



Bianca Jagger Testimony
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
15th December 2022

I would like to begin by thanking the Honorable Co-Chairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC) Congressman Chris Smith and Congressman Jim McGovern for inviting me to testify before you. The human rights situation in Nicaragua, the country of my birth, has dramatically deteriorated since I spoke to you on 21 July 2021. For the purposes of today's proceedings, I will focus my testimony on the crackdown of religious freedom in Nicaragua

Yesterday, when I was writing my testimony, I received the alarming news that the dictatorial regime of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo had initiated, in the Criminal District Court in Managua, an infamous process against Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos, bishop of the Diocese of Matagalpa and apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Estelí. They charged him with "conspiracy to undermine the national integrity and propagation of false news through information technologies". He was exhibited sitting on the defendant's chair, looking physically deteriorated, having lost weight, looking pale and stripped of his soutane. For 131 days, he was held captive, isolated and incommunicado in an undisclosed location with no formal accusation, access to legal defence and with a seriously deteriorating health for


predicating peace and spreading the gospel. Bishop Álvarez Lagos is the latest Catholic prelate to be charged with trumped up charges as part of Ortega and Murillo's brutal crackdown on the church. It's been speculated that a member of the Nicaraguan Catholic hierarchy has tried to persuade the bishop that the best option for him and for members of the Catholic Church was to leave Nicaragua. But Monsignor Alvarez Lagos has always stated that he was not willing to leave the country. Monsignor Alvarez Lagos is a man of God, at the mercy of a murderous regime, a man of courage, principles and tremendous integrity who is prepared to risk his life, to defend the inalienable rights not just of the Catholic faithful, but of all oppressed people in Nicaragua.

Targeting Bishop Rolando Jose Alvarez Lagos at a time when millions of Christians around the world prepare to celebrate one the most important dates of the year. Christmas is when families and friends come together, for renewed strengths, for healing, forgiveness and reconciliation, a time for peace, a time for joy. Instead, in Nicaragua, the Ortega-Murillo regime is escalating their unholy war against the Catholic church.

Following the non-violent and widespread anti-government protest in April 2018, the dictatorial regime of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murio launched an attack on all dissenting voices and since then his regime has increased its brutal repression. Since then, the Catholic church in general has been instrumental in providing avenues for dialogue and understanding whilst maintaining a very clear message in support of democracy, freedom, and human rights. Some of the most vocal critics of the regime have come precisely from the ranks of the catholic clergy.

Monsignor Silvio Baez, Assistant Bishop of Managua, was forced into exile after serious physical attacks against him were perpetrated; similarly, many highly charismatic priests were forced to seek refuge abroad after intense persecution by the regime. One very notorious case was that of Father Edwin Román, who was held hostage for weeks inside his parish in the iconic Monimbó community in Masaya, surrounded by police forces and paramilitary squads with no electricity, running water or access to food and medicine.

Since the protest, nearly 400 Nicaraguans have been killed due to state violence, as certified by reputable international human rights organisations, which concluded that crimes against humanity have been perpetrated by the Ortega Murillo dictatorial regime.

Two fundamental pillars of Nicaraguan democracy – the Catholic Church and the independent media – have been practically trampled by the Ortega-Murillo regime. Ortega accused them of being accomplices of an alleged coup d'état in 2018, a spurious claim which has never been proven. To silence and frighten the Nicaraguan people, Ortega and Murillo launched an unprecedented crackdown on the freedom of the press by closing and confiscating some of the most important independent media in Nicaragua such as El Diario LA PRENSA, Confidencial, Canal  por Ciento Noticias and Radio Darío.

Ortega and Murillo's war against civil society has led him to arbitrarily cancel the legal status of more than 3,000 NGOs in a sweeping purge of civil society, human rights and humanitarian organisations, including several religious organisations that provided support to the most impoverished sections of the population.

It is of the utmost importance to understand that the Ortega Murillo's systematic and brutal crackdown on the Nicaraguan Catholic Church is all part of an unholy war

I will give you a chronology of Ortega and Murillo's crackdown on the Catholic Church this year alone: in March, Msgr. Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag, the apostolic nuncio, was ousted from Nicaragua by the regime, an action that the Holy See described as 'incomprehensible' because Sommertag "has worked tirelessly for the good of the church and of the Nicaraguan people" while "always seeking to promote good relations" between the Vatican and Nicaraguan authorities.

On 1st August Bishop Rolando Alvarez Lagos released a statement saying that the Nicaraguan communications regulator TELCOR had ordered them to close their radio stations after falsely accusing them of operating without a valid licence. By the end of August, the government had ordered the closure of 10 Catholic radio stations and three television stations.

On 4th of August Bishop Alvarez Lagos was held hostage in the clergy house of the Diocese of Matagalpa and was prevented from officiating mass in the cathedral. Security forces also prohibited members of the group: 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. In the early hours of 19th August special forces of the regime violently broke the door and forced their way in to kidnapped Monsignor Alvarez Lagos and his companions: were taken on a separate vehicle to the

notorious prison 'El Chipote' and have been formally accused of "conspiracy to undermine national integrity and spreading of fake news in detriment of the state of Nicaragua" all in accordance with the Russian inspired amendments made on the penal code by the regime in late 2020. On 13th of December, as I mentioned above, they brought Bishop Alvarez Lagos to court to face charges. And last Sunday, 11th December, two journalists, Manuel Obando Cortedano and Wilbberto Artola from the Media Diocese of Matagalpa were kidnapped by the police and their where about is unknown.

Holding a Bishop captive, the imprisonment of priests and seminarians; the relentless persecution that is forcing many of them to flee the country to save their lives, preventing them to return to their own country; and also expelling dozens of foreign priests and nuns, such as the case of the Missionaries of Charity of the order of Mother Teresa are some of the methods used by the Ortega-Murillo regime to crackdown on the Catholic Church.

Amidst this terrible state of persecution, the regime has increased the shutdown of any public activities or events of religious nature, especially in those cities, neighbourhoods, or communities where the regime has no absolute control through their police forces or paramilitary squads. That is precisely the case for Masaya, Managua, Matagalpa, Chontales, North Caribbean Autonomous Region, Jinotega and Nueva Segovia where no permits have been granted for religious events, with the obvious exceptions made for religious events organised by the regime.

Nicaragua is traditionally and culturally a very devout country; the role religion plays in everyday life is very important. Regardless of ideology, class or race, faith remains a unifying factor.

December is a special month for Christians around the world, in Nicaragua that is especially true since the most iconic and observed religious celebrations nationwide take place in this month, “La Purísima” and “Navidad”. Trying to explain Nicaragua without the cultural and social significance “La Purísima” has is like trying to define the Muslim world without the “Eid al-Fitir” or the Hindu world without “Diwali” or the Jewish world without “Hanukkah”. For most Nicaraguans being deprived of their faith and traditions is like amputating a very essential part of what makes them humans.

I cannot stop thinking about Bishop Rolando Jose Álvarez Lagos during this December “celebrations”, he is a person with a true calling, a Shepard that is one with his flock. The communities served by Bishop Álvarez Lagos are now orphaned, not only because their religious leader has been incarcerated, but also because their friend, provider and social champion is no longer doing the work they appreciate and the assistance they desperately need.

Once again, I come before you to ask for your help, and I do so with no intent to hide my disappointment with the silence in Rome, in Latin America and to a certain degree Washington DC, Brussels. I am fully aware that the world is rapidly veering towards an unprecedented and alarming increase in the influence of authoritarian regimes. Even those regimes that the west deemed “manageable or under control” have gone unhinged, the Ortega-Murillo regime is precisely one piece of that

puzzle, a piece in a masterful coordination with Moscow, Teheran, Caracas, and Havana.

As a human rights defender, I have always been open to dialogue when there are real perspectives and possibilities. But when I hear leaders within the Catholic Church advocate for continued dialogue with the dictatorial Ortega-Murillo regime, I wholeheartedly disagree. When engaging with dictators who commit crimes against humanity and who have repeatedly shown no remorse or intention to change, dialogue becomes a complicitous act.

I celebrate actions taken by the USA like the RENACER act, especially in its current scope of application. Similarly, I believe that the inclusion of Nicaragua as “Country of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 is an extremely important step towards garnering pressure needed to bring Ortega and Murillo to their senses. Unfortunately, this is not enough.

We need coherent and resolute actions from the international democratic community to stop Ortega and Murillo on their tracks. It’s not possible that the Human Rights Council is accusing the Nicaraguan regime of crimes against humanity in Geneva while at the same time the IMF, IDB and World Bank are fuelling Ortega’s capacity to kill, terrorized, persecute, and incarcerate. The silence of the Most Holy Father and some democracies, especially in Latin America is disheartening.

The people of Nicaragua will continue to be terrorized by this dictatorship if concrete and effective actions are not taken:

The Nicaragua Human Rights and Anticorruption Act of 2018 (Nica Act), needs to be fully implemented, particularly the parts pertaining to further scrutiny of funds coming from IFIs (IMF, IADB and World Bank), and sanctions over corrupt individuals and human rights abusers increased in numbers, reaching to the murderous Mayors, in service and retired Nicaraguan Army officers that facilitate the training and arming of the para-police forces, and continue a campaign of terror against the campesino farmers in Nicaragua's country side, the political and main shock structures of the Sandinista Party that sustains the repression. The FSLN should be sanctioned as the terrorist organization Ortega has turned it into.

The Renacer Act should continue being implemented more ambitiously and decisively. With this an extensive legally mandated investigation of the corruption of the Ortega family and circle of power, and a similar in-depth investigation of Russian interference in Nicaragua will have to be implemented.

The overseas investments of the Ortega family and collaborators, including that of the Nicaraguan military, need to be frozen and seized. Also, any remaining US ties with the Nicaraguan military need to be severed.

DR CAFTA needs to be use for the purpose of promoting liberty and democracy, not to invertedly further a dictatorial agenda.

All the efforts between the United States, Europe, Canada, the Organization of the American States, and the United Nations need to be urgently coordinated in order to have a greater impact on the regime for the sake of the people of Nicaragua.

I wish to express my gratitude to Congressman Chris Smith and Congressman Jim McGovern for initiating this hearing. Distinguished members of the US congress present here in this room I am testifying in my capacity as Founder and President of The Bianca Jagger Human Rights Foundation.

Numerous reports from the offices of the High Commissioner of UN Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Nicaraguan NGOs, the EU have pointed to the alarming violations of human rights and corruption in Nicaragua.

Distinguished members of the US congress, I know you agree with me importance of democracy, the need of free and fair elections and the respect for freedom of speech, freedom of expression and the rule of law.

We in Nicaragua share the same vision and recognise the need for responsible leadership and true commitment to global protection of Human Rights.

To impose Visa sanctions on high-ranking officials in the Cambodian and immediate family members suspected of corruption and investigate investments and bank accounts in the US. These investigations should be made public.