

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

Washington, DC—March 22, 2023
Excerpts of remarks by Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ)

Good afternoon. This hearing of the Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations and the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere will come to order.

I want to convey my deepest thanks to Bianca Jagger—an amazing human rights champion—for being here once again and for her continued tenacious advocacy on behalf of the Nicaraguan people, including Bishop Álvarez and other political prisoners.

Is the United States doing enough? I am concerned.

Yesterday, Owen Jensen, a EWTN correspondent asked National Security Council spokesman John Kirby: “Nicaragua is my question. Okay. So, you may know that Daniel Ortega recently threw into prison Bishop Rolando Alvarez—well-known, well-respected bishop throughout the world...He was thrown in prison for 26 years on trumped-up charges. The question: One, are you aware of any efforts the U.S. is making to free Rolando Alvarez, the bishop?”

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

The EWTN correspondent responded: “Okay. And, two, would you have—would the Biden Administration have any message for the Ortega regime that continues to persecute Catholics in that country?”

John Kirby replied that “we have been clear and consistent with nations all over the world about the—the importance of religious freedom and proper human

rights and civil rights for not only their citizens but certainly for ours as they travel abroad. But I don't have anything more specific on that."

Are we doing enough? I say again, I am deeply concerned.

For the record, as co-chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, I convened a hearing on religious persecution in Nicaragua in [December 2022](#) and held another hearing focused on Nicaraguan political prisoners in [July 2021](#).

With great courage, eloquence and resolve, Berta Valle and Victoria Cardenas testified at the 2021 hearing about the suffering their husbands—Felix Maradiaga and Juan Sebastian Chamorro and other political prisoners—were enduring at the hands of the Ortega-Murillo regime.

Berta Valle told us that: "Since June 8, (2021) Felix has been held by the regime without access to his family, lawyers, or doctor... Later that same day, Victoria's husband was also disappeared. Since then, dozens of opposition leaders have been arrested and detained in the same way. It is very clear that Daniel Ortega will do anything he can to maintain his grip on power. By arresting the leading presidential candidates and dozens of other critics, Ortega has shown the world that he cannot win reelection if the opposition is allowed to participate...

"This oppression is not new," she went on. "For years, Felix has been the target of attacks by the Ortega regime because he speaks truth to power. He has been beaten, confined to house arrest, and threatened. For months, he endured 24/7 surveillance by the police. They have tried again and again to silence him, but he never stands down.

The repression became so severe that in 2018, I fled Nicaragua with our 5-year-old daughter and mother-in-law. For three years, we have lived in exile as political refugees. While I am in the United States today, my heart and soul are in Nicaragua...we will not rest until our husbands are liberated and our dreams for a free and prosperous Nicaragua are realized."

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

Victoria said “Juan has always fought for Nicaragua. He has always wanted to be involved in improving his country, contributing to its economic and social development, so that all Nicaraguans can live prosperous and peaceful lives of dignity. My husband” she went on “is a peaceful and honest man, but Daniel Ortega feels threatened by him because he dares to speak out against the regime’s oppression...

Victoria also pointed out that “...For Juan’s activism, the regime has also persecuted and harassed me and my family. They have brought a civil case against me, my sister, and my mother, which would take away all my mother’s assets. They have brought a criminal case against me, and there is an open warrant for my arrest. It is clear that Ortega is using every part of Nicaragua’s institutions, including its judicial system, to not only persecute those who challenge the government, but also their family members.”

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

It is especially meaningful that these two men and their equally courageous wives are here today, finally free.

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

So today, we will hear directly from them about the reality of life in Nicaragua under the current dictatorship as well as their hopes and dreams for a democratic Nicaragua.

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

We are inspired by the incredible faith and bravery of those, like Bishop Álvarez, who non-violently resist tyranny and refuse to give in to the demands of dictators.

And we will work to ensure that President Ortega and his cronies are held accountable for their heinous crimes. Under authorities provided in [Nicaragua Human Rights and Anti-Corruption Act of 2018](#), the 2018 Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act (NICA Act) and the Reinforcing Nicaragua's Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform Act (RENACER), the Biden Administration has sanctioned key individuals complicit in the Ortega-Murillo regime's abuses.

The U.S. Treasury Department has sanctioned more than 43 individuals and 11 entities and has restricted hundreds of visas.

Nevertheless, the extreme repression that the Ortega-Murillo regime is committing against the people of Nicaragua deserves even greater attention from the United States and our allies.

Under President Daniel Ortega, Nicaragua has become a pariah dictatorship in league with other human rights abusers like Cuba, Venezuela, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and the People's Republic of China.

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

Those of us who know him, though, are not surprised. The regime's abuses have shown the world the true character of the Daniel Ortega that I met on a human rights visit to Nicaragua in 1984. During that trip—which also included my colleagues Frank Wolf, Tony Hall, and Bob McEwen—we confronted Ortega on a range of human rights abuses, including systematic torture and murder. In the course of this confrontational meeting, we were served water—which all of us except Tony Hall drank.

The three of us who drank the water came down with a debilitating stomach illness, but Tony was spared. Having experienced that ordeal, I have deep empathy

for the student protestors who were sickened by tainted food given to them by government agents during the 2018 protests in a display of the regime's consistent cruelty.

Tragically, the regime has increasingly turned its focus toward silencing the Catholic Church. Ortega is waging a war against religious freedom, and he is targeting the Catholic Church as the single most important independent institution remaining in Nicaragua.

The regime has closed Catholic radio stations and universities, obstructed access to places of worship, and even banned public Way of the Cross processions this year. Bishops and priests, as well as worshippers, have been harassed and detained, and Mother Theresa's order of nuns has been expelled. Political prisoners' requests for Bibles have been cruelly denied.

I was glad to see the Pope condemn the regime as a dictatorship last week and would encourage the Holy See to continue speaking out strongly on this issue.

Ortega has referred to priests as "terrorists" and is seeking to silence those in the faith community who speak out against tyranny—including Bishop Rolando Álvarez.

Bishop Álvarez has become a symbol of the Nicaraguan people's struggle for freedom, but in return for his courage he has been unjustly sentenced to 26 years in one of Latin America's most brutal prisons, La Modelo.

As Members of the U.S. Congress, we will continue to advocate for the unconditional release of Bishop Álvarez and the other political prisoners and prisoners of conscience who remain in Nicaragua.

I want to thank each of the witnesses again for being here today, and I now recognize Ranking Member Susan Wild (or Chairwoman Salazar) for her opening remarks.