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

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

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

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

## **Making 222 Political Prisoners Stateless**

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

Jan-Michael Simon, Chair of the United Nations Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua, compared the regime's actions to the crimes committed by the Nazis in the 1930s and 40s [“all the elements that are seen in Nicaragua, unfortunately, can be seen in the Nuremberg trials.”](#)

The latest strategy of the Nicaraguan authorities has its historical precedents in Nazi Germany and the Stalin Soviet Union. In Nazi Germany, about 39 thousand people were deprived of citizenship. From July 14, 1933, the so-called law “on the abolition of naturalisation and deprivation of German citizenship” was in force, which allowed depriving people of citizenship. Among some of the most prominent were Bertolt Brecht, Albert Einstein, Erich Maria Remarque, Stefan Zweig, Hannah Arendt, Willy Brandt. The Soviet Union also adopted the advanced repressive practices of the allies under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. During the existence of the USSR, dozens of thousands of people were deprived of citizenship, including Trotsky, Solzhenitsyn, Rostropovich, Voinovich, Lyubimov and others.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Bishop Álvarez Held Captive**

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

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

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

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

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

### **Pope Francis Speaks Out**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **More Sanctions Are Needed**

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

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

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

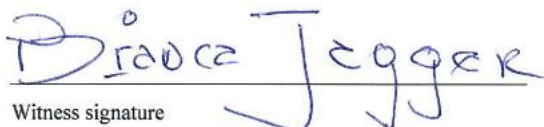
The U.S., European Union, Canada, Latin America, and other nations should coordinate efforts. The only dialogue with the regime should be to agree on a short-term road to reach democracy. Ortega and Murillo only respond to pressure.

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

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

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

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

  
Witness signature