



## Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

### The Ortega Government and the Human Cost of Repression in Nicaragua: Political Prisoners

Wednesday, July 20, 2021

2:00 p.m. – 4:00 pm

Virtual via Cisco WebEx

### **Rep. Christopher H. Smith**

#### **Excerpt of Remarks**

This hearing of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission—The Ortega Government and the Human Cost of Repression in Nicaragua: Political Prisoners—will come to order.

Good afternoon.

We are gathered here today to examine the extreme political repression including beatings, torture, the disappearance of and incarceration of political prisoners, and the pervasive suppression of democracy and the rule of law perpetrated by Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.

We will hear in particular from the courageous wives of two of those political prisoners—candidates for the presidency of Nicaragua—as they give compelling, personal testimony about the fate of their husbands and insight into the cruelty of the Ortega regime.

Speaking of her husband, Felix Maradiaga, Berta Valles in her written statement tells us that “For years, Felix has been a target of attacks by the Ortega regime because he speaks truth to power. He has been beaten, confined to house arrest, and threatened. For months, he endured 24/7 surveillance by the police. They have tried again and again to silence him, but he never stands down.”

Likewise, Victoria Cardenas also tells us that because her husband, Juan Sebastian Chamorro, dares to speak out against Ortega's oppression, "the regime has also persecuted and harassed me and my family. They have brought a civil case against me, my sister, and my mother, which would take away all my mother's assets. They have brought a criminal case against me, and there is an open warrant for my arrest. It is clear that Ortega is using every part of Nicaragua's institutions, including its judicial system, to not only persecute those who challenge the government, but also their family members."

One thing I will note about this cruelty, is that it is a consistent cruelty – political prisoners span the gamut of activists on the political Left, often dissident Sandinistas themselves, to those on the political Right.

Some are motivated by a commitment to religious principle, such as the social teachings of the Catholic Church. Others who have been arrested come from indigenous groups like the [Rama, or are Afro-Nicaraguan Kriol](#) from the Caribbean coast.

Some have remained independent in their opposition.

Others have decided to put aside their political differences to create a broad blue and white coalition, [or UNAB](#), by its Spanish acronym.

Such is the case, for example, of two political prisoners, Felix Maradiaga and Juan Sebastian Chamorro, whose wives are speaking today on their behalf.

What they do have in common is a commitment to democratic principles, and a resistance to tyranny.

And all these democracy fighters—left, right or center— have incurred the wrath of this one man, and his closest cadres, including Daniel Ortega's wife, Rosario Murillo.

Thirty-seven years ago—in May of 1984—a bipartisan group of four Congressmen—Frank Wolf, Tony Hall, Bob McEwen, and I—travelled to Nicaragua to meet with Ortega and some of his closest henchmen, including Interior Minister Tomas Borge, and Church leaders including Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo.

We confronted Ortega over a broad range of human rights abuses including systematic torture and murder.

During the two-hour confrontation, Ortega served us water. Three of us drank what we were served, but not Tony Hall.

And I have never been sicker in my life.

Those of us who drank the water, all came down with a debilitating stomach pain, which remained with us for weeks on end. I lost close to 20 pounds during the ordeal. Only Tony remained unaffected.

Thus I can say that I have at least some very modest, personal understanding but deep empathy with those student protestors who were also sickened by tainted food they were given by agents of the Sandinista government when the protests began in 2018.

Ultimately, however, it is the bravery, tenacity and willingness to sacrifice of these Nicaraguan students and others like our witnesses who resist the regime which will ultimately bring about democratic change.

They should know that the United States stands unequivocally with them and their noble commitment to democracy and respect for universally recognized human rights.

And to this end, these Nicaraguan democracy advocates should be inspired—as we all should be inspired—by the citizen protests what we are witnessing today in Havana and throughout Cuba.

For it was the Communist regime in Cuba that first enabled Ortega and his Sandinistas to come to power in the 1970s, during their first iteration. It was Castro's Cuba which spread its misery and its malign influence throughout Latin America, including in Venezuela, and actively conspired against democratic regimes, inciting revolutionary violence and terrorism which has resulted in death, destruction and despotism.

Hopefully, those days are ending.

And that soon the purveyors of violence will be held to account for their atrocities and crimes against humanity.

Something I hope for is that peaceful democratic change will come to Cuba and to Nicaragua and Belarus and China and beyond.

I would like to thank all of our witnesses for testifying, and also give special recognition to Jared Genser for his great help in bringing the wives to testify.

I would also especially like to thank Bianca Jagger for her strong leadership and for accepting my invitation to testify.

In [1998, Bianca testified at my hearing on Srebrenica](#) and gave extraordinary witness to the betrayal of Bosnian Muslims who were killed en masse—a genocide—in July of 1995.

I now yield to my colleague, Co-Chair McGovern of Massachusetts.