

**House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Hearing  
on  
THE EVOLVING HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS IN NICARAGUA**

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

**Statement of Julio Martinez Ellsberg  
Member  
Platform for Social Movements and Civil Society Organizations**

We are grateful for the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in its taking a sincere interest in the current plight of the Nicaraguan people.

I would like to acknowledge the presence of the Inter American Human Rights Commission and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, who along with the Nicaraguan and international human rights groups have provided accurate depictions of the reality that the Nicaraguan government stubbornly refuses to acknowledge. They have been exemplary in their roles as witnesses and defenders and deserve the recognition of us all.

I would like to start my testimony by mentioning the names of

Yaritza Rostrán,  
Victoria Obando,  
Levis Rugama,  
Jonathan Lopez,  
Amaya Coppens  
Nahiroby Olivas,  
Luis Quiróz  
Byron Corea

These are students within the Nicaraguan public university system who have been bravely organizing students in their faculties and in other universities to demand freedom of expression, freedom from violence from the Nicaraguan State, and university autonomy. These students, most of whom I have known and worked with since the beginning of the protests, were arrested and taken to the El Chipote prison, the same place where the Somoza dictatorship used to hold and torture its political prisoners. So were some of their professors such as Ricardo Baltodano of the UPOLI, as well as over 300 other fellow citizens who have been part of the protests.

I will mention that this is no abstract matter for me personally. I became involved during the first days of the protest when I saw the students and my friends that were part of the protests being brutally attacked by government groups, and later police and paramilitaries. Like thousands of

Nicaraguans, I decided to find a way to help in any way that I could, participating in marches and later helping organize. This led me to experience attacks by paramilitaries, and witness horrible situations such as when I took a teenager who had been wounded by gunshot from one hospital to another in my sedan, because his family was terrified of keeping him in the public health system, as the entire public health system had been complicit with the repression: either denying care to protesters, handing over wounded people to the police, to denying mothers the bodies of their children until they signed documents saying that he had not died in anything related to the protests.

The current state of affairs in my country is the following: After the massacre of hundreds of my fellow Nicaraguans, Ortega lost the support of all sectors (the church, the traditional Sandinista communities, and most of the big business, on which he has relied upon for support over the last decade.) For fear of losing it all, he is now moving on to intimidating the population by kidnapping all organizers nationwide. We face jail, exile or death. And we speak here today not knowing if we will be arrested upon arrival in Nicaragua.

He hopes that by intimidating the Nicaraguan people, he discourages them from protesting and if there are no more people in the streets, that the economy can go back to so-called normal, and that he can go back to business as usual with the financial oligarchy and American businesses, as though nothing had happened.

However, that former state of affairs will not return. The level of violence and murder, and the political and economic crisis that it has created is one that Ortega cannot himself undo and the Nicaraguan people are not going to just forget. Even in the midst of this murder and intimidation, the Nicaraguan people have not stopped protesting, peacefully, a single week in 5 months. And they will not stop, until real change is achieved. The Platform of Social Movements, of which I am a part of and which represents more than sixty grass roots organizations, believe that the following are key demands that must be respected for the country to go back to normality:

1. The Ortega government must halt the repression of the marches, and respect Nicaraguan's right to assemble and protest non-violently. This entails an end to the shootings, arbitrary arrests and disappearances. We consider it important for the UN High Commissioner for HR should be allowed back in to confirm that these aspirations become reality.
2. He must free the more than 300 political prisoners immediately.
3. As Human Rights groups have already documented, the judicial system no longer is capable of delivering justice to the Nicaraguan people. Meanwhile, the government obviously cannot be trusted to investigate its own crimes. That is why, to move past this as a nation, investigations must be carried out by independent groups, ideally by the Independent Group of International Experts that are already in the country, led by Ms. Claudia Paz y Paz, to find those responsible for the murders over the past 5 months, who can then be tried.
4. Paramilitaries must be disbanded. This apparatus that has been created by the government, and which many suspect have ties to the army, work side by side with the police to attack the Nicaraguan population. We as a nation fear that if they are not disbanded, they will become a new permanent destabilizing force not only for Nicaragua but for the region as a whole reinforcing the Mesoamerican gang system.
5. Early elections must happen as soon as possible, after having carried out the necessary electoral

reforms so that free elections are truly possible in the country. Through these elections, we want to turn a new page in Nicaraguan history where our government has respect for grassroots movements, local governance, where it has respect for the autonomy of the Caribbean Coast, of the Universities, of the Municipalities, and respect for all Nicaraguans to organize and express themselves freely.

Yet, it is important to mention that the reforms necessary to turn Nicaragua into a republic will only be possible in Nicaragua until after Ortega's resignation. Heads of government have resigned for much less, and we reserve the right to demand that our public servants step down after such attacks on our population. We will continue to demand the resignation of the president and vice-president, and all government officials who have been responsible for the atrocities that he has committed.

As social movements we reiterate that the call has always been for non-violence. And also, we reiterate that our call is for this to be solved by Nicaraguans initiative. No military intervention from any direction, as we know from recent history that this would only bring more suffering to our people.

Yet, Nicaragua is part of a larger community of nations and it is important for those in the community to do what they can to help us with the most important human right of all: to stay alive and safe and to restore justice to the country. This is why we fully support the resolution that was already put forward by the Organization of American States that, I quote, "calls upon Member and Observer States to implement, in accordance with their respective legal frameworks and applicable international law, appropriate diplomatic measures to assist in the restoration of rule of law and the protection of human rights in Nicaragua." We too hope that all member and observer states to the OAS, including this will do what is in their power to pressure the Nicaraguan government and help the Nicaraguan people in this time of need.

We thank you for your solidarity and invitation to speak with you here today. Que viva Nicaragua libre!