope the regime realizes that we're just beginning and, you know, you saw the passion of Chairwoman Salazar. I feel the same. She is, you know, absolutely committed. Has been doing this her entire life as well.

And so if you could maybe speak to and elaborate a bit on some of those actions that need to be taken.

MS. ULLMER. Thank you for the question.

I'd like to start off with the question that Chairwoman Salazar posed first—what are the vulnerabilities. I heard one Juan Sebastian Chamorro behind me say they fear the population.

All of this, the sham, all of the false information, the attacks against the Nicaraguenses, the fear I hear in these brave souls that are sitting next to me they fear the population. This is what they

fear. And, again, I'm so grateful and so honored to be sitting aside them.

What else can we be doing? I mentioned the central bank because I'd like to speak about my own personal experience. These criminals are trying to not leave traces of their illegalities.

In confiscating our houses they are not leaving any papers. They're telling—if we have tenants they're telling our tenants that they have to sign new leases but are not being provided what those leases are or the terms.

Furthermore, they're being told to go and pay the central bank in person so that they won't have wire transfers or any paper trails.

They will make mistakes and we will document those mistakes and this is why it's important to be documenting today the crimes that they are committing because the population will regain their democracy. They will be able to go back to a free land. I'm certain of that and that is what I'm dedicated to doing.

What else could we be doing? I want to highlight the efforts of the Nicaraguans that are here not only in the U.S. but also in exile in Spain and Mexico and Costa Rica and inside of the country, of the brave souls that are still there and their family members that are still there.

They're trying to find a common ground for peaceful change for when a political opening does occur. These efforts can be bolstered by sustained U.S. democracy assistance that supports journalists, civic, environmental, human rights, and youth activists and the democratic opposition to what—to shine a light on the crimes against humanity, to monitor international financial bank loans, to disrupt information manipulation, to generate a consensus toward a democratic transition.

A return to democracy, however, will only likely succeed when the Nicaraguan efforts are bolstered with international support. CABEI has been playing an unfortunate role and supporting not only the Murillo and Ortega regime but others that are becoming less democratic in Central America.

We have a golden opportunity to now work with the new president who comes from Costa Rica to rethink the lending to Nicaragua. Thankfully, a U.N. environmental fund was recently stopped.

I believe that was after the hearing in March because we shined the light on what's going on with the indigenous lands and the settlers. It's important to continue the pressure and to really look at the bank lending, that absolutely we have voice and vote at the World Bank, at the International Development Bank—we have that influence.

We need to also work with colleagues at CABEI because they are bankrolling dictators. The sanctions—DR-CAFTA—that is something that the Nicaraguans are calling for and we have been very careful to provide individual sanctions to really only harm the regime that are committing crimes against humanity and not widespread sanctions.

The Ortega/Murillo regime has attempted over the past couple of years to manipulate the information as if we are calling for a widespread blockade and that is not the case.

The Nicaraguans need to understand that our sanctions have been targeted to individuals who are causing harm including the attorney general and others now at the supreme court—what's left of the supreme court.

There's a lot of change going on and there is analysis in the—within the country that the firing of almost 900 individuals at different levels—the supreme court, national and local levels of judges, of administrative staff.

They fear information getting out to other nations. They fear that their own officials who have worked in government and are now fleeing the country they fear that real—the information is getting out and now they are clamping down to the point of completely erasing the supreme court and moving all of their illegalities to the attorney general's office, which is now judge and jury.

There's a lot more work that can be done for sure and I thank you both, Chairwoman Salazar, Chairman Smith, and Ranking Member Wild for all the efforts in keeping the light on Nicaragua.

Mr. SMITH. Ms. Wild?

Ms. WILD. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I'm going to pick up right there, speaking of information getting out. I'm very interested and concerned with the topic of freedom of the press and in July 2023 a Nicaraguan journalist said in Nicaragua there's not a single independent media outlet that operates within the country. You would—you're nodding your head. I take it you agree with that statement.

Can you speak to any efforts by the regime to restrict or surveille internet use and other forms of digital information sharing?

Ms. ULLMER. Thank you for that question. Back in March I believe I had mentioned that the Russians, according to the Pentagon and other sources, have set up satellites. I've seen the satellites for myself when I was there in 2019.

With their new embassy and these satellites the belief is that the satellites are there to not only surveille the opposition within the country but they're also surveilling opposition throughout Latin America or at least throughout Central America.

There is no doubt in anyone's minds that the regime is working closely with Iran, with Russia, with China to not only surveille their own but also to replicate or manipulate information.

The surveillance, however, was also started a while back ago through what they call community policing. Not community policing in what we believe in the United States but it's to set up police block by block, and this is inspired by Iran and in Cuba, where they—basically they're informants to the party and provide movements.

Hence, while these people were picked up, right, at 3 in the morning they knew where to find folks not only in their homes but on the streets. That was also shown to be the case in 2018 when they were going after the students and their families. They were being surveilled.

And so there's no doubt in my mind that that's happening. There is no freedom of press, of speech, of movement, of assembly that you can speak of anymore in Nicaragua.

Ms. WILD. So let me ask you this. Are there any effective pathways for the United States and international partners to attempt

to protect independent media workers or outlets broadcasting and publishing independent coverage of events in Nicaragua?

Ms. ULLMER. Absolutely. Journalists today are circumventing this restriction. They're operating on the outside and that's thanks to support by the United States of lifting the Nicaraguans' voices outside of Nicaragua and throughout the territories.

That is one way to continue to shine a spotlight on Nicaragua. They're working from the outside.

Ms. WILD. Meaning they're not in the country?

Ms. ULLMER. They're not in the country anymore.

Ms. WILD. OK. So that's how they—because I was going to ask about their safety and wellbeing.

Ms. ULLMER. But they have journalists and they have in their informants that they protect inside of the country.

Ms. WILD. And how can we best support that?

Ms. ULLMER. I think that we need to continue to provide democracy and civic government assistance. That is the best way to support, to support organizations that work with the journalists but organizations that also provide human rights protection mechanisms.

Unfortunately, that means many times that these individuals have to leave their countries and they cannot stay in their country. They shouldn't have to leave their countries but many times for their own safety and protection there are mechanisms now but that is supported by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission and other mechanisms to protect these individuals.

Ms. WILD. If I could just ask one last piece of this question about journalism and freedom of the press. So it's encouraging to hear that certain journalists are finding a way to circumvent it outside the country.

But can we assume from past testimony here and what you just told us about informants literally going block by block that journalism is essentially unavailable to people in Nicaragua?

I mean, it's more for the—more for the purpose of educating the outside world about what's happening in Nicaragua than it is in help—in bringing truth to the residents and citizens?

Ms. ULLMER. I have to say by the flood of WhatsApp messages I've just received Nicaraguans are receiving the information inside.

Ms. WILD. Well, that's encouraging. I always like to end my questioning on an encouraging note so I'm going to yield at this point. I may—I may have other questions but I thank you.

Ms. ULLMER. Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you again. Matter of fact, if you want to ask it now that'd be great.

Ms. WILD. Sure. Great. Happy to. I just do not like to—I do not like to hog the time. So I will proceed. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

What—switching gears—not on journalism here—what avenues do you see for constructive engagement in defense of human rights in Nicaragua given particularly the regime's increasing retreat from international fora and efforts to cutoff contact, even banning the Red Cross?

Obviously, it's encouraging that 222 political prisoners were released to the United States and 12 Catholic priests were released and sent to Rome.

But it seems pretty clear that these individuals are likely to be stripped of Nicaraguan citizenship and perhaps tried for spurious claims of treason and all of that is just obviously very, very concerning.

So I'd like to know what you see as the best strategy for engaging on the defense of human rights. That's the—in many ways the purpose of this subcommittee to try to figure out how we actually help people who are suffering human rights abuses. So we'd love to hear from you.

Ms. ULLMER. Thank you for the question.

So as Nicaragua's isolation from regional and international organizations sort of reduces the checks on Ortega/Murillo's power, but despite their withdrawal from the OAS the government and the country remained bound to several human rights obligations under international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

So ongoing investigations and public reporting by the U.N. human rights group on Nicaragua is crucial to ensuring international scrutiny of the deteriorating crises and to exert pressure on U.N. member States to provide accountability and justice for the victims of atrocities, particularly human rights abuses that we have heard against women and the indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.

The U.S. should also work with those democracies throughout the world but particularly in Latin America. It took the jailing and not even the deaths, but it took the jailing of so many political prisoners, prisoners of conscience, and touching the Catholic Church for other members of this hemisphere to speak out.

I think we now need to work with them to exert pressure. They're watching very closely and they are human rights advocates. We need to be working with them to find other avenues to reach out and to pressure Ortega/Murillo.

Ms. WILD. And you just made reference to the priests who were imprisoned. Do you think that that was key to the rest of the hemisphere taking note as opposed to individuals outside the priesthood being imprisoned which happens regularly and often?

Ms. ULLMER. In my personal opinion, yes. Yes. Given the history of Latin America, yes.

Ms. WILD. Thank you. Thank you very much for your excellent testimony and your—the work that you do in this field.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SMITH. Just a couple of things that we're putting on our radar is that when Nicaragua's Universal Periodic Review comes up next year we want to be very, very focused so that other nations will raise—I mean, the Human Rights Council has its drawbacks but certainly the Universal Periodic Review provides an opportunity and we do raise these issues with other U.N. fora including human rights—the High Commissioner there.

So we're going to—if any of you want to speak to whether or not you think the U.N. has been responsive that would be fine. Maybe, Deborah, you might want to do that.

And just so you know, you know, your testimoneys are motivating. You know, Mr. Chamorro and his wife and others who testified previously, I mean, you let us know—you are—you got your hand on the pulse as to what's happening and inspires all of us to do more and it also gives us the direction we should be going in and we're going to just redouble our efforts. I can absolutely assure you of that.

We have not let up but that's why we're having this hearing to say, you know, let Bishop Alvarez go. I mean, it's absurd that he is being held, the way he is being incarcerated for no crime and I'm so glad you brought up, Exiled Prisoner of Conscience No. 2, that you intervened for him when he was in trouble.

I mean, does not he remember that? Doesn't he care? You know, there was the church. The church is for everyone. It tries to say love and be a peacemaker for everyone.

So thank you for reminding us of that and I will remind others of that based on your testimony and, you know, thank you for bringing that forward.

But anything before we close that you would like to speak, including to the U.N.?

Ms. ULLMER. Thank you. Yes. I cannot stress enough that the expert group of human rights on Nicaragua is doing an important work. Their mandate has been extended, I think, to April 2025 and that happened, again, after the last hearing in March.

They are documenting important cases. They are documenting and reporting out to the international community what is happening—what has happened and what is happening.

And so I think it's important to continue to work with this group of experts who are lawyers, they're human rights activists, so that they can continue to report out to the U.N. Human Rights Council.

Unfortunately, we all know which members sit on the Human Rights Council so we do need to do work beyond the council to really inform others who are human rights activists to lift their voices.

EPU, the Universal Periodic Review, as you mentioned, Chairman, is a great opportunity to continue to shine light so that it's not just the regime that's speaking but that they're hearing the truth from the Nicaraguan people.

Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Would anyone else like to offer any further commentary before we close?

PARENT OF PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE. I just want to say on behalf of all three of us sitting here today and on behalf of all Nicaraguans in exile we're extremely thankful for the efforts that you are putting in.

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

Ms. WILD. If I could just say it's our honor and our privilege to do so.

Mr. SMITH. Absolutely.

Ms. ULLMER. If I may just add one last point. It's an important point.

The 222 former political prisoners that are in the United States we need to help them expedite their political asylum cases. They do not have benefits. They do not have benefits, and I know Chairwoman Salazar has put forth a bill.

We are here to support that, to make sure that these important citizens so that they can remain engaged in the future of their country it's important that they have benefits, that they're able to make a living wage.

They have work permits but they do not have benefits and they do not have citizenship, and their parole has only been granted for 2 years. It's important, please, to keep that in mind.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, and I'll just conclude with this. I did put together a letter that has gone over to the Secretary of State—and without objection that will be made a part of the record—which lays out a number of things we think State could and should be doing and we do it in the spirit of partnership with the Administration and I do hope that they will take it seriously.

And I would also point out the Alliance Defending Freedom has filed a petition with—on behalf of Bishop Alvarez with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and without objection that petition will also be placed in the record.

[The information referred to follows:]



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November 28, 2023

Rep. Christopher Smith

Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Global Health,

Global Human Rights and International Organizations

2373 Rayburn House Office Building

Washington, D.C. 20515

Rep. Susan Wild

Ranking Member of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Global Health,

Global Human Rights and International Organizations

1027 Longworth House Office Building

Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: An urgent appeal to let Bishop Álvarez go

Dear Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Wild:

On behalf of ADF International, we submit this statement for the record in connection with the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations hearing titled, *An urgent appeal to let Bishop Álvarez go* which is scheduled to take place on November 30, 2023.

1. The Catholic Church under attack in the Republic of Nicaragua

Nicaragua has been in a state of turmoil since April 2018 with the eruption of civil unrest and mass protests against the government in response to proposed reforms to the Social Security Law. The state's reaction to this social dissent has been the use of violence and repression, which has been strongly condemned by human rights defenders and organizations¹. Amid this human rights crisis, the Ortega government has initiated a systematic persecution of the Catholic Church that has taken different forms over the past five years. Nicaraguan authorities have orchestrated attacks against religious leaders, religious orders, and places of worship, as well as Catholic institutions and universities, non-profit organizations, and Catholic media. All of these attacks on religious institutions have occurred despite the government having previously invited the Catholic Church to serve as a mediator in the national dialogue process between the regime and the opposition.

Nicaraguan authorities have reportedly prohibited the holding of religious acts in public spaces and even the celebration of masses through the use of police sieges of churches, arbitrary detentions, and surrounding places of worship². The National Police have prohibited religious processions, most recently, processions scheduled for Holy Week in April 2023. More than 20 people were reportedly arrested in different parts of the country for non-compliance with the police ban imposed on the processions.³ In addition, penitentiary custodians have arbitrarily prohibited the practice of the Catholic faith within detention centers⁴.

The government of Nicaragua has systematically confiscated the property of the Catholic Church and arbitrarily forced the closure of several Catholic institutions. Among the Catholic institutions closed are educational facilities, such as the Universidad Centroamericana ("UCA") and the

¹ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. "Closure of civic space in Nicaragua". OEA/Ser.L/V/II. Doc. 212/23. September 23, 2023.

² "Mandatos del Relator Especial sobre la libertad de religión o de creencias; de la Relatora Especial sobre la promoción y protección del derecho a la libertad de opinión y de expresión y de la Relatora Especial sobre la situación de los defensores de derechos humanos." AL NIC 2/2023. August 2, 2023. Available at: [AL NIC \(2.2023\) \(ohchr.org\)](https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-treaties/AL-NIC-2-2023)

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Life in 'El Chipote' - A Nicaraguan priest's story of prison, torture and exile". The Pillar. April 3, 2023. Available at: <https://www.pillarcatholic.com/p/life-in-el-chipote-a-nicaraguan-priests>

Universidad Católica del Trópico Seco, as well as twelve media outlets associated with the Catholic Church. UN special rapporteurs have estimated that the Nicaraguan government has canceled the legal personality of at least 310 non-profit organizations associated with the Church.⁵

Members of the Catholic Church, clergy, and laity have been subject to arbitrary criminal prosecution. Courts have convicted several members of the Church without evidence of the crimes of which they have been accused. In addition, Nicaraguan courts have arbitrarily deprived several members of the Catholic Church of their nationality. The Nicaraguan National Police has also reported that it is investigating the Catholic Church for money laundering, which has led to the freezing of the bank accounts of at least three of Nicaragua's nine Catholic dioceses.

The government is also responsible for the forced exile of members of the Catholic Church, and for prohibiting the reentry into Nicaragua of several members of the Church. The expulsion of the Missionaries of Charity in particular shocked the international community. Ortega himself had first welcomed these missionaries to Nicaragua⁶, and thirty-four years later he expelled the entire order and confiscated their convents. The government expelled eighteen Missionaries of Charity from the national territory; sixteen of them were foreign citizens with legal residence in Nicaragua, and two were of Nicaraguan nationality. In addition, the government has banned the re-entry of at least forty-two members of the Church since August 2022.⁷

⁵ “Mandatos del Relator Especial sobre la libertad de religión o de creencias; de la Relatora Especial sobre la promoción y protección del derecho a la libertad de opinión y de expresión y de la Relatora Especial sobre la situación de los defensores de derechos humanos.” AL NIC 2/2023. August 2, 2023. Available at: [AL NIC \(2, 2023\) \(ohchr.org\)](#)

⁶ “Las Misioneras de la Caridad cerraron sus obras benéficas en Nicaragua por la persecución de la dictadura de Daniel Ortega.” Infobae. June 29, 2022. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2022/06/29/las-misioneras-de-la-caridad-cerraron-sus-obras-beneficas-en-nicaragua-por-la-persecucion-de-la-dictadura-de-daniel-ortega/>

⁷ “Mandatos del Relator Especial sobre la libertad de religión o de creencias; de la Relatora Especial sobre la promoción y protección del derecho a la libertad de opinión y de expresión y de la Relatora Especial sobre la situación de los defensores de derechos humanos.” AL NIC 2/2023. August 2, 2023. Available at: [AL NIC \(2, 2023\) \(ohchr.org\)](#)

Finally, there has been a deterioration of relations between the Catholic Church and the Nicaraguan government due to concerns expressed by the local Church and the Vatican regarding the human rights situation in Nicaragua. In March 2022, the expulsion of the Apostolic Nuncio manifested the rupture of diplomatic relations between Nicaragua and the Holy See.

These actions have been accompanied by an explicitly anti-Catholic narrative sponsored by the president and vice president of Nicaragua. Both leaders continually refer to the clerics of the Catholic Church as “coup plotters,”⁸ “assassins,”⁹ “terrorists,”¹⁰ and “sons of the devil.”¹¹ In a 2023 message to the nation, President Ortega accused the bishops of supporting terrorists: “And there, many of the bishops who were participating, encouraging terrorists. Bishops of the devil! Bishops of Satan!”¹²

The Catholic Church in Nicaragua has spoken out regarding the hostile aggressions perpetrated by the government, accusing the regime of religious persecution. In the words of a public letter issued by the clergy of Estelí, “they are persecuting the Church for its prophetic mission, because it is the only one capable of denouncing their constant violations of human rights, forgetting that when they persecute the Church, in the person of its servants, the bishops, the priests, the laity, it is Christ himself whom they are persecuting.”¹³

⁸ “Daniel Ortega dice que la Iglesia católica es ‘una dictadura perfecta’.” France24. September 29, 2022. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/es/minuto-a-minuto/20220929-daniel-ortega-dice-que-la-iglesia-cat%C3%B3lica-es-una-dictadura-perfecta>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Daniel Ortega acusa: ‘Obispos son terroristas’.” Confidencial. October 5, 2021. Available at:

<https://confidencial.digital/politica/daniel-ortega-acusa-obispos-son-terroristas/>

¹¹ “Ortega y Murillo llaman ‘hijos del demonio’ a los sacerdotes.” Nicaragua Investiga. August 14, 2021. Available at: <https://nicaraguainvestiga.com/nacion/57602-ortega-y-murillo-llaman-hijos-del-demonio-a-los-sacerdotes/>

¹² President Daniel Ortega’s message to the people of Nicaragua in commemoration of the “National Day of Peace”. April 19, 2023. Free English translation. Original in Spanish: “Y ahí, muchos de los obispos que estaban participando, alentando a los terroristas, ¡obispos del demonio!, ¡obispos de Satanás!”. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9cE7UGRRhA>

¹³ “Nicaraguan Diocese denounces persecution of Church for prophetic mission.” Swissinfo.ch. August 24, 2022. Free English translation. Original in Spanish: “Están persiguiendo a la Iglesia por su misión profética, porque es la única que es capaz de denunciar sus constantes violaciones a los derechos humanos, olvidándose de que cuando persiguen a la Iglesia, en la persona de sus servidores los obispos, los sacerdotes, los laicos, es a Cristo mismo a

Although the persecution of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua is the most systematic, other Christian denominations have also suffered similar attacks from the government, including the prohibition of public processions¹⁴, the arbitrary forced closure of educational institutions¹⁵, and the cancellation of the legal personality of their congregations¹⁶. The Nicaraguan government should be reminded of its obligations under international human rights law to protect the right to religious freedom of all believers in its territory.

2. Persecution and arbitrary detention of Bishop Rolando Álvarez

Bishop Rolando Álvarez has been persecuted by Nicaraguan authorities due to the pastoral work he has carried out: the active defense of human dignity and freedoms. The persecution of Bishop Álvarez started on August 4, 2022, when police agents prevented him from leaving his residence, the Episcopal Curia of Matagalpa, to celebrate mass at a nearby cathedral. With the bishop were other members of the Catholic Church, lay people, seminarians, and priests. Some lay people were allowed to leave the Curia, but the bishop, seminarians, priests, and a cameraman were forced to remain there for 15 days.

During the early morning hours of August 19, 2022, the police forcibly entered the Episcopal Curia of Matagalpa to arbitrarily arrest bishop Rolando Álvarez and seven other members of the Catholic Church. Álvarez was transferred to Managua, to his family residence, and placed under house arrest by the police.

quien persiguen.” Available at: https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/nicaragua-iglesia_d%C3%B3cesis-nicaragüense-denuncia-persecuci%C3%B3n-a-iglesia-por-misi%C3%B3n-prof%C3%A9tica/47850980

¹⁴ “La Policía de Nicaragua prohíbe procesiones y conmemoración de la Biblia.” Swissinfo.ch. September 22, 2022. Available at: https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/nicaragua-iglesia_la-polic%C3%ADa-de-nicaragua-proh%C3%ADbe-procesiones-y-conmemoraci%C3%B3n-de-la-biblia/47922392

¹⁵ “Ortega ilegaliza otras dos universidades privadas, incluyendo una evangélica.” Artículo66. July 28, 2023.

Available at: <https://www.articulo66.com/2023/07/28/ortega-ilegaliza-otras-dos-universidades-privadas-incluyendo-una-evangelica/>

¹⁶ “Ortega cierra Misión Cristiana Verbo y ordena confiscación.” Artículo66. May 20, 2023. Available at: <https://www.articulo66.com/2023/05/20/ortega-cierra-mision-cristiana-verbo-y-ordena-confiscacion/>

Bishop Rolando Álvarez considers it a religious duty to preach in his diocese of Matagalpa about the human dignity that each person possesses as a creature of God, as well as to denounce the violations of human rights committed by the government that contradict God-given freedoms. Preaching human rights and freedom is his religious duty according to the teachings of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church.¹⁷ Despite being harassed and threatened several times by the government for his preaching, Álvarez continued to speak from the pulpit, adhering to his message of faith and justice. Unfortunately, with the ultimate aim of silencing him, the Ortega government illegally detained him and sentenced him to prison without holding a public trial, preventing him from being present at the trial and denying any transparency in the criminal proceedings against him, violating the requirements of due process.

In the mock criminal process that followed against the bishop, he was prevented from appointing his attorney until late in the proceedings, and once he was able to appoint his lawyer, she was not allowed access to the case file and the accusation. To this day the specific facts and charges brought against the bishop have not been confirmed. Certain expert reports in the case file, however, do compile phrases the bishop said in his homilies delivered in churches and that were posted online. The sermons included the following expressions:

“What does God want in my life, personal, family, marital? What does God want in my work life, in social, political and economic life? What does God want from our country?”¹⁸

¹⁷ The compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church, issued in 2004 and whose introduction expressly states that “[t]his document is intended first of all for Bishops,” reaffirms the perennial Christian defense of human dignity and reaffirms the support of the Catholic Church for the movement of the “identification and proclamation of human rights.” This is also evidenced by the fact that it devotes the entire third chapter to “the human person and human rights,” of which section IV concentrates on “human rights”. Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, to His Holiness Pope John Paul II, Master of Social Doctrine and Evangelical witness to justice and Peace. 2004. Available at:

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html

¹⁸ “Monseñor Rolando Álvarez insiste en que la política es para ‘servir al pueblo’ y no para lucrarse.” Artículo 66. October 18, 2020. Free English translation. Original in Spanish “¿Qué es lo que Dios quiere en mi vida, personal, familiar, matrimonial? ¿Qué es lo que Dios quiere en mi vida laboral, en la vida social, política y económica? ¿Qué

“[...] and they can take many things away from us, of course, but the dignity that comes from the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit of whom we are the temple, and the freedom that Christ has given us, because the apostle says, ‘Christ has set us free to be free,’ no one and nothing can take that inner freedom away from us.”¹⁹

On February 9, 2023, Álvarez was taken out of prison and transferred to the airport to be expelled from the country. The bishop was isolated from the other 222 prisoners who were also going to be expelled to the United States. Nicaraguan authorities did not inform Bishop Álvarez why he was being placed on a plane or where he would be going. Álvarez refused to board the plane and has now become a visible sign of the injustices being committed in Nicaragua.

The defense of the bishop in the criminal proceedings was constantly obstructed and directly impeded by court officials. On February 10, 2023, the bishop was then condemned in an oral trial at which he was not present and at which he, therefore, could not testify nor cross-examine witnesses. The decision condemning the bishop has not been published or known by him or his lawyer. Álvarez was convicted for “undermining national integrity” and “propagation of false news through information and communication technologies.”

In addition to sentencing him to twenty-six years in prison, the decision also declares the loss of his nationality and his rights as a citizen, in perpetuity, by means of an unconstitutional law that has not been duly approved by the legislature.

An appeal to the Managua Court of Appeals against the conviction resulting from the sham trial was refused on procedural grounds for failing to challenge specific parts of the judgment, which

quiere Dios de nuestro país?”. Available at: <https://www.articulo66.com/2020/10/18/monsenor-rolando-alvarez-politicos-nicaragua/>

¹⁹ “Monseñor Álvarez pide un milagro para vivir en libertad, sin presos políticos y exiliados.” 100 Noticias Nicaragua. January 20, 2022. Free English translation. Original in Spanish “Y nos pueden quitar muchas cosas claro, pero la dignidad que procede del Padre y del Hijo y del Espíritu Santo del que somos templo, y la libertad que Cristo que nos ha dado por que dice el apóstol “para ser libres nos liberó Cristo”, esa libertad interior nadie ni nada nos la puede arrebatar”. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0r632HD_ERg

the court had not provided. There is no further effective legal recourse available to him in Nicaragua. Álvarez is the first Nicaraguan bishop to become a prisoner of conscience serving a long-term sentence. He has now been in prison for nine months, deprived of contact with his legal representation.

ADF International is now seeking justice for the bishop at the Inter-American System of Human Rights. A petition has been filed on his behalf denouncing several violations, including violations of his rights to freedom of conscience, religion, and expression.

The day after Congress released the notice of this hearing, Nicaraguan authorities published pictures and videos of Álvarez in prison, along with a press release stating that “the conditions of confinement [or Bishop Álvarez] are preferential and the regime of medical consultations, family visits, remission and receipt of packages is strictly complied with, contrary to what slanderous campaigns would have us believe.”²⁰

Reliable sources assure that Álvarez’s prison conditions are outrageous and that the State is not complying with its human rights obligations. Based on the testimonies received about Álvarez’s prison conditions, both the Inter-American Commission on Human rights (“IACHR”) and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights have ordered Nicaragua to release the bishop and demanded that, until then, his right to health, life, and personal integrity be guaranteed²¹.

²⁰ “(VIDEO Y FOTOS): Vivencia de Rolando Álvarez en el Sistema Penitenciario Nacional”. El19Digital. November 28, 2023. Free English translation. Original in Spanish: “las condiciones de reclusión son preferenciales y se cumple estrictamente con el régimen de consultas médicas, visitas familiares y recibimiento de paquetes, contrario a lo que campañas calumniosas pretenden hacer creer”. Available at: https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:147011-video-y-fotos-vivencia-de-rolando-alvarez-en-el-sistema-penitenciario-nacional?_cf_chl_tk=7lcTq7OkGqCGf_dX6pr_WXGvArxNdKuoZt9iuxcaD7c-1701318891-0-gaNvcGzND6U

²¹ “CIDH otorga medidas cautelares a Rolando José Álvarez Lagos, obispo de Matagalpa, en Nicaragua”. OAS. April 14, 2023. Available at: <https://www.oas.org/es/CIDH/jsForm/?File=/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2023/064.asp>. “Corte IDH amplía medidas provisionales a monseñor Álvarez y ordena su libertad inmediata”. Artículo 66. June 28, 2023. Available at: <https://www.articulo66.com/2023/06/28/corte-idh-medidas-provisionales-monsenor-alvarez-ortega-libertad/>

3. Violations of the right to religious freedom perpetrated by the Nicaraguan government

The Nicaraguan government's actions against members and institutions of the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations violate Nicaragua's international human rights obligations. The international principles and treaties applicable to the situation described above are, principally, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ("UDHR"), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ("ICCPR"), and the American Convention on Human Rights ("ACHR").

Under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Nicaragua should guide its actions to ensure that "[e]veryone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."²² The Republic of Nicaragua is obliged to protect and guarantee the right to religious freedom proclaimed in the UDHR, in the terms established by both the ICCPR and the ACHR.

The ICCPR requires states to ensure "[e]veryone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion."²³ This right includes the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching, either individually or in community with others and in public or private. The ICCPR additionally provides that freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

In similar terms, the ACHR specifies that the right to freedom of religion includes the "freedom to profess or disseminate one's religion or beliefs, either individually or together with others, in public or in private,"²⁴ and that freedom to manifest one's religion may be subject only to such

²² Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

²³ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 18. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

²⁴ American Convention on Human Rights. Article 12.1. Available at: https://www.oas.org/dil/treaties_b-32_american_convention_on_human_rights.pdf

limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

The systematic persecution of the Catholic Church perpetrated by the Republic of Nicaragua consists of various severe human rights violations, such as arbitrarily prohibiting the celebration of religious acts in public spaces, weaponizing the judicial system to use it as an instrument of persecution of Church members, and discriminating against Catholic institutions, universities, media, non-profit organizations, and members of the Catholic Church in the protection of their rights and their freedom to exercise their rights. These egregious actions violate Nicaragua's obligations to protect and guarantee the right to religious freedom in its territory under the ICCPR and the ACHR.

Regarding Rolando Álvarez, he was convicted for "propagation of false news through information and communication technologies"²⁵. The speeches of Bishop Rolando Álvarez that merited the categorization of crime were, apparently, certain lines of his homilies preached in the liturgy of the holy mass or other religious rites.

Both the ICCPR and the ACHR protect, as part of the right to religious freedom, the freedom to disseminate and teach one's religion or beliefs, subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. Additionally, it has been the position of the IACHR that religious speech should enjoy a special level of protection because it expresses an integral element of identity and personal dignity²⁶.

²⁵ Original in Spanish "propagación de noticias falsas a través de las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación."

²⁶ IACHR. Marco Jurídico Interamericano sobre el Derecho a la Libertad de Expresión. Relatoría Especial para la Libertad de Expresión. 2010. Available at: http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/expresion/docs/cd/sistema_interamericano_de_derechos_humanos/index_MIJAS.html

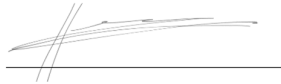
The Republic of Nicaragua has illegitimately restricted the bishop's freedom to profess and teach his religion by imposing penal limitations on his speeches that are incompatible with the restrictions on the right to religious freedom as provided by the ICCPR and the ACHR.

4. Action required by the United States Congress

The United States Congress should strongly condemn the Nicaraguan government's actions against the Catholic Church and demand that it complies with its human rights obligations to guarantee and protect the right to religious freedom.

Finally, the United States Congress should also urge immediate action by this administration to demand an end to the Nicaraguan government's persecution of the Catholic Church and demand the immediate release of Bishop Rolando Álvarez. The Biden Administration and Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain should be asked to prioritize diplomatic efforts to halt the persecution of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua and reinstate victims of persecution and state-sponsored violence in all their rights.

Sincerely,



Director of Advocacy, Latin America & Caribbean
ADF International
Tomás Henríquez



Legal Counsel, Latin America
ADF International
Kristina Hjelkrem

INFORMATION SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

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EXCLUSIVE from Bianca Jagger: The 'martyrdom' of Bishop Rolando Jose Álvarez Lagos

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On Thursday 9 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: six 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 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 7 February, the regime brought forward the bishop’s trial from 28 March to 15 February. I suspect they hoped that the prospect of being sentenced to a lengthy prison term would frighten 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

read://<https://catholicherald.co.uk/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fcatholicherald.co.uk%2Fexclusive-by-bianca-jagger-the-martyrdom-of-bishop-rolando-jose-al...> 1/7

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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 against humanity committed by Hitler and the Nazis in the 1930s and 40s, and stated that [“all the elements that are seen in Nicaragua, unfortunately, can be seen in the Nuremberg trials”](#).

On 9 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.

Sentencing the bishop to 24 Years and 4 months in prison

On Friday 10 February, the day after Bishop Álvarez Lagos refused to board the flight to the U.S., he was sentenced to 26 years and 4 months in prison by Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo’s Appeals Court of Managua. The sentence read by Judge Héctor Ernesto Ochoa Andino, President of The Criminal Chamber 1 of the Managua Court of Appeals, stated: “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.

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 15 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 stripped another 94 political dissidents of their citizenship, accusing them of being “traitors to the fatherland”, committing “criminal acts to the detriment of peace, sovereignty, independence and self-determination of the Nicaraguan people” and being “fugitives from justice”. They also announced their properties would be confiscated. Among those targeted are prominent exiled bishop Silvio Baez, distinguished human rights defender Vilma Núñez who remains in Nicaragua, award-winning authors Sergio Ramirez and Gioconda Belli, and influential journalist Carlos Fernando Chamorro.

Bishop Álvarez Lagos’ early years

read://https_catholicherald.co.uk/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fcatholicherald.co.uk%2Fexclusive-by-bianca-jagger-the-martyrdom-of-bishop-rolando-jose-al... 2/7

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Bishop Rolando Jose Álvarez Lagos turned 56 last November while 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. 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 as part of 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" and estimated that 355 people were killed in those violent days. [2,000 people were injured and 1,600 people were incarcerated.](#) In March of the following year, his regime vetoed Bishop Álvarez Lagos from mediating or even witnessing the negotiation. Cardinal 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, religious persecutions and abuses of power. 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 linked to Álvarez, a prominent critic of the regime, were closed on 1 August 2022. Following this, on 4 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

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medicines. Police encircled and blockaded the house for 15 days. Abruptly, in the early hours of 19 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 for International Affairs, 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 12 February during his weekly blessing of the Angelus to pilgrims in St 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."

"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 22 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](#).

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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 10 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 13 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 Nicaraguan regime and the Vatican, placing them in a small group of nations, such as China, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Somalia, the Maldives, Oman, Laos, Bhutan, and Tuvalu who have severed 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 consequence of Ortega's abrupt and precipitous actions will turn Nicaragua into a political pariah and follow in the footsteps of countries such as North Korea and Russia.

The persecution of the Catholic Church

The crackdown on the Catholic Church by the Ortega and Murillo regime seems to have no limit. The regime ignited mass revolt following "social security reforms" which not only cut retirement benefits but also raised payroll taxes. 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 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 24 February the "Way of the Cross", which recreates the passion of Christ in traditional processions all over the country, was prohibited by 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, the Juan Pablo II Catholic University, an institution of the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua (CEN), 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, Esteli, Juigalpa Chontales, Masaya and Matagalpa. The regime has stripped 19 universities of their legal status, including seven of foreign origin, in addition to ordering the

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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 am 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 without hope for the future. This is evidenced by the nearly 600,000 Nicaraguans (8.7 per cent of the population) who voted with their feet and left the country in the last four 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. 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.

I am deeply concerned for Bishop Rolando Jose Álvarez Lagos' safety, who according to Ortega 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.

Where is Bishop Álvarez Lagos? I demand a proof of life

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.

Bianca Jagger

Founder, President and Chief Executive, Bianca Jagger Human Rights Foundation

Council of Europe Goodwill Ambassador

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EXCLUSIVE from Bianca Jagger: The 'martyrdom' of Bishop Rolando Jose Álvarez Lagos

IUCN, Bonn Challenge Ambassador

Member of the Executive Director's Leadership Council of Amnesty International USA

Mr. SMITH. Again, I thank you. God bless you, and we will—we will persevere, and thank you for your sacrifices. They are not in vain.

The hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:45 a.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX



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

Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations
Christopher Smith (R-NJ), Chairman

November 28, 2023

Revised

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 at 10:00 a.m. in room 2200 of the Rayburn House Office Building. The hearing will be available on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>.

DATE: Thursday, November 30, 2023

TIME: 10:00 a.m.

LOCATION: 2200 RHOB

SUBJECT: ~~Part 2—The Martyrdom of Bishop Alvarez: Nicaragua's Prisoner of Conscience~~

An Urgent Appeal to Let Bishop Alvarez Go

WITNESSES: Exiled Prisoner of Conscience #1

Exiled Prisoner of Conscience #2

Parent of Prisoner of Conscience

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

****NOTE:** Witness added.

***NOTE:** Witnesses may be added.

By Direction of the Chair

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.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
MINUTES OF FULL COMMITTEE HEARING

Day Thursday Date November 30, 2023 Room Rayburn 2200

Starting Time 10:15am Ending Time 11:45am

Recesses ☐ (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____)

Presiding Member(s)
Chairman Smith

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Stenographic Record ☒

Televised ☒

TITLE OF HEARING:

An Urgent Appeal to Let Bishop Alvarez Go

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Reps. Smith, Wild, Salazar

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.)*

Alliance Defending Freedom

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or

TIME ADJOURNED 11:45am

Meg Wagner
Full Committee Hearing Coordinator

Committee on Foreign AffairsSubcommittee on Global Health, Human Rights, and
International Organizations118th Congress

ATTENDANCE

Meeting on: *An Urgent Appeal to Let Bishop Alvarez Go*Date: *November 30, 2023*Convened: *10:15 am*Adjourned: *11:45 am*

Representative	Present	Absent	Representative	Present	Absent
Mr. Smith	X		Ms. Wild	X	
Ms. Salazar	X		Mr. Bera		X
Ms. Radewagen		X	Ms. Jacobs		X
Mr. Hill			Ms. Manning		X
Mr. McCormick		X			
Mr. James		X			