

**U.S. House of Representatives
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

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

July 22, 2021 – 2:00 pm
Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C.

Statement of Berta Valle
Wife of Presidential Candidate and
Political Prisoner Félix Maradiaga

Chairman McGovern, Chairman Smith, distinguished members, and honored guests: I am humbled to appear before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission today to discuss the ongoing crisis in Nicaragua. I thank you for creating the space for this discussion, and I am grateful for your ongoing commitment to uplifting and defending human rights in Nicaragua.

My name is Berta Valle. My husband, Félix Maradiaga is one of the presidential candidates and opposition leaders that was arrested and disappeared by the Ortega regime. Since June 8, Felix has been held by the regime without access to his family, lawyers, or doctor. We have not had any contact with him since his disappearance and we worry every day for his physical and mental wellbeing. Later that same day, Victoria's husband was also disappeared. Since then, dozens of opposition leaders have been arrested and detained in the same way.

It is very clear that Daniel Ortega will do anything he can to maintain his grip on power. By arrested the leading presidential candidates and dozens of other critics, Ortega has shown the world that he cannot win reelection if the opposition is allowed to participate.

This oppression is not new. For years, Felix has been the 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.

The repression became so severe that in 2018, I fled Nicaragua with our 5-year-old daughter and mother-in-law. For three years, we have lived in exile as political

refugees. While I am in the United States today, my heart and soul are in Nicaragua.

I would like to tell you a little bit about my husband. Felix has dedicated his entire life to Nicaragua and its people. As a young boy during the war, he saw how violence and conflict affected his family, especially his parents. His father had been a political prisoner, and his mother also suffered greatly. During these years, his mother feared for his life and felt obligated to send Félix to the United States, where he lived as a minor in exile. These experiences – as a witness and refugee – made Félix committed to the causes of human rights, nonviolent social change, and democracy.

He returned to Nicaragua as an adolescent, where he finished his studies and dedicated his professional life to public service. He found a particular passion in the area of demobilization and disarmament of ex-combatants, where he was deeply involved in the peacemaking process throughout the country. Through this work, he traveled to all corners of Nicaragua, meeting Nicaraguans from all walks of life, including those most marginalized in our society.

As a teacher, he spent over 10 years shaping the lives of young people. In his teaching, he emphasized the importance of nonviolent change, peaceful resistance, and civilian democracy. I am certain that Félix's commitment to these principles can be traced back to his experiences at a young age. For him it has always been more than a just curriculum to teach, more than academic theory. He has a profound and tangible commitment to these principles. He lives his life in service of them.

It is his commitment to these exact same principles, and his refusal to be silenced, that the Ortega regime arrested Félix at the beginning of its brutal crackdown on opposition before the November elections.

Since June, more than 26 opposition leaders have been arrested and placed under house arrest or disappeared, including presidential candidates, political leaders, student activists, businesspeople, union leaders, and former Sandinistas. The vast majority have been held without access to their families or lawyers. The regime won't even confirm where they are being held.

Under the framework of international law, this form of an enforced disappearance is a form of cruel, degrading and inhuman treatment, which constitutes a form of torture the longer it persists. Because they have been disappeared for so long – in

the case of our husbands, for 43 days – these disappearances constitute torture as a matter of international law.

While our domestic lawyers continue to exhaust the legal resources available at the local level to access our husbands, we are calling on the international community to continue to pressure the Ortega regime to release our husbands and all of the more than 140 political prisoners in Nicaragua.

In my hand I have a list of all the political prisoners that are held by the Ortega regime, and I am asking that this list be included in the record of today's hearing. This week, as Victoria and I meet with policymakers, diplomats, and officials in Washington, we will be advocating for not just our husbands, but for all the political prisoners in Nicaragua.

While my husband and Victoria's husband were competitors in the presidential primary, they are united by their vision for a better Nicaragua. While Daniel Ortega may try to divide the opposition but arresting and detaining his critics, this crackdown has only brought us closer together. I am grateful to Victoria for her support as we fight – together – for our husbands' freedom. And we are more committed than ever before to a peaceful transition to democracy that the Nicaraguan people want and deserve.

We stand in solidarity with all of the families of the political prisoners and with all those in Nicaragua who pray for a future where they can live in dignity and without fear.

And we will not rest until our husbands are liberated and our dreams for a free and prosperous Nicaragua are realized.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.