

Statement of Emily Mendrala
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Before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on
Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration, and International Economic Policy

Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Green, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is an honor to appear before you today as President Biden's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs at the Department of State. I look forward to talking with you today about U.S. policy responses to the increasingly authoritarian steps being taken by the Ortega-Murillo government.

As you are well-aware, the Ortega-Murillo government has carried out a ruthless crackdown over the past several months, cancelling the registration of opposition parties, incarcerating journalists, opposition leaders, potential presidential candidates, students, private sector leaders, and others who defend free and fair elections, attacking the free press, and closing long standing Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that provide humanitarian and medical assistance to Nicaraguans in need. While we had hoped that the government would respond to the voices of Nicaraguans themselves and U.S. and international urging to abide by its commitments to implement electoral reforms and allow free and fair elections, we have seen instead an acceleration of Ortega and Murillo's efforts to consolidate their own power. As Secretary Blinken stated on August 7, "the United States views the regime's latest undemocratic, authoritarian actions—driven by Ortega's fear of an electoral loss—as the final blow against Nicaragua's prospects for a free and fair election later this year. That electoral process, including its eventual results, has lost all credibility."

In the face of sham elections in November, we and our international partners must continue to denounce and push back against the Ortega-Murillo government's antidemocratic rule as well as its use of Russian-inspired laws and growing Russian presence to carry out its repression. We must demonstrate that these practices have no place in our hemisphere.

We have called repeatedly on the Nicaraguan government to release all political prisoners immediately, including those who have been arrested in the latest wave of repression. We hold President Ortega and Vice President Murillo, and those who carry out their authoritarian orders, responsible for the detainees' safety and well-being. Every day in August we highlighted on social media the personal profile of one of the recently detained Nicaraguan political prisoners, drawing widespread media coverage in Nicaragua and in international press to their cases, and spotlighting the regime's repressive tactics. These individuals have taken enormous risks and made enormous sacrifices in their efforts to demand genuine democracy in Nicaragua; none deserves the mistreatment and injustice they are now suffering.

The Department has already taken strong actions to impose consequences on the Ortega-Murillo government. We have worked with Treasury to impose sanctions on those implicated in carrying out the government's crackdown. As of September 14, 2021, the United States has sanctioned 31 individuals and eight entities under our Nicaragua and Global Magnitsky sanctions programs, and the Department has applied visa restrictions to 169 Nicaraguans in response to the political

crackdown and the application of sham laws that ensure the November election will not be free, fair, transparent, or reflective of the will of the Nicaraguan people. As these actions demonstrate, there are costs for those who are complicit in the undemocratic and repressive acts carried out on behalf of the Ortega-Murillo government. We will continue to use the diplomatic and economic tools at our disposal to support Nicaraguans' calls for greater freedom and accountability.

We are also working with the international community, urging our neighbors and partners in the region and beyond to join us in multilateral fora to send a clear signal to the Ortega-Murillo government that democracies in the hemisphere will not tolerate these repressive actions. Following advocacy by the United States and our partners, the OAS issued a strong resolution on June 15, backed by an overwhelming majority of 26 member states, which condemned the Ortega-Murillo government's arrests and called for the immediate release of political prisoners. We continue to work with the OAS on potential actions at the upcoming OAS General Assembly in November. At the UN Human Rights Council, we were pleased to be one of 59 governments that called for the release of the prisoners on June 22 and are working with international partners to promote accountability. Fifty countries issued another joint statement on September 14 in Geneva that expresses doubt about the credibility of the upcoming elections. We are also working closely with the EU, Canada, and the UK to coordinate additional targeted measures. In addition to these international condemnations, we were pleased that Canada announced on July 14 targeted sanctions on 15 Nicaraguan individuals, and we welcomed the EU's August 2 announcement of sanctions on eight Nicaraguan individuals, including Vice President Rosario Murillo. These joint actions have further isolated the Ortega-Murillo government.

Through USAID, we continue to support Nicaraguan civil society, independent media, and human rights defenders as they fight for a return to democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights. Our continued support assures Nicaraguans that the outside world has not forgotten them.

In conclusion, the Department of State stands firmly with the Nicaraguan people in their desire for genuine democracy, and we will continue to pursue bold actions in response to the Nicaraguan government's failure to uphold fundamental freedoms and respect for human rights.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I'm happy to answer your questions.