

**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 Victoria Cárdenas**  
Wife of Presidential Candidate and  
Political Prisoner Juan Sebastián Chamorro

Good afternoon. Thank you, Chairman McGovern, Chairman Smith, and distinguished members, for the opportunity to testify before the Lantos Human Rights Commission regarding the situation in Nicaragua. While the situation in Nicaragua has been dire for the last three years, the situation has deteriorated dramatically in the last six weeks. We urgently need the international community's help.

My name is Victoria Cárdenas. I appear before you today as a wife and a mother. I did not choose a life of politics or activism. But the circumstances in my country have given me no choice but to stand up and speak out against the oppression of the Ortega regime, which has detained and disappeared my husband, Juan Sebastian Chamorro, and more than 25 opposition activists in the last month.

Our lives were turned upside-down on June 8. That afternoon, Juan received a summons to appear at the prosecutor's office for an interview on June 9, the following day. Later that evening, around 7:00, eight police patrol cars entered our neighborhood, and more than 40 armed agents began to jump over the wall to our property. They were so forceful and almost broke the gate trying to enter. As soon as they arrived, Juan put his hands above his head. They arrested him and took him in one of their patrol cars. Just like that, he was gone.

We have not heard from him or had any contact with him in 43 days.

For the next four hours, the police – armed with weapons – searched our home. I told them over and over: I will cooperate, I do not want violence. They

catalogued everything in our home and took whatever they could find: papers, notebooks, computers, electronic devices, etc. It was so inhuman.

Since Juan's arrest, the Ortega regime has systematically violated all of his rights. The cases of Juan, Berta Valle's husband Félix, and the other political prisoners are remarkably similar. We have identified at least 10 violations of international law in their cases. Ortega has completely eliminated any due process rights and manipulated Nicaragua's justice system to maintain his grip on power.

- First, both men were arrested without warrants. Our homes were also searched without warrants.
- Second, both men were disappeared – taken into custody to unknown locations without any legal basis whatsoever.
- Third, both men have been held without being able to access their counsel since they were detained over one month ago.
- Fourth, both men are being held without being able to have family access them at their place of detention. In fact, while we have heard rumors, the government has not even confirmed where they are being detained.
- Fifth, neither was brought promptly before a judge and allowed to challenge the lawfulness of their detentions.
- Sixth, neither was given a fair and public hearing.
- Seventh, the judges they were brought before were neither independent nor impartial – they simply did Ortega's bidding.
- Eighth, both Félix and Juan Sebastián were presumed guilty rather than innocent, as is required by law, by being sentenced to 90 days in jail despite having never been convicted of a crime. Both President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo also referred to all the detained opposition leaders as “terrorists” and “criminals,” which constitutes illegal interference with their cases because it puts pressure on the judiciary to convict them.

- Ninth, by being held disappeared and held extra-legally, both men are being subjected to cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment which constitutes a form of torture.
- And tenth, they are being subjected to arbitrary detention because there is, in fact, absolutely no legal basis for them to be detained.

Since I met my husband over 30 years ago, he has always fought for Nicaragua. He has always wanted to be involved in improving his country, contributing to its economic and social development, so that all Nicaraguans can live prosperous and peaceful lives of dignity. My husband is a peaceful and honest man, but Daniel Ortega feels threatened by him because he dares to speak out against the regime's oppression.

For Juan's activism, 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.

It is very clear that this regime will target anyone who speaks out against it, as they have done with presidential candidates, student activists, journalists, businesspeople, labor leaders, and others. And, in turn, I will keep raising my voice until Juan and Felix and the other political prisoners are released.

I never thought that I would be here in Washington to testify before Members of Congress. When my husband decided to run for the presidency, I pledged to support him, but I never expected *I* would be the one speaking on his behalf. But the events of the last few weeks have shown that we must do all we can to save democracy in Nicaragua. As a wife, mother, and proud Nicaraguan, I must do my part.

And so I am here to appeal to you, honorable members of this Commission, to join us in demanding that the Ortega regime release our husbands and all the political prisoners in Nicaragua. Stand in solidarity with us, but also raise your voices and use your power to ensure that the world remains focused on the crisis Nicaragua. The greatest fear of any political prisoner is to be forgotten. Please make sure that

our husbands – and the 140 other political prisoners of Daniel Ortega – are not forgotten.

I thank you and I look forward to this discussion.