

## Statement on the Deteriorating Status of Religious Freedom in Nicaragua

---

April 2024

We, the undersigned, convey our tremendous disquiet regarding the Nicaraguan government's arbitrary detention and unjust sentencing of pastors and religious leaders, the most recent and unnerving of which unfolded over the past few months targeting 11 evangelical pastors associated with the Christian ministry Mountain Gateway. These recent developments illustrate the escalating deterioration of religious freedom conditions under President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosaria Murillo.

Mountain Gateway has a decade-long altruistic reputation of serving the citizens of Nicaragua "through discipleship, church planting, feeding and clothing those in need, providing food, water, equipment, and recovery assistance during natural disasters, and sharing the gospel of Jesus". After ten years of operation, including its hosting of eight mass gospel campaigns throughout 2023 with the collaboration of Nicaraguan government actors, Mountain Gateway was blindsided by the sudden news in December that their ministry's registration had been revoked amidst absurd allegations of money laundering. Maintaining documentation of their funding, accounting, and financial reviews conducted by the Nicaraguan government, Mountain Gateway was confident that the charges would be discarded.<sup>1</sup> Regrettably, concerns were reignited with the arrest of eleven associated pastors - Harry Lening Rios Bravo; Álvaro Daniel Escobar Caldera; Orvin Alexis Moncada Castellano; Manuel de Jesús Ríos Flores; Marcos Sergio Hernández Jirón; César Facundo Burgalin Miranda; Juan Luis Moncada; Warner Omier Blandón Ochoa; Maricela de Fátima Mejía Ruiz; José Luis Orozco Urrutia; and Juan Carlos Chavarría Zapata - and the unfounded charges of money laundering and organized crime imposed upon the clergy and three affiliated US citizens - Jon Britton Hancock, Jacob Britton Hancock, and Cassandra Mae Hancock.<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding encouragement from Nicaraguan legal counsel to trust the judicial proceedings, and reassurances that their case would be handled in conformity with standards of due process, Mountain Gateway has reported that the detained clergy were denied family contact and that the group's appointed lawyer has not been provided with documentation essential for preparation of a robust defense. In March in the most disdainful and impersonal manner, the court prohibited the defendants from appearing physically in court and delivered its verdict over livestream, convicting the 11 pastors and sentencing each to prison terms ranging from 12 to 15 years.<sup>3</sup> The court also unceremoniously slapped each pastor with an incomprehensible 80 million USD fine. Domestically, the defendants' attorney has filed an appeal; meanwhile, Mountain Gateway representatives based in the United States have condemned the reprehensible court decision and have expressed the ministry's intention to exhaust all avenues for legal remedy.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mountain Gateway, [Nicaragua Update: December 22, 2023](#).

<sup>2</sup> Mountain Gateway, [Nicaragua Update: January 19, 2024](#), "Mountain Gateway addresses recent allegations from the Nicaraguan government against three U.S. citizens and 11 Nicaraguan Mountain Gateway pastors".

<sup>3</sup> Mountain Gateway, [Nicaragua Update: March 28, 2024](#), "Nicaraguan Government Convicts 11 Nicaraguan Evangelical Mountain Gateway Pastors and Charged Almost 1 Billion USD in Fines".

In light of these disconcerting developments, the undersigned organizations welcome a recent letter issued by four United States senators - Rick Scott; Ted Cruz; Tommy Tuberville; and Katie Britt - imploring the Biden administration to "implement strong, targeted sanctions" upon the Nicaraguan government for its religious freedom violations which have exponentially intensified in recent years under the leadership of President Daniel Ortega.<sup>4</sup> We additionally reiterate the importance of United States House Resolution 6954 - Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights in Nicaragua Act of 2024 - introduced in January 2024 by House representatives Chris Smith and María Elvira Salazar.<sup>5</sup>

The increasing mobility among United States government representatives to hold the Nicaraguan government accountable for religious freedom violations signals a coordinated response to upwards of five years of evidence that President Ortega's regime has specifically targeted the Catholic Church for acting as a sanctuary for political protesters and vocally criticizing the government's repression of democratic rights. Following the outbreak of multiple demonstrations specifically against Nicaraguan authorities' controversial changes to the national social security system in 2018, a more widespread social movement commenced which outwardly condemned President Ortega's governance as a whole. While security forces and pro-government vigilantes violently attacked protesters, the Catholic Church offered demonstrators assistance in the form of shelter, food donations, and medical care for wounded activists.<sup>6</sup> Clergy who were horrified by the government's barbaric treatment towards its own citizens and the shrinking of civic space began to incorporate these unsettling observations and their justified criticisms of the government into church sermons, expressing their solidarity with the nation's people fighting for a free Nicaragua.

Over the past five years, Ortega's government has viciously sought to settle scores with the Catholic Church, arresting priests, expelling missionaries, shutting down church-run public services, and revoking the licenses of Catholic universities. Throughout this campaign, the president and vice president repeatedly and disgustingly defames religious leaders, calling them "terrorists", "coup mongers", "sons of the devil", and "fake shepherds".<sup>7</sup> Bishop Rolando Álvarez, Father Óscar Benavides, Bishop Isidoro del Carmen Mora Ortega, and many others have been arrested and face fraudulent charges such as treason and/or conspiracy to undermine national security; Álvarez and Benavides have since been released from prison and exiled to the Vatican in 2024 and the United States in 2023, respectively.<sup>8</sup> The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has had to extend protective measures to religious leaders including Bishop Abeldardo Mata and Father Edwing Roman who have been on the receiving end of harassment and death threats by state actors and pro-Ortega groups in response to the clerics' condemnations of the

---

<sup>4</sup> ["Sen. Rick Scott, Colleagues Call on Biden to Implement Targeted Sanctions on Nicaragua Following Regime's Religious Persecution"](#), 14 March 2024.

<sup>5</sup> ["Press Release: Smith, Salazar introduce new legislation with robust economic sanctions to combat Ortega's crackdown on religious freedom in Nicaragua"](#), 11 January 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Eduardo Berdejo, ["The history behind the persecution of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua"](#), *Catholic News Agency (CNA)*, 12 August 2022. ; Gabriela Selser & María Teresa Hernández, ["EXPLAINER: Tension between Nicaragua and the Catholic Church"](#), *Associated Press*, 14 August 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Associated Press, ["Nicaragua's President Ortega calls bishops 'terrorists'"](#), 4 October 2021. ; Deutsche Welle, ["Ortega slams bishops as allies of 'coup plotters'"](#), 20 July 2018. ; Inés San Martín, ["Nicaragua's vice president calls priests and bishops 'devils'"](#), *Crux Now*, 17 August 2021. ; Al Jazeera, ["Nicaragua leader calls Catholic Church a 'dictatorship'"](#), 29 September 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Ismael Lopez, ["Nicaraguan anti-Ortega bishop under house arrest after pre-dawn raid"](#), *Reuters*, 19 August 2022. ; Gabriela Selser & Christopher Sherman, ["Nicaraguan police detain Catholic bishop, other priests in raid"](#), *PBS*, 19 August 2022. ; Lisa Zengarini, ["Nicaragua: Bishop Álvarez sentenced to 26 years' imprisonment"](#), *Vatican News*, 11 February 2024. ; David Agren, ["Bishop Rolando Álvarez released, exiled from Nicaragua after over 500 days of detention"](#), *Catholic Review*, 15 January 2024. ; CNA, ["Dictatorship in Nicaragua sentences priest critical of the regime to 10 years in prison"](#), 6 February 2023. ; CNA, ["Meet the priest the Nicaraguan dictatorship wants to put away for eight years"](#), 21 January 2023.

government's human rights violations since 2018. Father Roman decided to temporarily flee Nicaragua to Miami due to escalating threats upon his life but decided to extend his stay indefinitely after hearing Vice President Murillo publicly denounce him as a "criminal".<sup>9</sup> Nicaraguan immigration authorities have prohibited both Nicaraguan citizens and foreign missionaries from re-entry, including El Salvadorian Franciscan friars Jose Lemus Aguilar and Santos Fabian Mejia who had traveled freely to and from Nicaragua for service trips for years, and Nicaraguan priests Guillermo Blandón and Juan de Dios Garcia who have both condemned rights violations committed by Ortega's government.<sup>10</sup>

Catholic institutions have similarly been victimized by state-sponsored retaliation campaigns since 2018. In February 2022, the national assembly revoked the legal status of Universidad Católica del Trópico Seco as well as numerous other Catholic charitable services in the Diocese of Estelí, including an organization of parochial schools, a Church-run agricultural learning facility, a local Catholic cultural association, and the diocesan chapter of Caritas Internationalis.<sup>11</sup> In July 2022, the government stripped the legal status of the Missionaries of Charity and ordered police to escort 18 of the organization's nuns across the border into neighboring Costa Rica without permission to return to Nicaragua.<sup>12</sup> The following month in August 2022, authorities shut down six radio stations operated by the Catholic Church, additionally confiscating technological equipment and using tear gas to disperse individuals present at the time of the ambush.<sup>13</sup> Also in August 2022, the congress removed Catholic- and Jesuit-operated Central American University from the National Council of Universities, and one year later the school's assets were formally seized; during the 2018 protests, the university allowed protesters to seek refuge on its campus grounds.<sup>14</sup> By late 2023, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights identified 3,900 non-governmental organizations shut down by government forces on false allegations of "money laundering", in addition to the closure of 20 evangelical churches.<sup>15</sup> Most recently, in April 2024 the government seized the Monastery of Saint Mary of Peace of the Trappist Nuns in San Pedro de Lóvago and transferred its ownership to the Instituto Nicaraguans de Tecnología Agropecuaria.<sup>16</sup>

In light of all of these deplorable actions taken against religious actors, on December 29, 2023, the US Department of State designated Nicaragua as a Country of Particular Concern in its annual list of countries exhibiting particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Specific sanctions are triggered by this designation.

---

<sup>9</sup> Organization of American States & Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, [Resolution 87/2021](#), 5 November 2021. ; Inés San Martín, ["Exiled Nicaraguan priest says Ortega regime is attacking Church"](#), *Crux Now*, 9 June 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Cinthya Torrez, ["Two Franciscans Denied Entry to Nicaragua 'for Denouncing Injustices'"](#), *Confidencial*, 19 February 2021. ; CNA, ["Priest prevented from returning to Nicaragua: It's 'not a crime' to criticize the government"](#), 3 October 2022. ; Confidencial, ["Daniel Ortega regime bans priest and feminist from returning to the country"](#), 16 September 2022.

<sup>11</sup> David Agren, ["Nicaragua revokes legal status of Catholic charities, educational projects"](#), *National Catholic Reporter*, 4 February 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Mike Gonzalez, ["Christianity Under Siege in Nicaragua"](#), *The Heritage Foundation*, 8 August 2022. ; Vanessa Buschschlüter, ["Nicaragua expels Mother Teresa's nuns in latest crackdown"](#), *BBC News*, 7 July 2022. ; Inés San Martín, ["Ortega regime expels Missionaries of Charity from Nicaragua"](#), *Crux Now*, 30 June 2022.

<sup>13</sup> CNA, ["Ortega regime in Nicaragua violently shuts down Catholic radio stations"](#), 2 August 2022. ; Reuters, ["Nicaragua's government shuts one of last opposition radio stations"](#), 12 August 2022. ; National Catholic Register, ["Ortega Regime Shuts Down Another Catholic Radio Station in Nicaragua"](#), 25 August 2022.

<sup>14</sup> David Agren, ["Nicaragua strips funds from Catholic university, ups government control"](#), *Crux Now*, 4 April 2022. ; Kata Karáth, ["Government seizure of Nicaraguan university a blow to science, researchers say"](#), *Science*, 25 August 2023. ; National Catholic Reporter, ["Nicaraguan government seizes University of Central America from Jesuits"](#), 17 August 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos & Organización de los Estados Americanos, ["Cierre del espacio cívico en Nicaragua"](#), 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Massimo Introvigne, ["Trappist Nun Monastery Confiscated by the Regime in Nicaragua"](#), *Bitter Winter*, 24 April 2023.

We, the undersigned, call on the Nicaraguan government to do the following:

- Promptly release the 11 protestant pastors unjustly imprisoned and sentenced and nullify their criminal convictions and exorbitant fines. Any criminal charges brought since 2018 against all clergy, Catholic and Protestant, should be expunged;
- Uphold the principles of religious freedom and refrain from targeting religious institutions and individuals for persecution or harassment. This includes refraining from shutting down churches, closing church-associated public services and civil infrastructure, expelling missionaries without just cause, and detaining religious leaders for exercising their right to freedom of expression;
- Permit exiled citizens and missionaries to re-enter Nicaragua without fear of reprisal or harassment. This ensures that individuals can return to their homes and resume their religious activities without facing punitive measures;
- Investigate and address human rights violations committed against religious leaders and institutions. This includes prosecuting those responsible for harassment, threats, or violence against religious figures;
- Restore the legal status of religious institutions that have been unjustly revoked, such as universities, charitable services, and cultural associations affiliated with the Catholic Church;
- Protect the rights of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to operate freely without fear of retaliation or false allegations. This includes preventing arbitrary shutdowns of NGOs and ensuring that they can carry out their missions without interference;
- Initiate a national dialogue involving government officials, religious leaders, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to address underlying social and political issues and promote reconciliation and peace;
- Immediately halt the use of inflammatory language and rhetoric against religious leaders, institutions, and civil society actors. Such language, including derogatory and defamatory terms, serves to exacerbate tensions, incite violence, and undermine the principles of religious freedom and tolerance.

We additionally urge the international community to:

- Strongly denounce the Nicaraguan government's violations of religious freedom and human rights. This condemnation should be accompanied by efforts aimed at pressuring the Nicaraguan government to respect religious freedom and cease persecution of religious leaders and institutions;
- Exert diplomatic pressure on the Nicaraguan government to uphold its international obligations to respect religious freedom and human rights. This can include issuing

public statements, conducting diplomatic negotiation, and coordinating efforts through multilateral forums such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States;

- Consider imposing targeted sanctions on Nicaraguan government officials responsible for religious persecution and human rights abuses. These sanctions could include travel bans, asset freezes, and other measures designed to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions;
- Offer legal assistance and advocacy support to individuals and faith organizations facing persecution or harassment due to their lawful and humanitarian activities. This can include funding legal defense efforts and advocating for their cases through international legal mechanisms.

### **Organization Signatories:**

*Christian Freedom International*  
*Church in Chains*  
*Freedom Seekers International*  
*Hilfsaktion Maertyrekerche (HMK)*  
*Institute on Religion and Democracy*  
*Jubilee Campaign*  
*Open Doors US*  
*Spirit of Martyrdom International*  
*The Voice of the Martyrs Canada*

---

To sign on or recommend edits, please fill out our Google Form here:

<https://forms.gle/VpkrzVFM5ULFMqbA>

For questions, comments, or concerns, please contact Sydney Kochan, Government Relations and Special Projects Coordinator of Jubilee Campaign USA: [sydneykochan@jubileecampaign.org](mailto:sydneykochan@jubileecampaign.org) or call (703) 503-2260.