



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

The Perilous State of Religious Freedom in Nicaragua

Thursday, December 15, 2022

11:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

Virtual via Cisco WebEx

Rep. Chris Smith (R-Manchester, NJ)

Today's hearing is an extremely important one—and one which deserves greater recognition, not only from the Biden Administration and our regional and European allies, but also and especially the Holy See, commonly called the Vatican: Namely, the Perilous State of Religious Freedom in Nicaragua.

Nicaragua, under the dictator Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo, has been on a downward trajectory since the

2018 crackdown over what began as protests over reduced social security benefits, but soon became a street referendum on the decline of democracy under Ortega's rule.

Our Commission previously called attention to the deteriorating situation with regard to civil and political rights more generally in Nicaragua, in a [hearing](#) I chaired in July of last year.

Today, we are focusing on one aspect of that, which is the war Ortega and Murillo are waging against religious freedom, and in particular against the Catholic Church and an extraordinarily brave Catholic leader—Bishop Rolando Álvarez.

As we have seen in so many countries—from Poland during the days of the Iron Curtain to China under the brutal dictatorship of Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party's most recent persecution and conviction of Cardinal Joseph Zen,

to the Democratic Republic of the Congo today—the faith community and the Catholic Church in particular has often been the strongest institutional voice against tyranny.

So too in Nicaragua, where Ortega has taken an increasingly hard line against the Catholic Church as clergy and other members of Nicaragua’s Catholic community have criticized his government’s democratic backsliding and human rights violations.

Among other statements, Ortega reportedly has referred to priests as “killers”, “terrorists”, “coup plotters” and accused the clergy of working on behalf of “American imperialism.”

This is what psychologists refer to as “projection:” it is the Ortega regime that embraces violence.

The Catholic News Agency reports that over the last four years, the Catholic Church has been the target of some 190

attacks and desecrations. Such attacks have included fire bombings, blockades, increased patrols, arbitrary arrests, expulsions, and closures of religious media outlets.

In 2019, for example, Monsignor Silvio Báez, a critic of the Ortega administration, revealed that he faced harassment, received death threats, and been beaten.

In March of 2022, Ortega withdrew the credentials of the papal nuncio in Managua, Archbishop Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag, and expelled him from the country.

In August 2022, per Ortega's orders, the Nicaraguan National Police, or NNP, closed seven Catholic radio stations due to their criticism of the Ortega administration.

The NNP also first placed Bishop Ronaldo Álvarez of the Diocese of Matagalpa and Estelí, along with five priests, under

house arrest, and then took him into custody, where he was kept incommunicado.

Just the day before yesterday we learned that Bishop Álvarez was finally brought before a Nicaraguan court and formally charged with the laughable crimes of “conspiracy to undermine national integrity” and “spreading false news through informational technologies.”

I have the press release of the Managua Central Judicial Complex detailing these charges, which I would like to enter into the record.

I also note that another priest who was forced into exile from Nicaragua, Uriel Antonio Vallejos, is named, and the Court has called upon INTERPOL to seize him. This is another abuse, namely the corrupting of the INTERPOL Red Notice system by

tyrannies such as Nicaragua, Russia, and the People's Republic of China.

Many, myself included, have also questioned why the Holy See and Pope Francis in particular have not been more vocal in light of this persecution of the Church and a courageous church leader like Bishop Álvarez—not to mention the expulsion of the Sisters of Charity, Mother Theresa's order of nuns, from Nicaragua this past summer. They were reportedly forced to leave the country overland on foot to Costa Rica.

We also know that the Ortega regime has repeatedly denied requests by political prisoners for Bibles, denying them even this small, spiritual solace.

I assume this relative silence was due to efforts behind the scenes to free Bishop Álvarez and others, and now that a formal

judicial process has been initiated, the Pope and the Holy See will be less constrained in their comments.

Finally, because I believe it is important, we need to highlight the names of others who have suffered religious persecution by the Ortega Regime.

I have already mentioned Father Vallejos.

Óscar Danilo Benavidez has also reportedly been arbitrarily arrested, along with Father Enrique Martínez Gamboa. There are other priests, seminarians and lay Catholic journalists who have also been placed in detention.

These individuals are included among the more than 236 political prisoners that we believe, through sources, to have been incarcerated by Ortega, a list that also includes public servants and even judges.

The Commission is grateful to welcome two powerful and amazing human rights leaders:

- [Bianca Jagger](#), Founder and President, Bianca Jagger Human Rights Foundation,
- and [Eddy Acevedo](#), Chief of Staff and Senior Advisor to the President, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars