

**Statement by Felix Maradiaga**  
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Joint Subcommittee Hearing on Nicaragua  
House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Subcommittees: Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International  
Organizations  
Western Hemisphere  
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Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the sub-committees. It is an honor to be here today.

My written statement—which I will be summarizing—has been submitted for the record.

I want to start by thanking Congress for its continued bipartisan support and attention to the critical situation of Nicaragua, which has clearly become the most severe human rights crisis in the Western Hemisphere. The important role of the House and the commitment of dozens of house representatives with Nicaragua is admirable.

I want to express my special gratitude for opening this House on several occasions, to my wife Berta Valle and to Vicky, the wife of Juan Sebastian. Together, they were both relentless advocates for our freedom and the freedom of all political prisoners. I would not be here if it wasn't for the perseverance of Berta, Vicky and the many people and friends who listened to them.

However, far from a complete freedom, my beloved nation continues to be oppressed by a ruthless tyrant, Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo. As I stated in my testimony during a congressional hearing back in June 2019, three months before I returned to Nicaragua knowing myself that I could face unjust and arbitrary detention: “Ortega and his inner circle constitute a clear and present danger not only to the people of Nicaragua, but also to the entire hemisphere. Ortega is a relic of the Cold War and he embodies a legacy of oppression against human dignity.”

Almost four years have passed since that previous testimony and the Ortega regime has only grown more ruthless. His ties with China, Iran and Russia are closer, and he has not been shy about expressing his hatred of the United States and against any international institution that criticizes his methods of oppression.

Despite multiple efforts by the Organization of American States and the United Nations, the regime has further isolated itself. Ortega has displayed a contempt for the international community, never before seen in the recent history of Western diplomacy. For example, on my recent visit to Geneva in the context of the UN Human Rights Council sessions, several senior diplomats agreed that even the most extreme autocracies make at least an attempt to feign respect for international treaties. In the case of Ortega, over the last three years, there is no known official response from the regime to the dozen private communications that United Nations bodies have sent. This is just one example of a reality that many of us have been warning about: The Ortega regime is on its way to becoming a kind of North Korea in our hemisphere.

Previously, in September 2018, I also testified before the United Nations Security Council. On that occasion, I warned that the Ortega regime was committing crimes against humanity and that for this reason urgent action was required from the United Nations to stop Ortega's onslaught against the citizens who were demonstrating in the streets of Nicaragua. The member states of the Security Council said on that occasion that the forum to resolve the crisis should be the Organization of American States. However, a short time later, Ortega completely ignored all the OAS resolutions and eventually broke relations with the OAS. All the efforts of political dialogue have failed. Ortega has used the goodwill of the international community to destroy all forms of opposition and civic resistance within Nicaragua. In this regard, it is essential that the international community move to a new phase of diplomatic pressure, and that it do so without timidity.

Ortega has already closed all the doors to any sincere dialogue. Therefore, any electoral solution, under the current circumstances, is unthinkable. The Nicaraguan opposition has made all the necessary attempts to find a peaceful and political solution that would allow a path towards democracy. Among those efforts there have been two frustrated attempts at dialogue. In addition, in 2021, the main opposition leaders agreed to participate in a primary election process to choose a single candidate. We did so even in the midst of repression and without guarantees of a free and fair electoral process. We did it precisely to demonstrate our willingness to explore all the democratic solutions to the crisis. Ortega, for his part, resorted to further repression and the imprisonment of all the main opposition candidates and other civil society leaders. By arresting us all, Ortega has made it clear that he has no chance of winning a free and competitive election. He also has no political will to do so because his sinister plan is to consolidate a family dictatorship.

The most recent victim of that plan is the Catholic Church of Nicaragua, which is the only institution that stood in his way. Before, Ortega and his repression agencies had been persecuting, imprisoning, and extrajudicially killing peasants, students, and activists who seek to peacefully stop the dictatorship. The new phase of repression can only be defined as religious persecution.

I know from painful personal experience throughout my life, that dictatorships cannot be dismantled with timid methods. There are people in Nicaragua willing to fight peacefully for freedom, but we cannot do it alone. The persecution of the Catholic Church is part of the perverse plan of the regime to silence all voices that advocate democracy. The most recent report from the UN Group of Experts, which says that the regime has committed crimes against humanity, opens the doors for a new phase of diplomatic pressure.

In the face of this, Nicaraguans have joined together to restore liberty, justice and democracy. We, the Nicaraguan people are fighting for our freedom. We are not asking the international community to solve our problems, but since our struggle is non-violent, we need robust international support in the form of targeted sanctions against human rights violators. In that regard, effective international pressure requires coordinated actions by key allies in the western hemisphere and around the world.

However, for our civic resistance to be effective, we ask for a more coordinated engagement from the countries in the region. In this regard, I want to congratulate Chairman McCaul's, together with Chairman Menendez, recent letter to the Presidents of Guatemala, Honduras, Salvador, and Costa Rica requesting more transparency and accountability in CABI funding to Ortega. We also welcome the sanctions on the gold sector imposed in October 2022. This actions were important but that more pressure on individuals close to Ortega should follow. Through the amendment of Executive Order 13851, the administration created the mechanisms for further restrictions on trade which must, in effect, be used. More specifically, the NICA and RENACER Acts are powerful instruments that should be used fully by the administration to put more pressure on Ortega by exerting US influence in international financial institutions to stop loans to the regime.

My release—and the release of other 221 Nicaraguans who were arbitrarily imprisoned—will never be a complete freedom precisely because there are still 37 political prisoners in Nicaragua, including Monsignor Rolando Alvarez, Bishop of my own Diocese. Nor can there be complete freedom, when an entire population

lives in a police state. Our freedom and the denied freedom of those in prison, cannot be separated.

On 9 February, 41 days ago, the regime expelled 222 political prisoners who flew to the United States under “deportation”, a legal figure which, under the Nicaraguan constitution, is only applicable to foreign nationals. On that same day, Bishop Alvarez refused to board that plane. He refused to be forced into exile. He refused to be banished from the country he loves. But in addition, he refused to be released if other political prisoners remained locked up. Such a courageous act of peaceful resistance cannot be ignored by the world. I am here before you, to ask for your greatest effort to put pressure on the Ortega regime, through all available diplomatic measures, for the immediate and unconditional release of Monsignor Alvarez and all political prisoners in Nicaragua.

Bishop Alvarez, has been sentenced to 26 years in prison. He is in prison simply because from the pulpit he has exercised his religious freedom to preach a gospel that upholds the following beliefs:

“A Christian cannot have false neutralities. He who remains silent in the face of human rights violations has already decided.” Another of his phrases, from one of the churches surrounded by paramilitaries, was the following: “God said, love one another. So why are they armed? Why do they stir the hearts of a simple and hard-working people? Why are they besieging this church as if it were military barracks? No one here is conspiring against anyone. Thinking differently enriches us, not impoverishes us. Thinking differently does not divide us, it unites us.” All of these are exact quotes from his homilies.

Other repressive acts against the Catholic Church in Nicaragua, has been the expulsion of the Vatican nuncio, detention of over 12 members of the church, including seven priests. Other 18 religious were expelled from the country and dozens of religious media have been shut down. In addition, on several occasions the Sandinista Police has forbidden parishioners from receiving the Eucharist inside the temple and does not allow religious celebration in the open, such as the recent prohibition of the “Via Crucis.”

For us Catholics, the Way of the Cross is a sacred devotion that commemorates Jesus Christ's last day on Earth as a man. For Christians around the world of all denominations, the crucifixion of Jesus is the ultimate symbol of nonviolence and sacrifice. We are reminded of his word: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God”. Perhaps for that reason, it is no coincidence that the peaceful

protests of April 2018 found in the Christian faith a profound inspiration for nonviolent resistance.

Monsenor Alvarez is in prison for speaking truth to power. He is in prison because he was the only voice left free to preach an inalienable truth: “That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

These principles, so beautifully expressed in the United States Declaration of Independence, have inspired entire nations. But they are also principles that are undermined by dictatorships around the world. These are principles that transcend religions, races, and borders. Your democratic solidarity will be instrumental in helping us defend this principles, and achieve the freedom we deserve.