



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

The Perilous State of Religious Freedom in Nicaragua

Thursday, December 15, 2022

11:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

Virtual via Cisco WebEx

As prepared for delivery

Good morning. I join Co-Chair Smith in welcoming the witnesses and the audience to today's hearing on religious freedom in Nicaragua.

This is the third time the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission has taken up the situation in Nicaragua since the ongoing political crisis exploded in April 2018, after the Ortega government violently repressed peaceful protests.

In the first hearing I led in September 2018, we had already received reports of attacks on the Catholic Church. In fact, it was a priest and long-time friend who first reached out to me about the emerging crisis. The Ortega government began going after the Church because priests were safeguarding the rights of protesters and criticizing the repression.

Harassment and intimidation against the Church and the clergy have continued since then. As of last June the Catholic News Agency [reported](#) 190 attacks and desecrations against the Church, including a fire caused by arson in the Cathedral of Managua.

But things have escalated dramatically during 2022.

In March, the government expelled the papal nuncio with no explanation.

In May, Bishop Rolando Alvarez was forced to take refuge in a church and go on a hunger strike in response to police intimidation. In August, the police raided his Matagalpa

diocese, detained him and several other priests, announced an investigation against the Bishop for “organizing violent groups” and placed him under house arrest.

Only last Tuesday, 110 days later, was the Bishop finally charged. His alleged crimes: conspiracy to undermine national integrity and propagation of false news. These are the same charges Nicaraguan prosecutors have used to condemn more than 40 political prisoners.

In May, the television channel of Nicaragua’s Episcopal Conference was taken off the air by the national telecommunications authority. In August the same authorities closed seven Catholic radio stations.

In June, the government cancelled the legal status of the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa’s order, and forced the nuns to leave the country. They had operated in Nicaragua since 1988. Several other Catholic charities were also ordered closed.

The National Assembly revoked the legal status of one Catholic university and cut funding for another, the Jesuit-run Central American University, known for its decades of research and advocacy on issues of social justice.

In November Ortega described the Catholic Church as a “dictatorship.”

It is impossible not to conclude that all of this constitutes a systematic attack on the Church as an institution. That is why on December 2nd the Biden Administration [designated Nicaragua](#) as a “Country of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

It is equally important to recognize that the persecution of the Church is one aspect of the complete collapse of respect for human rights in Nicaragua.

Since 2018 the human rights situation in the country has deteriorated at an exponential rate, as local advocates and international bodies can attest.

With the closing of more than 2,000 non-governmental organizations, including the faith-based organizations I mentioned earlier, the space for civil society has been decimated.

More than 200,000 Nicaraguans have fled the country for political and economic reasons.

Self-censure is widely practiced. One example: we reached out to several possible witnesses for the hearing today, but no one we talked to was willing to speak publicly for fear of reprisal.

Without objection I will again include in the record recent findings by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and U.N. bodies.

We know what the Church in Nicaragua has experienced directly, that the fundamental right to religious freedom does not exist in a vacuum.

The Church has come under attack because members of its clergy stood up for the rights of Nicaraguan citizens to freely express themselves, organize, protest and dissent.

The people's exercise of those basic rights has become intolerable for the government led by Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo.

The repression of those rights became intolerable for many in the Church.

In these circumstances, to stand in solidarity with the Nicaraguan Church means that we must also stand in solidarity with all those Nicaraguans the Church has sought to support and protect – social and political leaders, human rights defenders, journalists, student activists and protesters. Many are now imprisoned or exiled. Others are still at risk within the country.

In that spirit, I call today for the immediate release without conditions of three ordinary Nicaraguans – Luis Carlos Valle, Karla Escobar and Yader Polanco – who are [recognized as prisoners of conscience](#) in the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project.

All three joined the 2018 protests and have paid for that with years in prison. Their cases are riddled with procedural flaws and they have all been denied medical care while imprisoned. Luis and Karla have been granted protection measures by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

They are among the more than 200 political prisoners held in Nicaragua in miserable conditions in violation of Nicaragua's international human rights obligations. We must not allow any of them to be forgotten.

What else should we do?

I expect we will hear today that the Administration should increase sanctions on Nicaragua.

It's worth noting that as of November, Treasury had already imposed blocking sanctions on 44 individuals and 11 entities, including the country's top leadership, the National Police, the

Attorney General and state-owned enterprises. The State Department has restricted the visas of several hundred officials.

So far, it's hard to argue that the sanctions alone have improved the situation on the ground.

I believe we need new thinking. We must move beyond the temptation to simply impose increasingly severe sanctions in the hope that somehow these will change the behavior of leaders who excel in avoiding the worst consequences for themselves, while their people suffer.

The way things look now, the status quo could go on forever. That's simply unacceptable.

This is one reason I welcome President Biden's November decision to name former Senator Chris Dodd as Special Presidential Advisor for the Americas. I hope his appointment signals that Central America and Latin America are moving up on the Administration's diplomatic agenda.

I believe we need a wholistic multilateral approach to dealing with the challenges we face in Nicaragua and throughout Central America. The democratic backsliding in El Salvador and Guatemala is just as concerning to me as the situation in Nicaragua.

What we've been doing isn't working. If we don't want failed states and countless refugees, we need a better approach. Imagine what we might accomplish if sustained diplomatic energy similar to that devoted to Ukraine were also directed toward working hand-in-hand with pro-human rights governments to chart a different path in our own hemisphere.

Thank you and I yield back.