

**Prepared Testimony of Barbara A. Feinstein
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United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
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Chairman Cook, Ranking Member Sires, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to testify today and for holding this hearing at such a critical time in Nicaragua's history. On behalf of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), I want to thank the Subcommittee for its unyielding commitment to advancing human rights and democracy in our hemisphere, and for your support of USAID's work in the region, including Nicaragua.

As many of you know, the United States is the only remaining donor working on democracy, governance, and human rights in Nicaragua, and it is thanks to your support that we have been able to maintain a crucial lifeline for civil society organizations, human rights defenders, emerging leaders, and independent media -- all of whom remain under grave attack. At no time has that lifeline been more critical than in the past few months, as the Ortega government has sustained a brutal crackdown against the Nicaraguan people, censoring media, and unleashing a reign of terror against any who challenge its repression.

According to the latest figures, more than 300 people have been killed since the protests began in April 2018 -- most at the hands of the national police, youth groups, or government-led gangs, targeting any who dare raise their voices to peacefully and legitimately protest government actions, human rights violations, or continued repression and violence.

In early June, I had the privilege of joining USAID Administrator Mark Green in meeting with some of the courageous student leaders, independent journalists, and human rights defenders who came to Washington, DC, to shine a light on the atrocities underway in their country. We heard first-hand how students -- most of them in their early to mid-twenties -- are putting their lives on the line to protest injustice, peacefully demand their rights and condemn the killings,

torture, and disappearances of their friends and fellow students. Human rights defenders spoke of jail sentences and other threats both they and their families are facing -- punishment for daring to speak the truth. And journalists shared stories of the perilous environment within which they are operating -- some murdered in cold blood for chronicling the government-sanctioned brutality we continue to witness to this day.

Administrator Green has added his voice to that of Vice President Pence and Secretary of State Pompeo in “condemn[ing] the atrocities committed by the Ortega regime.” He has also expressed his grave concern over “spurious allegations against civil society activists, students, and independent journalists, and the jailing of human rights defenders.”

USAID continues to acknowledge and commend the bravery of the students, journalists, human rights defenders, civil society, religious leaders, and indigenous groups who have united their voices in a call for justice, rule of law, and a return to democratic order.

We also recognize and respect that any meaningful change must be led by the Nicaraguan people themselves. This is *their* movement, and we will provide appropriate support when requested and warranted.

Indeed, as this crisis has unfolded, USAID has provided rapid assistance to scores of civil society groups, human rights organizations, independent media, and others involved in peaceful protest.

To ensure reporting of independent and accurate information, at a time when government-controlled forces are systematically censoring independent media -- either through cyber attacks, destruction of physical infrastructure, online slander campaigns, or unfounded criminal charges -- USAID is providing critical assistance to journalists from 14 different independent media outlets. This assistance, which builds upon longer-term efforts to strengthen independent media in the country, is helping to combat disinformation and disprove the distorted narrative promoted by the Ortega government.

USAID has also mobilized international technical expertise to provide on-the-spot assistance with digital security and resilience for USAID partners working in civil society and media, who have seen an increase in online attacks, heightened online surveillance, and attempts by the government to take websites offline.

To ensure human rights protections, USAID has awarded multiple small grants to Nicaraguan human rights and civil society organizations. These funds are enabling these groups to provide short-term legal aid for those detained, injured, or for the families of those killed in the protests. Our resources are also helping to coordinate and support networks of human rights defenders; to document violations; and, to elevate cases of human rights abuses to the inter-American, and UN systems.

USAID continues to recalibrate our approach to assist those in need and to position the Agency to respond to opportunities as they emerge.

We call on the Ortega government to cease the repression of protesters immediately, and to heed the proposal by many Nicaraguans for early, free, and fair elections with credible domestic and international electoral observation.

As Vice President Pence said at the Organization of American States: “[W]e join with nations around the world in demanding that the Ortega government respond to the Nicaraguan people’s demands for democratic reform and hold accountable those responsible for violence. The people of Nicaragua deserve better than the worsening repression of Daniel Ortega’s government.”

The United States will continue to respond as appropriate, and we express our solidarity with the courageous protesters, journalists, and other democratic actors in civil society seeking a better future for themselves and their families. As we have for many years, we seek to empower civil society so that all people in Nicaragua can have their voices heard by a government that responds to their needs and respects their rights.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for shining a spotlight on this crisis and for your commitment to advancing the freedom and

human rights of citizens throughout the hemisphere. I look forward to your questions.