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Crushing Dissent: The Ongoing Crisis in Nicaragua

1. Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of this sub-committee. It is an honor to be here today. My name is Felix Maradiaga. I am a Nicaraguan citizen and human rights defender. I thank you for the opportunity to give a voice to the voiceless who are suffering under the tyranny of Daniel Ortega.
2. Since his return to power in 2006, Ortega has systematically taken over Nicaragua's institutions to remain in power, causing widespread corruption, grave human rights abuses and a collapsing economy. Ortega and his inner circle constitute a clear and present danger not only to the people of Nicaragua, but also to the entire hemisphere. In the face of this, Nicaraguans have joined together in pursuit of a common goal: to restore liberty, justice and democracy in our country.
3. In April 2018, Nicaraguans from all walks of life joined anti-government protests, with demonstrators calling for democracy, respect for human rights, the resignation of Daniel Ortega and free and fair elections. The response was a brutal government crackdown on peaceful protesters that caused the deaths of over 300 people.
4. Talks between the Ortega regime and the opposition have repeatedly failed. In May, negotiations were suspended as a result of the cold-blooded assassination of Mr. Eddy Montes, a political prisoner with dual citizenship from Nicaragua and the United States. Mr. Montes was a US Navy Veteran who was retired in Nicaragua. His murder inside the notorious "La Modelo" prison outraged Nicaraguan society, not only because he was shot with an AK-47 while unarmed by prison guards, but because he was illegally detained.
5. Ortega has repeatedly broken the agreements. Instead his regime continues to perpetrate a wide range of human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual abuse of prisoners and arbitrary detentions. The regime has ignored multiple points that were agreed upon in the negotiations, such as the right to peaceful assembly, the freedom of speech, and the freedom of the press. These violations of basic civil liberties make it increasingly more difficult for the opposition to come back to the negotiating table.
6. The regime continues to politically persecute people who have played any role in the protests, causing an unprecedented exodus of refugees never seen since the civil war of the 1980s. Based on recent estimates using official data from the government of Costa Rica and other credible sources, over the last ten months over 100 thousand people have left Nicaragua. The vast majority remains in Costa Rica. However we have seen unprecedented numbers of Nicaraguans escaping from political persecution and seeking protection in the United States.

7. Since May of last year, at least 2000 people have been imprisoned for participating in the protests. Whilst many have been released due to substantial international pressure, many grassroots leaders and protesters remain in arbitrary detention. Other 200 activists, including myself, have received arrest warrants by criminal courts controlled by Ortega, using bogus charges.
8. Ortega controls the National Police through his co-father in law, Chief Francisco Diaz who reports directly to Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo. As far as the military is concerned, shortly after Ortega rose to power in January 2007, he sent all the Generals that were considered neutral and professional into early retirement and promoted those that were loyal to him.
9. Despite immense personal risks, the people of Nicaragua continue to struggle for democratic change. All type of peaceful protests has been banned. Sandinista loyalists constantly intimidate members of the opposition, small businesses whose owner's only crime is wanting a free country are having their shops shut down. All major cities are militarized. Nicaragua is now a police state.
10. The people of Nicaragua want freedom and are willing to take major sacrifices to achieve our dream of a free society. We, Nicaraguans, are not asking the international community to solve our problems but we believe that the internal civic resistance has to be supported by individual targeted sanctions against perpetrators of human rights abuses. Without substantial international support, Nicaragua is at the risk of becoming another Venezuela.
11. We also believe that for the international pressure to be effective, it needs coordinated action by key actors of the free world, mainly by member states of the Organization of American States and the European Union. For this to happen, US leadership as a beacon of light in the rule of law is essential. In this regard, I would like to take a moment to thank the US Delegation at the OAS headed by Ambassador Carlos Trujillo as an example of such diplomatic leadership. However, we would like to recommend greater foreign policy coordination with vital strategic Asia/Pacific Allies such as South Korea, and Taiwan, who this year alone approved a 100 million dollar lifeline to the regime, which is counterproductive to the efforts of our democratic friends.
12. Moreover, we believe the US can play a more active role in stopping the disbursement of certain loans, and denying any future requests for access to international funds such as the Bank of Central American Integration which just last month transferred over half a million dollars to the Ortega Regime.

13. The opposition coalition is broad and pluralistic, and such diversity is certainly a challenge. However, in October 2018 over 40 organizations from civil society and political movements agreed on a common manifesto of National Unity. We believe that Nicaragua also requires a comprehensive electoral reform that can allow free, fair and competitive elections. This diverse pro-democracy movement is the most comprehensive civic coalition in recent Nicaraguan history. This coalition is ready to rebuild a new Nicaragua under the principles of an inclusive, free and open society with justice for all. Your democratic solidarity is a cornerstone for the prosperous future Nicaraguans deserve.