

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration and
International Economic Policy

“An International Response to Ortega’s Destruction of Democracy in Nicaragua”

September 21, 2021 - 10:00 am
Rayburn House Office Building/WebEx
Washington, D.C.

Statement of Berta Valle
Wife of Presidential Candidate and
Political Prisoner Félix Maradiaga

Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Green, distinguished members of this committee, it is an honor to appear before you today. Thank you for the space to discuss the ongoing crisis of democracy and human rights in Nicaragua, and for your continued concern for the Nicaraguan people.

My name is Berta Valle and I am the wife of Félix Maradiaga. Félix is a human rights defender, academic, and candidate for president of Nicaragua. And for 105 days he has been a political prisoner of the regime of Daniel Ortega – simply for speaking out against the human rights violations of the regime. Félix is just one of the more than 140 political prisoners held in Nicaragua.

My husband, Félix Maradiaga, has devoted his life to Nicaragua and its people. As a young boy, he fled Nicaragua because of war and lived in the United States as a refugee. He returned as an adolescent, committed to building a peaceful and prosperous country for all Nicaraguans. As a teacher, public servant, and activist, he has always emphasized the importance of nonviolent change, peaceful resistance, and civilian democracy.

But this work has made him an enemy of Daniel Ortega. Indeed, for years, Félix had been speaking out – in Nicaragua and abroad – that Daniel Ortega posed a severe threat to our democracy. We have seen him consolidate his power and

abuse our human rights. Now, we are living the nightmare my husband warned about many years ago – including before this same Subcommittee in 2019.¹

On June 8 of this year, Félix was called to the Public Ministry for “an interview.” While there, he was interrogated for four hours. He left the Public Ministry, but 500 meters away – away from the press – his car was pulled over by the police, he was pulled out of the car and beaten, and taken away. On the same day, Juan Sebastián Chamorro, another presidential candidate, was also taken from his home. The regime has used the same tactic against countless other opposition leaders including presidential candidates, party leaders, student activists, journalists, businesspeople, labor leaders, and peasants.²

For 84 days, Félix and Juan Sebastián were disappeared – they were held in an undisclosed location without any access to their families, their lawyers, or their doctors. For 84 days, we didn’t even know if they, or the other disappeared, were alive.

Since June 8, Juan Sebastián’s wife, Victoria Cárdenas, and I have been raising our voices and speaking out about the situation of political prisoners in Nicaragua. We know that if we remain silent, Daniel Ortega will win.

In July, Victoria and I traveled here to Washington to meet with officials in the Biden Administration, with members of Congress (including Chairman Sires and Ranking Member Green), with civil society groups and human rights organizations. Days later, the Ortega regime convicted us as “traitors to the homeland” – just for speaking with US Government officials and advocating for the release of Félix, Juan Sebastián, and the rest of the political prisoners.³

On August 31, after 84 days of being disappeared, the regime allowed Félix, Juan Sebastián, and some other prisoners a short visit with a family member. This was the first time that anyone had seen or heard from them since June 8.

¹ “Crushing Dissent: The Ongoing Crisis in Nicaragua,” US HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, Jun. 11, 2019, *available at* <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/2019/6/crushing-dissent-the-ongoing-crisis-in-nicaragua>.

² NICARAGUA: ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE IS THE NEW TACTIC FOR REPRESSION, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, Aug. 25, 2021, *available at* <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/08/nicaragua-enforced-disappearance-is-the-new-tactic-for-repression/>.

³ Confidencial Nicaragua (@confidencial_ni), TWITTER, Jul. 27, 2021, 6:10 pm, *available at* https://twitter.com/confidencial_ni/status/1420144539172491271?s=20.

Even though Félix has dedicated his life to serving our country, the regime has charged him and others with “conspiracy to undermine national integrity.”⁴ The government is alleging that Félix and others were part of a global conspiracy to use foreign resources – including from the US Agency for International Development, the International Republican Institute, and the National Endowment for Democracy – to “harm the interests of the nation.”

We know that some have been subjected to psychological torture. Many have lost substantial weight – Félix and Juan Sebastián have each lost 25 pounds in just three months. And we worry especially for the women who have been detained, as we have heard that they have been held in solitary confinement for three months. And we worry for the children of all the political prisoners who are living without their parents and suffering from trauma and separation anxiety, like my own 8-year-old daughter.

But while I am here, there are more than 140 families who are suffering the same pain of having a loved one detained or disappeared. All Nicaraguan people live in fear from this regime that has shown it will do anything to silence opposition and stay in power. And thousands continue to suffer and die from the regime’s neglect and mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Green, members of this committee, we need the urgent assistance of President Biden and the US Congress to work bilaterally and multilaterally to hold Ortega accountable for this assault on our democracy. I implore you to ensure that the United States works with its allies around the world to defend our human rights. We need your support – and action – now more than ever before.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

⁴ NICARAGUA: TRUMPED-UP CHARGES AGAINST CRITICS, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, Sept. 20, 2021, *available at* <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/20/nicaragua-trumped-charges-against-critics>.