



**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**  
**The Evolving Human Rights Crisis in Nicaragua**

**Thursday, September 27, 2018**  
**9:30 – 11:00 a.m.**  
**2200 Rayburn House Office Building**

**Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery**

Good morning and welcome to this Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on the evolving human rights crisis in Nicaragua. I extend a special welcome to our witnesses who have traveled here from Nicaragua, and to the Nicaraguans in the audience.

I know this is a difficult and complex moment in your country's history. I want to assure you that we in the United States Congress are paying attention. We are concerned and we are committed to doing what we can to make sure that U.S. policy contributes in the most constructive way possible to resolving the internal political conflict that has escalated since April.

I have been around long enough to remember the Nicaraguan revolution and the Contra War that followed the overthrow of the Somoza regime in the 1980s.

I agreed with those who opposed the Reagan Administration's aid to the Contras, and in fact Congress acted to cut off the aid in 1985 – in part in response to reports that the Contras were routinely killing civilians, Sandinista officials in the interior of the country, heads of cooperatives, nurses, doctors and judges.

At the time, some U.S. government supporters of the Contras justified the violence. One of them was Duane Dewey, the Central Intelligence Agency officer in charge of the covert war. "After all," he told the House Intelligence Committee, "this is war – a paramilitary operation."

But enough Members of Congress were sufficiently appalled by the tactics to pass the third Boland amendment and outlaw the assistance.

For those of us who opposed the Contra War more than thirty years ago, the Nicaragua of today is not what we were rooting for.

As you will hear from our witnesses, over 300 Nicaraguans have been killed and some 2,000 injured since social protests erupted in April of this year. The deaths include 24 children and adolescents, and 21 police officers. The majority of the deaths have been attributed to the government's police forces and to armed pro-government groups.

What began as a protest against a government proposal to "reform" the social security system has grown into a major opposition movement that demands that Daniel Ortega step down -- the same Daniel Ortega who was a leader of the Sandinista revolution four decades ago and has been elected president three times since 2006.

The man who once stood up against Somoza's oppression has become the oppressor. This is a tragedy.

After the first burst of violence, the Ortega government responded well to international concern. It cooperated with a May visit by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights and agreed to follow-up mechanisms. In June the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights sent a mission at the invitation of the government.

But as we will hear, cooperation slowed once these agencies began to attribute responsibility for grave human rights abuses to the government. In late August the government expelled the UN High Commissioner's team.

Now the government is simply denying that the abuses documented by the UN, the Inter-American system and highly credible local human rights organizations have occurred.

Meanwhile, as the opposition has evolved, so have the government's tactics. We have heard reports of attacks on churches, the dismissal of health workers who treated the wounded, arbitrary detention and torture -- including sexual violence against men --, the targeting of families, and the use of a new anti-terrorism law to persecute and criminalize dissent.

Unlike many Salvadorans, Hondurans and Guatemalans I have met over the years, Nicaraguans are not used to being afraid of their government. But today they are.

The tactics deployed by the Ortega government are similar to those used around the world by authoritarian leaders whose hold on power is threatened by dissent.

The consequences tend to include increased migration and refugee flows, as people flee. And in fact, thousands of Nicaraguans have fled into Costa Rica since this crisis began in April.

So we have convened this hearing today with two objectives: first, to get the well-documented evidence of human rights abuses on the record, and second, to hear recommendations as to how the U.S. government and Congress can be most helpful to those in Nicaragua seeking a peaceful resolution to this crisis. As you will hear from our second panel this morning, the opposition movement remains firmly committed to non-violence.

Those recommendations should not focus only on Daniel Ortega.

It may be tempting to think that everything would be fine if Ortega were to just step down. But as former UN Human Rights Commissioner Zeid al Hussein observed in June, the repression and violence we've seen in recent months are the product of years of erosion of rights and weakening of institutions.

The problem in Nicaragua is bigger than one man.

I will now introduce our first panel of witnesses.