

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
The State of Exception in El Salvador

Thursday, 04/16/2026
2360 Rayburn House Office Building

Statement of Noah Bullock
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Distinguished members of the Commission — After four years under a state of exception, the security environment in the country of El Salvador has transformed. The criminal violence of gangs has been replaced by the corruption and violence of an autocratic regime. As a human rights organization who provided assistance to victims of gang violence as well as State repression, we believe Salvadoreans deserve better options than living subjugated to the violence of gangs or the repression of dictatorships.

At we sit here today, Salvadorans continue to suffer human rights abuses and new cases of torture and deaths in custody of the state emerge regularly. Since January alone, our team of investigators has registered 93 new prison deaths, bringing the total number of deaths documented by Cristosal to 513 — of which 420 we have been fully investigated and documented.

Our methodology for case documentation draws on health records, death certificates, coroner's reports, witness testimonials, photographic evidence, and forensic assessments conducted by external experts. The causes of death identified in our investigations reveal a consistent pattern of severe physical abuse, medical neglect, and inhumane conditions directly attributable to the state.

Physical violence is reflected in 181 of the deaths we documented. pulmonary or cerebral edema was listed as the official cause, and 168 cases where victims sustained trauma to the head, chest, or abdomen — injuries consistent with beatings. Hypovolemic shock, linked to hemorrhage, dehydration, or burns, accounts for 24 of the deaths. Sixteen detainees died of asphyxia by hanging or strangulation; though six were classified by officials as suicides, evidence shows that in at least five cases the forensic evidence doesn't support that cause.

Denial of medical care is evident in at least 73 of the cases attributed to cardiac conditions, 71 cases died of infectious diseases including pneumonia, tuberculosis, and meningitis didn't receive medical care, and 54 were directly linked to infection. Sepsis claimed the lives of 49 people. Renal failure developed in 52 cases — 33 which had no prior medical issues before being detained, strongly suggesting their condition was caused by confinement itself.

Inhumane conditions are further demonstrated in 36 deaths from severe malnutrition and 7 from dehydration, reflecting deliberate deprivation of food, water, and basic hygiene.

Under the Bukele regime, the Salvadoran justice system and prisons have become tools for punishment and intimidation of dissent. In March Cristosal published a report studying 245 cases of citizens who suffered judicial or extrajudicial persecution due to their profiles as members of the political opposition, community leaders, environmental and human rights defenders,

journalists, academics, and even former allies and collaborators of the Bukele regime. The study includes the case of the disappearance, torture, and killing of former friend and advisor to the president, Alejandro Muyschondt, after he denounced corruption in the president's party. The report also documents a pattern of persecution of family members as retribution against Salvadorans who make critical statements about the regime, exemplified by the detention of the son of indigenous and environmental activist Silverio Morales.

The report assesses 186 cases of judicial persecution, 86 of which remain in prison. These cases demonstrate how the exceptions to due process rights — allegedly necessary to combat organized crime in the country — are now being used against human rights defenders, like my friend and colleague Ruth López, the head of our anti-corruption unit.

Ruth was arrested in May and has been in prison for nearly a year without trial. For the majority of her imprisonment, she has been held incommunicado, without access to her family or legal counsel. At the request of the prosecution, the judge ruled that Ruth would be tried in secret, despite her very public demand for a public trial. Her arrest and judicial proceedings against her have been riddled with irregularities and illegalities that make clear the regime's intent to punish Ruth for her role in the fight against corruption and send a message to the Salvadoran public to deter and silence dissent.

I ask the honorable members of this Commission to join Ruth's family in demanding that her rights to a fair, speedy, and public trial be upheld; that she have access to her family and defense while held in detention; but ultimately, that she be released from pretrial detention, which in the Salvadoran legal system should be the exception, but under the Bukele regime has become the standard.

With tens of thousands of Salvadorans detained and disappeared under the state of exception, Ruth's arrest, and the capture of constitutional lawyer Enrique Anaya days later, denoted an exodus of civil society leaders, human rights defenders, and journalists. They rationally determined that the Bukele regime has unrestricted power to arrest and detain indefinitely whoever it wants, and that there are no institutions in the country with sufficient independence and authority to intervene to protect the of rights citizens.

The Bukele regime insists that anyone who questions their security model is defending the rights of criminals over the rights of victims. The regime is profoundly mistaken on this point. Human rights organizations have advocated for the rights of and provided assistance to victims of gang violence for years. We are in full agreement that the state has a responsibility to protect citizens from crime and violence — our disagreement with the regime centers on the necessity of using policies that amount to crimes against humanity to achieve it.