

CSW expresses deep gratitude to the Nicaraguans inside the country and those who have been forced into exile who, despite great risk, carried out the firsthand documentation on which much of this report is based.

Executive Summary

In 2024, violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Nicaragua, under the leadership of now co-Presidents Daniel Ortega, his wife, Rosario Murillo, and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), remained severe and numerous. Leaders of different religious groups reported that they were subject to regular harassment and surveillance by the police. Some were placed under what the government referred to as ‘precautionary measures’ and forced to make weekly, in person reports to local police and to share details of their planned activities, and were banned from leaving their municipality without government authorisation. Most public religious activities, including traditional Roman Catholic processions and the Day of the Bible celebrations, observed by both Roman Catholics and Protestants, remained prohibited. Even inside religious buildings, religious activities were subject to overt and covert government monitoring and religious leaders were warned not to speak or pray about specific topics. Preaching about unity or justice or praying for imprisoned religious leaders or even the general situation in the country, for example, can be considered as criticism of the government and treated as a crime. Religious leaders who openly defend human rights, including FoRB, face the possibility of being arbitrarily detained in inhumane conditions and or forced into exile.

CSW recorded 222 separate FoRB cases during the period covered by this report (1 January-31 December 2024).¹ Most cases involved multiple FoRB violations and some affected thousands of people.² Members of religion or belief communities and religious leaders, including both Nicaraguan nationals and individuals holding foreign citizenship, were forcibly exiled by either being forced to exit the country, or prevented from re-entering the country after travel abroad. Religious leaders and members of religion or belief communities were subjected to short- and long-term arbitrary detention in inhumane conditions, in some cases incommunicado. The total number of religious leaders in prison at any one time fluctuated due to the forced exile of numerous political prisoners. Political prisoners are not allowed to receive or have a Bible or other religious literature in prison in violation of the Nelson Mandela Rules (the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners).

The government forcibly shut down hundreds more independent civil society organisations (iCSOs), including religious institutions, arbitrarily stripping them of their legal status, bringing the total number of iCSOs that have been

made illegal to upwards of 5000. The government froze the bank accounts of some groups. In some cases, this led to the closure of the targeted institution, inability to pay staff, or was accompanied by the confiscation of property by the government or the forced exile of members. The authorities also implemented new regulations removing exemptions on religious institutions and iCSOs of a religious nature or linked to a religious group or institution to pay property taxes.

In 2024 the government continued to aggressively prohibit most public manifestations of a religious nature, including outdoor worship services and religious processions. Some religious groups, in particular those aligned with and supportive of the government, were exempt from this prohibition, with permits granted for large scale public events, and the government co-opted some religious festivals and traditions in an attempt to create an illusion of general respect for FoRB. Pro-democracy activists, human rights defenders (HRDs), members of the political opposition, and others considered by the government to be critical of its policies reported harassment and warnings from government security agents to separate themselves from religion or belief communities and to refrain from participation in religious activities.

Recommendations

To the government of Nicaragua:

- Release without condition imprisoned religious leaders and all political prisoners unjustly detained in the country.
- Restore Nicaraguan citizenship to all those, in and outside the country, from whom it has been arbitrarily removed.
- Reinstate the legal status of all civil society organizations which have been arbitrarily made illegal; and unfreeze the bank accounts of universities, non-governmental organizations and religious groups throughout the country.
- Cease the collection of taxes from religious institutions previously exempt under Article 5 of Executive Decree 3-95 on Real Estate Tax.
- Allow international human rights bodies, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UN Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (GHREN) and relevant Special Procedures unhindered access to Nicaragua.
- Uphold, in law and in practice, guarantees to fundamental human rights, including FoRB for all, in line with the constitution and the International Covenant

¹ This number is lower than the previous year, in part because it covers a 12-month period rather than a 14-month period, but also because a number of CSW on the ground documenters had to stop their work due to threats, arbitrary detention and forced exile. It should not be interpreted as an improvement in FoRB overall.

² CSW's documentation work relies on the willingness of those affected to share the details of their experiences. In the current climate of fear, a significant percentage of violations goes unreported.

on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which the State is party.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Support the OHCHR and GHREN in monitoring and reporting on the situation of human rights in Nicaragua and maintain pressure on the government to promote and protect human rights, including the right to FoRB, in accordance with the ICCPR.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to FoRB in their reporting on Nicaragua, addressing the vulnerabilities and violations faced by religion or belief communities and those seeking to defend them.
- Monitor reports of arbitrary detention and call on Nicaragua to protect all persons from arbitrary detention and guarantee the right to a fair trial.
- Ensure fair and efficient access to identification, referral, and status determination procedures to those deprived of their nationality or forced to leave Nicaragua.

To the European Union and Member States:

- In keeping with the European Parliament's resolution of 15 June 2023, consider adding new individuals to the EU sanctions list already imposed on human rights violators in Nicaragua, and to include Daniel Ortega and his inner circle.
- Facilitate and ease mobility (including visas) for human rights defenders and other persons at risk, and support countries in the region hosting significant numbers of migrants, including Costa Rica, in keeping with the European Parliament's resolution of 15 June 2023.
- Following Nicaragua's unilateral decision to sever diplomatic relations with the Netherlands, remaining European diplomats should continue to raise human rights issues in the country, to monitor trials, and to visit political prisoners, including religious leaders.
- As provided for in Article 56(3b) of the EU-Central America Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA), and in Article 355 of the EU-Central America Association Agreement, call for an urgent meeting with the Nicaraguan authorities concerning their violations of essential elements of the agreements (detailed in Article 1 of both). The EU's representation at this forum should include the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, and the EU Special Envoy for FoRB outside the EU - who may also consider, separately, formally requesting a visit to the country.

To the government of the United States of America:

- The State Department should continue to closely monitor FoRB in Nicaragua and maintain the country as a Country of Particular Concern, setting benchmarks for the country to meet before being removed from the list.
- The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and the US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), should request invitations

to visit Nicaragua to meet freely with independent civil society and with unhindered access to all parts of the country.

- Identify Nicaraguans, including government officials, members of paramilitary groups and others including members of neighbourhood Citizen Power Councils and pro-government activists directly responsible for FoRB violations and include them on a visa ban list.
- Ensure that cases of Nicaraguans seeking asylum in the United States are fairly and carefully evaluated and that officers responsible for reviewing these are fully informed of the human rights situation in the country.

Background

The Constitution of the Republic of Nicaragua stipulates in Article 69 of Chapter III on Social Rights, in Title IV Rights and Guarantees of the Nicaraguan people, that all people, individually or collectively, have the rights to express their religious beliefs in private or in public, through worship, practices and teaching. No one is permitted to fail to observe the laws or prevent others from exercising their rights and fulfilling their duties, by invoking religious beliefs or provisions.

Daniel Ortega has held power in Nicaragua since 2007. He was re-elected president in 2021 and inaugurated on 10 January 2022; Rosario Murillo, Ortega's wife, serves as vice president. The FSLN controls the country's legislative body, the National Assembly. Ortega first held presidency between 1985 and 1990. He won the presidential election in 2006 and since taking office in 2007, power has been consolidated around the presidency. Members of the opposition have been barred from participating in the political process, and have been threatened, arbitrarily detained, and forced into exile. In 2014, the FSLN abolished presidential term limits.

In 2018, protests took place across the country in reaction to government modifications to the pension system for the elderly. Roman Catholic Church leaders attempted to mediate between the government and protesters, but, after the church leaders' refusal to deny aid to demonstrators in need and because some clergy had expressed for the protesters, these efforts broke down. Around this time, the government initiated a media campaign against the Roman Catholic Church and its leadership, attacking churches and other places of worship, including the main cathedral in Managua, the country's capital. Hundreds of protesters were killed by state forces. Many more were wounded or imprisoned.

Protestant churches in general were less likely to publicly voice support for the protesters, likely out of fear. However, many individual Protestants were involved in the protests, including students at the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua, which is affiliated with the Baptist Convention of Nicaragua. Protestant leaders who voiced messages the authorities considered to be critical experienced swift retaliation at the hands of the government.

In 2020 a Special Cybercrime Law introduced penalties of up to ten years' imprisonment for anyone posting news online deemed by the government to be 'false'. This followed measures taken against the independent media including a customs limit on ink and paper in 2018, which led to the 2019 closure of the 40-year-old "*El Nuevo Diario*," one of the newspapers most critical of the government. In a post on X (formerly Twitter) on 16 October 2023, the Centre for Inter-American Legal Assistance in Human Rights (CALIDH) alleged that individuals were being harassed by the National Police (PN), with agents identifying themselves as part of the 'intelligence'.³ Those affected, who were likely targeted because they had been deemed by the government to be critical and therefore dangerous, told CALIDH that they were offered prison or exile.

In November 2021, Ortega was elected to a fourth consecutive term in an election process marred by months of government repression and the arrest of political opponents. International condemnation was swift. On 12 November 2021, a resolution was adopted at the 51st regular session of the General Assembly of the Organisation of American States (OAS) stating that the presidential elections had 'no democratic legitimacy.' In response, on 19 November 2021, the government announced its withdrawal from the OAS.

The Permanent Council of the OAS adopted a second resolution on the human rights situation in Nicaragua in a special meeting held on 8 December 2021, which recalled all previous resolutions made since 2018 expressing grave concern about the deterioration of democratic conditions and urged the government 'to urgently and as a first step, release all political prisoners.' It also called for 'the immediate return of international human rights bodies, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights,' which were expelled from the country in 2018.

In 2022, the United States State Department announced the designation of Nicaragua as a country of particular concern (CPC) in regard to FoRB. This designation was renewed in 2022 and 2023.

Over the past few years, thousands of iCSOs have been stripped of their legal status and seen their associated properties confiscated. In October 2023, the government reformed Article 165 of the Political Constitution of Nicaragua, removing powers held by the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ), to supervise the administrative functioning of the Public Registries of Real Estate and Commercial Property, to appoint Public Registrars, as well as to sanction them for disciplinary offenses. The law now mandates that all public records held by the National Registry System (SINARE) be transferred to the Attorney General's Office (PGR). These

reforms and the new law streamlined the ability of the government to confiscate property.

A study⁴ by the AmericasBarometer⁵ noted a 20% jump in the number of Nicaraguan adults reporting emigration plans and estimated that approximately one in four (23%) Nicaraguans are considering emigration in the near future. While it is difficult to obtain exact figures, as of the end of September 2024, US Border Control reported authorising travel for 96,000 Nicaraguans under a humanitarian parole programme introduced by the US in January 2023.⁶ Nicaraguans have also fled to other countries including Canada, Costa Rica, Honduras and Mexico, and several countries in Europe.

There have been a series of forced deportations of political prisoners who were freed on the condition they go into exile. In February 2023, 222 political prisoners were deported to the United States. Subsequent large-scale deportations of political prisoners including imprisoned religious leaders took place in October 2023, January 2024 (in which Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos was released and sent to Rome), August 2024 and September 2024.

Precautionary Measures

One of the most concerning developments of 2024 was the imposition of what the Nicaraguan government refers to as 'precautionary measures' on religious leaders.

On Tuesday 27 August police officers led by Captain Wilber Montenegro Martínez arrived at the rectory of the Nuestra Señora de Fátima Parish, where they proceeded to interrogate and take photos of Father Luis Eduardo Benavides. The priest was informed that going forward, the police would visit every Tuesday to interview him and take his picture, and that he is not permitted to leave the municipality without police authorization. They noted that the precautionary measures were the result of an order from Managua. The priest fled to Honduras in the early hours of the following day.

Over the year, CSW received nine additional reports of Roman Catholic priests being subjected to precautionary measures. In each case, the priest was first detained and interrogated by police. They were assigned a specific local police officer and ordered to report to the officer on a weekly basis to have their photo taken and to submit plans for their weekly activities. Restrictions on their freedom of movement were also imposed, with prohibitions placed on their ability to leave their municipality without obtaining prior permission from the authorities. Some reported that they were warned that if they did not obey the terms of the precautionary measures, they would be detained or exiled.

³ X, Calidh @Calidhorg, 16 October 2023 <https://x.com/Calidhorg/status/1714021008263270545>

⁴ 'Pulse of Democracy', LAPOP Lab - Vanderbilt University, 2023 <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ab2023/AB2023-Pulse-of-Democracy-final-20231127.pdf>

⁵ The AmericasBarometer is a periodic study run by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University, which gathers data on trends and opinions in 34 countries in the Western Hemisphere.

⁶ U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 'CBP Releases September 2023 Monthly Update', 21 October 2023 <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/cbp-releases-september-2023-monthly-update>

Freedom of Assembly

Over the period covered by this report, one of the most commonly reported FoRB violations were those involving the arbitrary cancellation of religious events, activities or services. The National Police (PN) continued to forcibly prohibit public religious processions outside their respective physical buildings. This included maintaining a moratorium on traditional public marches by Roman Catholics and Protestants in celebration of the Spanish Bible Translation Day in September.

On 22 February the PN informed Father Yalmer Aragón, parish priest of the San Sebastian Church in Acoyapa Municipality, Chontales, that Roman Catholics in the city and surrounding rural communities would not be permitted to hold their traditional celebration of the Stations of the Cross in public. One month later, on 23 March, the PN stopped members of the same church from setting up a platform in front of the church in preparation for a religious vigil, which was subsequently held inside a corridor of the curate's house. CSW sources said that Holy Week activities, limited to the property of the church, were subjected to intrusive PN surveillance, and that other parishes in Chontales reported identical experiences.

Similarly, on 7 May the PN closed all access to the Our Lady of Cuapa Sanctuary where celebrations for the 44th anniversary of the Roman Catholic Marian apparitions were set to take place. The PN blocked the roads forcing individuals, many of whom had travelled from all over the country to participate, to return home.

Traditional masses for the deceased held in cemeteries on 2 November (All Souls Day) were cancelled in various parts of the country by the authorities. In at least one case, the local authorities took over the chapel where the religious ceremony was meant to take place and set up a vaccination station.

Protestant Christians were also affected. In mid-Spring, members of a church in northern Nicaragua gathered in the early hours of the morning to pray before a planned baptism celebration in a local river. At around 9am, PN officers, led by a high-ranking official, entered the church and ordered all those present to remain inside the church building or be arrested. The baptism did not take place.

The government targeted public activities held by religious groups, even when the activity in question was not religious in nature. In October, Captain Neydi Vanesa Gaitan Bustos ordered parishioners of the San Miguelito Church in San Miguelito, Rio San Juan to shut down a bake sale that had been set up in front of the church. Those who had assembled there were forced to return home with the donated food, which was meant to help raise funds to repair the church's roof.

Arbitrary Cancellation of Legal Status

The government continued its targeting of independent civil society organisations, including those of a religious nature or affiliated with a religious group, stripping hundreds more of their legal status. Those affected included religious orders, churches, entire Protestant denominations, schools, religious radio and television outlets, and faith-based charities. The legal cancellations have had a devastating effect on the ability of both domestic and international organisations of a religious nature, or with historical links to a religious group, to operate in the country.

Scores of Protestant churches, the Nicaraguan Evangelical Alliance, and the Latino-Islamic Cultural Association, were among 169 civil society organisations whose legal status was cancelled by the Nicaraguan government in an announcement on 29 August 2024. The Ministry of the Interior (MINT) published a list of the cancelled organisations, 92 of which were religious in nature, in the Official Daily Gazette.⁷ This followed the cancellation of the legal status of 1,651 civil society organisations earlier the same month,⁸ bringing the total number of organisations that had arbitrarily lost their legal status since 2018 to 5,552.

Among the organisations that had their legal status cancelled were two of the most historic Protestant denominations in the country: the Episcopal Church of Nicaragua, which belongs to the Global Anglican Communion, and which has had a presence in the region since 1612, and the Moravian Church of Nicaragua, which was established in Nicaragua in 1847. Churches affiliated with both denominations were affected by the cancellation, including Episcopal and Moravian churches in Bluefields in the South Caribbean Autonomous Region. Both churches led long running educational efforts in the majority indigenous and Afro-descendent populated region and operated schools in the area. A third historic church in the capital, the First Baptist Church of Managua, founded in 1917, and which operated schools, a seminary, a hospital, and a radio station, also saw its legal status cancelled. The Latino-Islamic Cultural Association had been legally recognised in Nicaragua since 12 May 2020 and maintained a mosque in Managua where the Muslim community in the capital regularly gathered.

While most legal cancellations were announced in the Official Daily Gazette, some organisations received only verbal notification of the loss of their status. In October, a Roman Catholic group providing humanitarian assistance in central Nicaragua was verbally informed by the departmental chief of police that their legal status had been cancelled. They were ordered to immediately shut down their work and close their doors.

Although the government announced that all property associated with the cancelled organisations, including buildings, land and furniture, would be transferred to the

⁷ La Gaceta - No. 160 (Spanish), 29 August 2024 <https://www.lagaceta.gob.ni/la-gaceta-no-160-jueves-29-de-agosto-de-2024/>

⁸ CSW, 'CSW condemns mass closure of civil society organisations', 27 August 2024 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2024/08/27/press/6301/article.htm>

government,⁹ it does not appear that it followed through with the threat in any uniform way. Some of the cancelled religious groups reportedly negotiated agreements with the government to continue operating despite their loss of legal status. There is concern that such groups, lacking any legal protections, will now be especially vulnerable to government pressure.

Arbitrary Detention

CSW documented 46 cases of arbitrary detention of religious leaders over the year. Some of the cases involved the detention of multiple individuals. While some of the detentions were short term – lasting hours to a few days – some are ongoing. In at least two of the cases, the victims, Carmen María Sáenz Martínez, age 49, and Lesbia del Socorro Gutiérrez Poveda, age 58, have been held incommunicado with no proof of life provided to their families.

Police in two patrol cars arrested Mrs Gutiérrez Poveda at 8am on 10 August at the Guadalupe Farm in Samulali, San Ramón Municipality. Mrs Sáenz Martínez was detained and taken from her home in Lomas de San Thomas, Matagalpa City at 6am the same day by two police units comprising 15 officers wearing ski masks and carrying AK-47s. Both women worked with the Matagalpa Diocese, formerly led by the now exiled former political prisoner Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos, which has been a particular target of the government. Mrs Gutiérrez Poveda worked with the diocese's rural and urban credit project since 2006, while Mrs Sáenz Martínez worked as a justice promoter in cases of marriage annulments since 2018. Their families have had no communication with the women and no assurance that they are alive since their detention.

Some detained priests were placed under house arrest. On 26 July at 5pm, Father Frutos Constantino Valle Salmerón, age 79, was arrested by the PN who notified the priest that he lacked authorisation to carry out a three-day priestly ordination for which he was preparing. The priest, who is diabetic and hypertensive became seriously ill as the PN were transporting him to prison. He was left at the National Inter-Diocesan Seminary of Our Lady of Fatima in Managua, where he remains confined under permanent guard. On 2 August, Father Javier Pravia, age 54, and Father Víctor Salvador Godoy Morales, age 72, were arrested at the Immaculate Conception of Mary Parish in Sébaco and likewise transferred to the National Inter-Diocesan Seminary of Our Lady of Fatima where they were placed under house arrest.

Both Protestant Christian and Roman Catholic religious leaders were subjected to short-term detention, in some cases as punishment for the content of their preaching or prayers. This included praying for or mentioning those in prison, or for the situation in Nicaragua, Israel or Venezuela. In one case in autumn, a high ranking PN officer detained a Protestant Christian married couple, both pastors. They

were taken to a maximum-security prison where they were separated and interrogated. Both were subjected to inhumane treatment, including in the case of the wife, of a sexual nature. They were told by the PN that their detention was the consequence of having prayed for Nicaragua and for Israel in their religious services. Following their release, their church was forcibly closed, and they have been prohibited from engaging in any activities of a religious nature.

In another case, a Roman Catholic priest was detained in the summer by a local chief of police after returning from another municipality where he had been visiting a relative. He was released after four hours and told, 'You may go, but be careful about sharing what happened on social media because we will arrest you; and you already know that the mass is always under surveillance, so be very careful with what you say in sermons.' In a third case, a Roman Catholic parishioner was arrested and detained for a few hours after he expressed his discontent with the presence of armed PN officers stationed in front of his church during Mass.

Emblematic Case: Reverend Efrén Antonio Vílchez López

Reverend Efrén Antonio Vílchez López is a Protestant Christian pastor who also manages a family-run funeral home. He is affiliated with the Chapel of the Spirit Ministries Association (MECE) at the International Missionary Centre Chapel of the Spirit and was well known for working cross-denominationally with 111 different churches. He was also frequently sought out by foreign Christian groups to help organise large scale public events. Vílchez López also has a history of criticising the government. During the 2018 demonstrations he published statements condemning the use of violence against protesters. In 2019, after he verbally confronted police officers who routinely surrounded his home, he was severely beaten, resulting in fractures to his hand.

On 15 May 2022 as the pastor was leaving the funeral home where he worked, he was beaten and detained, although he was not told on what charges he was being arrested. Pastor Vílchez López's family members were not given any information as to his whereabouts for three days. The pastor was held at the San Rafael del Sur National Police Station for 15 days and then transferred to La Modelo Maximum Security Prison. During this period, the authorities did not provide the pastor, who is diabetic and hypertensive, with his required daily insulin, leading to a health crisis that resulted in his being sent to a clinic for treatment.

On 21 September 2022 the Third Specialized District Court for Violence in Managua sentenced Pastor Vílchez López to 23 years in prison for the crime of raping a minor with an intellectual disability. The decision was confirmed by the court of appeals on 21 April 2023. The courts refused to consider evidence supporting the pastor's innocence. It should be noted that the Nicaraguan government has a record of using dubious sexual assault cases to charge

⁹ Confidencial, 'Interior continúa con la "barrida" de oenegés evangélicas y gremiales' (Spanish), 29 August 2024 <https://confidencial.digital/nacion/interior-continua-con-la-barrida-de-oeneg-es-evangelicas-y-gremiales/>

religious leaders who have been critical of its actions, including in the case of Bishop José Leonardo Urbina Rodríguez, who in 2022 was sentenced to 30 years in prison on strikingly similar charges.¹⁰

Until July 2024, Pastor Vílchez López was treated as a 'common' prisoner, when he was transferred to a maximum-security cell in the 'Gallery 300' wing of the prison in a de facto recognition of his status as a political prisoner. He was initially held in solitary confinement but is now in a cell with two other men. The cell is small and hot with a hole in the ground to be used for physiological needs. He is not permitted any books and since August 2024 he has been provided with only one small container of water daily. He has been deprived of natural light and fresh air as he is rarely permitted to go outside onto the prison patio. The pastor is regularly subjected to verbal abuse on the part of the prison director and his Bible and his glasses have been confiscated. Prison officials have refused to pass on packages of food and basic supplies, including soap, and medicine for hypertension, blood circulation and other health issues brought by his relatives to the prison every 15 days.

Forced Expulsion

The government continued its drive in 2024 to forcibly expel those deemed critical of government, stripping them of their Nicaraguan citizenship. As in previous years, religious leaders and members of religion and belief communities were among those forced out of the country. Many were political prisoners who were given the choice of remaining in prison or going into immediate forced exile.

On 19 January the government sent 19 imprisoned religious leaders into forced exile. The group included two bishops, Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos and Bishop Isidoro del Carmen Mora Ortega, 14 priests, and two seminarians. In August, nine more priests were sent into forced exile. On Thursday 5 September 135 political prisoners were released and immediately expatriated to Guatemala in an agreement reached between Nicaragua, the United States and a number of other countries. The group included Roman Catholic lay leaders and Protestant pastors associated with the Mountain Gateway organisation and their lawyers.¹¹ US government representatives told CSW that the 135 individuals would have the opportunity to apply for humanitarian parole in the US from Guatemala, or relocation to another country.

At the end of the year, a student and Roman Catholic youth leader, who was forced to continue his studies in another Central American country after the government closed his university in Nicaragua, was prevented from returning to Nicaragua by immigration officials who told him it was because of his involvement in religious youth ministry.

On 11 November Bishop Carlos Enrique Herrera Gutiérrez was detained by police officers after leaving a meeting of the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference in Managua. A few days

earlier he had complained publicly about the government's practice of interfering with the celebration of religious services, calling it sacrilegious. On 13 November, he was taken to the airport under police escort, given a plane ticket and his passport, and ordered to board a plane to Guatemala.

On 1 December Father Floriano Ceferino Vargas, an indigenous Miskito priest, was detained after celebrating mass at the San Martín de Porres Parish in Nueva Guinea, South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region, and sent to Panama. No reason was given by officials for his deportation. Three priests who hold citizenship in other Latin American countries, and at least 25 nuns, both Nicaraguan and foreign nationals, from different religious orders were also ordered to leave the country before the end of the year.

Threats and Harassment

Religious communities and individuals continued to report threats and harassment at the hand of government officials or their surrogates, in the form of pro-government activists and paramilitaries. Many cases involved a combination of both. The infiltration and use of informants in congregations of all types in order to monitor and report on the content of sermons, prayers and other activities was reported frequently by both Protestants and Roman Catholics, indicating that the government views religion or belief communities with increasing suspicion and is actively and systematically monitoring them. Religious leaders of all types reported regularly receiving verbal orders from security officers not to mention specific subjects including political prisoners, Israel, and the general situation in Nicaragua in any of their public discourse and not to use the combination of the colours blue and white (the colours of the Nicaraguan flag) in any decorations or other materials.

CSW received dozens of reports of PN officers regularly establishing a visible and intimidating presence in and outside religious buildings during services. In most of these cases, the officers openly took photos and recorded those present. In one example, early on one Sunday morning in August, PN officers surrounded Roman Catholic churches in multiple municipalities in the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region, and took photos of all of those entering the church to attend Mass. In another, on 6 October, riot police led by Chief of Police Luis Moises Valle Corea surrounded the Nuestra Señora del Rosario Cathedral in Bluefields Municipality, South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region, and maintained a presence until the evening of 7 October, apparently in an attempt to ensure that parishioners did not attempt to hold a procession in honour of the Virgin of Bluefields. 2024 was the third consecutive year that the procession has been prohibited.

Threats were regularly reported in retaliation for statements or other forms of expression perceived as critical by the government. In one example, in August, the pastor of a

¹⁰ The bishop was freed and sent into forced exile in October 2023.

¹¹ ForB in Full, 'Protestant, Catholic, Critic, Ally: No-one is safe in Nicaragua', 21 May 2024 <https://forbinfull.org/2024/05/21/protestant-catholic-critic-ally-no-one-is-safe-in-nicaragua/>

church in Estelí Department was approached by police officers at 7am before the Sunday morning services. They warned him that the authorities did not like his 'tone' in videos broadcast live on social media and threatened him with detention if he did not change it and the content of his sermons to be 'more friendly' to the government. In another case in May, a simple invitation made by the wife of a pastor to PN officers, who were stationed around and at the entrance of a Protestant Evangelical church in Madriz Department, to join the celebration that was taking place inside, was met with aggressive threats of arrest.

Individuals engaging in other types of religious activities were also affected. In April, organisers of a day-long women's congress at a Protestant Evangelical church in the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region were forced to cancel the event the same morning, on orders from the PN. In October, a high ranking PN officer arrived in patrol car at 4.30am at a Protestant Evangelical Church in Managua and interrogated the pastor about a monthly men's prayer meeting planned for 5am that morning. The officer allowed the event to proceed but stationed a police officer inside to record the event and additional officers outside to monitor who went in and out of the church.

Religious activities of a more personal nature were not exempt from government interference and threats. In May, Protestant Evangelical Christian friends of a deceased Roman Catholic man were waiting outside the Santa María Madalena Church in Santo Domingo, Totogalpa for the liturgical service to end, to accompany the funeral party to the cemetery for burial. PN officers arrived, told them that 'standing outside church buildings' was prohibited, and warned them to leave or to go inside the church or be arrested for contempt for the authorities.

Discrimination

Religious leaders continued to report cases of discriminatory treatment. The government's treatment of religious groups was not uniform. Even as Roman Catholics and many Protestant Evangelical groups were prohibited from holding public events, other Protestant Evangelical groups were granted permission to do so, in many cases carried out with approval and support from the government in the form of funding from mayoral offices and police authorisations. Government leaders were often present and publicly voiced their support for the religious group and the event.

Preferential treatment was not guaranteed, however. Over the weekend of 16 August, the Evangelical Alliance of Nicaragua (EAN) held its annual Festival of the Family in the Alexis Arguello sports stadium in Managua with the support of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and the participation of various Christian celebrities. One month

later, the EAN was stripped of its legal status along with 169 other independent civil society organisations.

Religious leaders also reported discriminatory treatment on the local level. In June, a Protestant Evangelical pastor in Jinotega Department was on the verge of finalising the purchase of a property where a new church was planned, when the PN arrived and informed him that he would not be permitted to buy the land in order to build a church. He was threatened with arrest if he did not leave immediately. The same month, in Rivas Department, a Protestant Evangelical church was damaged by flooding. The pastor told CSW that up until that point, the church had enjoyed a good relationship with the municipal government and had even been the beneficiary of donations from the mayor's office. After the flooding, however, the mayor prohibited the church from making any repairs on the building and ordered the church to close permanently.

Conclusion

Respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including FoRB continued to deteriorate drastically in 2024. There was no sign of positive change in Nicaragua over the past year. Instead, the government has continued its campaign to eradicate independent civil society by targeting both individuals and entire faith-based organisations and religious associations. Intrusive monitoring, surveillance and intimidation tactics targeting individuals and groups, including religious groups, is now the norm. It is now government practice to reduce numbers of political prisoners including religious leaders by sending them out of the country. Indeed, in many cases, it appeared that religious leaders may have been detained with the express purpose of then negotiating for their release into forced exile.

The government remains unresponsive to UN and OAS communications. It has strengthened its relationships with major human rights violators, including China, Russia, Cuba and Venezuela, and has attempted to use its position as a jumping off point for international migration to the US as leverage in its relationship with the US government. Members of the international community, and especially Nicaragua's regional neighbours in Latin America, must seek creative and effective ways to support and strengthen independent Nicaraguan voices, including religion and belief groups, identifying ways to reinforce the links between those in exile and those who remain in the country, so that they can work together for the restoration of democracy and respect for fundamental rights. The government must be held to account for its crimes including its draconian efforts to silence its own people through repression and intimidation, restricting the freedoms of those within the country, or denying these freedoms altogether by stripping them of their citizenship and forcing them into exile.

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