

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

**Hearing
on
The Evolving Human Rights Crisis in Nicaragua**

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STATEMENT SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Submitted by:

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Introduction

My name is Ligia Gómez, Nicaraguan and former employee of the Central Bank of Nicaragua (BCN). I have a doctorate in economics and graduated from the University of Córdoba-Spain. The majority of my career has been devoted to doing research on poverty reduction and governance of natural resources issues in order to inform policy makers. I did this work first as a staff member of the Research and Development Institute Nitlapán at the Universidad Centroamericana UCA (1995 to 2012) and later as the Manager of the BCN (2012 – 2018).

I have decided to speak out about the current crisis in Nicaragua because it not only affects me personally, but it is dividing and destroying my country. There are too many young people dying and afraid to walk freely on the streets just because they do not agree with the government. Too many mothers have lost their children or have had to flee. According to the Report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, more than 300 people have been killed and more than 2,000 injured between April 18 and August 18. Now the number of people killed has increased to more than 400. I believe my testimony will help explain that the problem in Nicaragua is not a soft coup against the FSLN orchestrated by the right. The problem is that we live under a dictatorship that kills, imprisons and exiles those who demonstrate against it. My testimony is relevant because having been a government employee and having held a political position of trust, I am able to explain how the government apparatus works to perpetuate Ortega's regime.

The Political Secretaries and the Government Apparatus

In 2012 I was invited by Alberto Guevara, President of the BCN, to be part of his team in a joint project with the United Nations. The project's goal was to develop a proposal for public policies to achieve the U.N. Millennium Development Goals, with the participation of different ministries. In 2013, at the

request of the President of the BCN, I was also appointed Deputy Political Secretary of the Sandinista Leadership Council (CLS). As time passed, my technical and political roles evolved. I was transferred to the Economic Research Division of the BCN where I was later promoted to manager. In addition, the new (and current) president of the BCN, Mr. Ovidio Reyes Ramirez, appointed me as the Political Secretary of the CLS, a position I held from 2014 until April 2018 when I opposed the government repressive measures.

The Political Secretary is a position of trust that serves as the liaison between government institutions and the FSLN. All public institutions have two Political Secretaries appointed with the purpose of mobilizing support and militancy. These officials represent their institutions in the meetings convened by the Political Secretary of Managua, Fidel Antonio Moreno Briones. Mr. Moreno Briones is a trusted man of the presidential couple Ortega Murillo and has been recently sanctioned by the Magnitsky Act for directing acts of violence committed by the Sandinista Youth and pro-government armed groups.

As a Political Secretary representing the BCN, I could not make independent decisions. I received orders from the President of the BCN and from Moreno Briones, who came to the meetings to assign tasks and logistical support for the public institutions to carry out political activities for the FSLN. We received memorandums written by the "Compañera" Rosario Murillo that we had to circulate among the party militants. These memorandums typically include President Ortega's sons as first recipients, followed by ministers and ambassadors.

My specific roles as a Political Secretary were summoning and mobilizing the BCN coordinators, who then organized BCN employees to participate in mandatory activities. These activities were as diverse as conducting house to house visits to control mosquitos' breeding grounds, participating in mass events convened by the Government, or distributing meals to voting stations during electoral periods. For these political activities, the BCN and other public institutions provided vehicles to transport employees, for example, or to take people from their homes to the polling stations during elections.

The administrative division of the BCN has the approval of the President and the General Manager, to provide food, transportation, travel expenses and an incentive of C\$400 Córdobas (US\$12 dollars) to each employee for his/her participation at each event. These payments are cumulative and are disbursed twice a year as "Productive Bonuses" for participating in the "social outreach" of the BCN. Likewise, each government institution assumes the responsibility to contribute to political activities without identifying institutional symbols, and provide sound equipment, dais, fuel, chauffeurs, travel expenses and food.

Before each election, the Political Secretaries met with Mr. Lumberto Campbell, current President of the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), and with Mr. Gustavo Porras, President of the National Assembly. At those meetings it was ordered that all public employees must vote. They argued that they could figure out whether someone voted. To prove it during the meeting, they randomly asked for the ID of a Political Secretary to check if he had gone to vote or not and how many elections he had participated. After the elections, the president of the BCN ordered the verification of those who had voted and to retaliate against those who had not gone to vote.

The Facts: The Beginning of the Open Repression

On April 17, 2018, a group of elderly people went out to protest against the social security reform. The police attacked and beat the elders despite the fact that they were protesting peacefully. This generated anger among the population, and on Tuesday, April 18, another group, mostly students went out to demonstrate in support of the elderly. They too were attacked by armed motorcycle groups. According to the coordinator of the Sandinista Youth (JS) in the BCN, the motorized attackers were workers of the Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security (INSS) that deliver mail, and the government uses them in these attacks. That day I was driving home from work when I stopped at the shopping center "Camino de Oriente." I saw a group of mostly young people who had gathered there and were preparing to protest. When I realized they had been attacked by the police and armed mobs, I could not believe it; it was definitely a disproportioned use of violence against a small group of peaceful demonstrators. Little did I know this was just the beginning of a human rights crisis.

On April 19, all the Political Secretaries, the Sandinista Youth coordinators, and the trade union secretaries, were summoned in the auditorium of the Japanese Park. At the entrance, officials scanned all participants' IDs and Moreno Briones forbid people from recording the meeting and ordered all the cell phones to be turned off. The purpose of the meeting was to organize the response to the street protests. Moreno Briones had a clear message: "We must defend the revolution no matter what; we will not allow them to steal the revolution". The implication was that all forms of repression would be implemented.

On the same day, the BCN President, who was in Washington D.C. attending the Spring Meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank Group, phoned me at 9:00 p.m. He asked me to explain what was happening in Nicaragua. I described to him all of what I had witnessed the previous two days and expressed my honest opinion, that I did not believe that repression was right or productive and that these measures were only provoking more unrest in the people. I asked him to convey this message to the FSLN authorities because he is in a higher position in the Government and has access to them. However, he only insisted that I tell him what "orders" we had received; I replied that Moreno Briones told us "We must defend the Revolution no matter what", to which the President replied, "there is nothing to discuss then, just to obey, no matter what". He also ordered me to make a black list of the employees who were opposing the government's actions, stating that he would fire them. I ignored this order because I would have been the first one in such a list. I argued that people were not sharing their views and I was unable to identify their positions.

On April 20, the Party asked the Sandinista Youth to send young government employees to guard the headquarters of the Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security (INSS) along with some members of the Sandinista Leadership Council. Their presence was needed to prevent people from protesting outside the INSS. In addition, we were ordered to place government employees in different parts of Managua permanently, 24 hours a day. The BCN was assigned a place on a suburban roundabout. On April 21, we settled in the afternoon and took a shift for the weekend. That day I gave a co-worker a ride home when I noticed barricades everywhere and saw people on the streets beating pots and pans. I feared there could be confrontation, and, in order to protect my employees, I called for them to leave their post at the roundabout and not to do the surveillance shifts allocated for the weekend.

My fears proved to be true. The weekend of the April 21 was terrifying. The protests intensified and equally the government repression. We all watched with horror on Facebook live and on television as

the government attacked the students; we watched people being wounded or killed. Through social media we learned about young people being injured and how the government did not allow the ambulances and doctors to assist them. By the end of that weekend more than 20 people had been killed and dozens had been injured, mostly youth. I returned to the office on Monday, but I was in shock, I felt morally and physically ill, because I could not support a government that was killing its people and I did not want to be complicit in that. It was something I had never expected to happen again in my country, after having lived during the Somoza dictatorship.

On Monday, April 23, we were summoned again to the meeting of Political Secretaries at the mayor's office in Managua. To that meeting Moreno Briones came with men who had come out on television directing attacks on the occupied INSS¹ years early. They played a video that according to them, showed that what we had seen in the news those days was not true, that everything was staged, that there was no violence. They studied our reactions while we watched the video. We were told that the protesters were not students, that they were gangs who had taken advantage of the situation to generate chaos. Similarly, at another meeting, we were directed not to watch television channels that were not from the government, because everything was a media manipulation and we would get confused. Lumberto Campbell, President of the Supreme Electoral Council said at that meeting that he forbade his wife to look at those news channels, that we should do the same with our families so they would not get confused as well. In addition, we public employees were ordered to pray for peace each evening, in front of the government buildings.

On Tuesday, April 24, I asked for two days off. I felt I needed to reflect and process the situation; however, my request was denied because the BCN President had returned to the country and wanted me to be in a meeting with him, the Party coordinators, the Sandinista Youth, and the BCN Union. At that meeting the President said: *"Let no one worry because the power is secure, the political parties are uncoordinated, there is no real opposition, we know that we should not touch the youth or the elderly, but this happened, and we must move forward."*

Resignation and Retaliation

As days passed, my discontent grew. I started to consider quitting my position as a Political Secretary even though I knew I would probably be fired from the BCN as well. On Wednesday, 25 April I was on my way to work when I was ordered to send people from the BCN to guard the Hugo Chavez roundabout, with other government institutions. The BCN would take the night shift. That was it for me and I refused to send anyone from the BCN because I did not want to endanger my employees. The BCN President was upset with my decision and ordered me to comply. I told him to remove me from the Political Secretary position because I was not going to mobilize people. I did not want to be responsible if something happened to my employees. That was the last time the BCN President addressed me directly. At that moment he called a meeting and appointed another person to replace me as Political Secretary. He immediately sent someone from the administration to get my work cell phone, and

¹ Occupied INSS was a group of elders and students that in 2013 were demanding the right to a minimum pension when workers did not fulfill all requirements to access a regular old age pension. In protest, they occupied for several days the outskirts of the INSS until they were violently evicted by Sandinistas mobs.

blocked my access to all institutional mails, including purely technical communications I received as a Manager of the Economic Research Division.

After that I suffered institutional marginalization. I could not even go to the BCN dining room because the employees stopped talking to me, some for being members of the Party who considered me a traitor and others for fear of retaliation for talking to me. I did not leave my office to avoid any problems; I was hopeful that, if they realized that I did not cause problems they would leave me alone. I was trying to keep my job as a manager because I need to support my family and pay for the education of my daughters. I was still able to attend managers meetings, where the BCN President continued to express his support for the repression, saying things like: "everybody grabs their dead and continues living normally, all governments do the same thing, but only this country is criticized." For the next few months I continued working as a manager, keeping a low profile. However, on July 17th, I was called by the human resources manager who informed me that the BCN President was canceling my contract as manager of the Economic Research Division. She suggested I submit my resignation so I would not lose my severance pay. I took that last option and withdrew immediately from the BCN.

The death threats started in August. I began to receive them via email messages, cell phone messages and *Messenger*, calling me a traitor and an infiltrator. One of the threats said "*Damn traitor, you thought the Commander was going to leave, but you're wrong, the Commander will stay until 2021 and longer. You're a traitor and you're going to pay, we're going to eliminate you along with all the coup-mongers of the Right.*" These threats have generated a lot of fear in my family. Our life has changed dramatically. I was afraid to walk in the streets or go anywhere with my daughters since someone may try to attack or kills us. My relatives have also received threats and some friends have been declared terrorists. Fearful for our safety and our lives, my family and I came to the Washington Metropolitan area to visit until the situation in Nicaragua improves.

I am sharing my testimony with the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission to create awareness of the Nicaraguan crisis, which has become not only a political crisis but a humanitarian crisis as well. I want to request support for my fellow Nicaraguans who are protesting the Ortega-Murillo regime and are being persecuted and killed. We all aspire to a democratic Nation that respect human rights. The support of the international community is key to achieving this goal.

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