



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

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

Wednesday, July 21, 2021

2:00 – 4:00 p.m.

Virtual via Cisco WebEx

As prepared for delivery

Good afternoon. I join Co-Chair Smith in welcoming the witnesses and those watching online to today's hearing on the human rights crisis in Nicaragua.

Before I begin, I have a bit of housekeeping. Today there is a witness on the panel who will be speaking in Spanish. The House has approved another virtual platform in which we can hear with simultaneous translation. It would be helpful not only for us but also for the witness to understand what others are saying, so as we go forward we might want to consider using that.

I want to start by expressing my deep respect and admiration for the many brave Nicaraguan victims, human rights organizations, journalists and activists who have denounced and documented the awful human rights abuses committed since the current crisis began in April 2018.

These are people who have been putting their lives and well-being on the line from the beginning. It is due to their efforts that international bodies like the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights have been able to compile comprehensive and damning reports like the one issued last October on [persons deprived of liberty](#) in Nicaragua.

Sadly, many of these brave people have had to flee their country. Those who remain in Nicaragua are so vulnerable that I have been advised not to name them or mention their organizations today because having a member of the U.S. Congress shine a light on their work in

a public event could put them at greater risk. Several declined to participate in this hearing to avoid giving the Nicaraguan authorities an excuse to go after them.

The situation today is far worse now than in September 2018, when I led the [first hearing](#) in this Commission on Nicaragua.

Then students and campesinos were at the forefront, motivated by the unfulfilled ideals of the Sandinista revolution, angry about the April crackdown but also determined and full of hope. Their peaceful civic movement was a breath of fresh air.

It is unfortunate that young people seem to be playing less of a leadership role now and I regret that they are not represented here today.

During the last two months the Nicaraguan state led by President Daniel Ortega and Vice-President Rosario Murillo has detained and imprisoned at least 27 leading figures from across the political spectrum, including the husbands of two of the witnesses today. I know some of those imprisoned – I've known them for decades. Without objection, I ask that their names be included in the record.

In response, hundreds of people who supported the Nicaraguan revolution in the 1980s have publicly condemned the escalating repression, the widespread violation of human rights and the efforts to shut down all dissent.

Without objection, I ask that the sign-on statements be entered into the record, and I take the opportunity to reiterate what I said in 2018.

As someone who strongly opposed the Contra War more than thirty years ago, the Nicaragua of today is not what I was rooting for.

Daniel Ortega and his wife, who once stood against Somoza's oppression, have become the oppressors.

Their authoritarian turn long pre-dates the current crackdown and is a tragedy for the Nicaraguan people.

Our solidarity must be with all those who are resisting their betrayal.

This brings me to the question of what the U.S. government and Congress can do that will be constructive.

In the three years since our last hearing, the main response to Nicaragua's return to dictatorship has been to impose economic sanctions. I am a believer in targeted sanctions, but they don't work in isolation.

I do not support the so-called "maximum pressure" campaigns, the go-to approach for many in Congress. Imposing crushing across-the-board economic hardship on entire populations because of the sins of their leaders is a form of collective punishment that succeeds only in deepening humanitarian crises and increasing forced migration.

What I do hope to see are coordinated multilateral initiatives that combine targeted sanctions, use of the U.N. and Inter-American human rights system, enforcement of anti-corruption laws, auditing and strict conditioning of loans, keeping media in business – I'm sure we can get creative here.

What would be a mistake, though, would be pretend that this crisis is just about ending the extended power grab by Ortega and Murillo.

The strategies they have used to consolidate power – politicizing the judiciary, changing electoral rules in their favor, criminalizing speech and on national security grounds, unleashing police on protestors – none of it is unique to them. Just last month this Commission reviewed the attacks on judicial independence throughout Central America.

The Cold War is over. What is happening in Nicaragua is the struggle between authoritarianism and democracy.

I yield back.