

The international community must know and realize that this government belongs to a transnational criminal organization..., which, by remaining in power under the facade that everything is normal, has sentenced Nicaraguans to the silencing of their voice through death, exile or banishment, and prison. Currently, it has eliminated more than 3,126 social organizations, has taken over all the movable and immovable property of these organizations, applies laws at its convenience and eliminates those who interfere with maintaining its totalitarian power. Today the population lives under a state of siege, fearful, as all the rights inherent to the human being are violated. Nicaragua has become a prison state ... for its people. The government achieves subjugation through the use of armed force. Faced with this, the people issue an SOS to anyone who can help Nicaragua.

David, FoRB defender in exile

CSW expresses deep gratitude to the Nicaraguans inside the country who, despite the risks, carried out the firsthand documentation on which this report is based, in coordination with Nicaraguan human rights defenders who have been forced into exile.

Executive Summary

Daniel Ortega was inaugurated as President of Nicaragua on 10 January 2022. His wife, Rosario Murillo, serves as vice president. Their political party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) controls the country's legislative body, the National Assembly. Under their leadership and especially in the period covered by this report, November 2021 to November 2022, the number and severity of human rights violations, including violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) has continued to grow.

Religious leaders who defend human rights or speak critically about the government face harassment and threats and the possibility of physical violence and arbitrary detention. The government monitors religious activities, putting pressure on many religious leaders to practice a form of self-censorship as one religious leader told CSW, preaching about unity or justice, for example, can be considered criticism of the government and therefore treated as a crime. Religious leaders and members of communities of faith, both those holding foreign citizenship and Nicaraguan nationals, have been forcibly exiled, in some cases expelled from the country and in others prevented from returning to the country after traveling abroad. Religious leaders and members of communities of faith have been subjected to short- and long-term arbitrary detention, with the number of imprisoned Roman Catholic priests rising sharply in Summer and Autumn 2022.

Nicaraguans are not allowed to hang symbols considered to be religious such as crucifixes or crosses, or the Star of David, outside their homes, nor are they permitted to display banners alluding to peace, justice, unity or democracy. Political prisoners are not permitted to receive or have a Bible or other religious literature in prison.

The number of civil society organisations (CSOs) and institutions stripped by the National Assembly of legal status and forced to shut down dramatically increased in 2022. These included CSOs of a religious nature or linked to a religious group or institution, and in some cases led to the confiscation of property by the government or the enforced exile of the respective members of communities of faith.

In 2022 the government became more aggressive in prohibiting public manifestations of a religious nature including outdoor worship services and religious processions. Pro-democracy activists, human rights defenders, members of the political opposition and others that the government considers to be critical of its policies regularly reported harassment and warnings from government security forces to separate themselves from communities of faith and not to participate in religious activities

Recommendations

To the government of Nicaragua:

- Release all political prisoners unjustly detained in the country, including religious leaders
- Allow international human rights bodies, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 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 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Support the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) 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 freedom of religion or belief in accordance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which the State is party
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to freedom of religion or belief 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.

To the European Union and Member States:

- In keeping with the European Parliament's resolution of 15 September 2022, consider adding new individuals

to the sanctions list already imposed on human rights violators in Nicaragua, and “to include Daniel Ortega and his inner circle”.

- Following Nicaragua’s unilateral decision to sever diplomatic relations with the Netherlands, and to expel the EU Ambassador, remaining European diplomats should be instructed 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 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 EUSR 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 an invitation 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 neighborhood Citizens Power Councils and pro-government activists directly responsible for FoRB violations and add them to a visa ban list
- Ensure that the 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.

Since taking office in 2007, the government under the leadership of President Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo and their political party the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) have consolidated power around the president. Members of the opposition have been barred from participating in the political process, and have been threatened, arbitrarily detained and forced into exile. The FSLN controls the National Assembly which, in 2014,

abolished term limits. President Ortega was elected to a fourth consecutive term in November 2021 in an election process marked 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 Nicaraguan presidential elections had ‘no democratic legitimacy.’ In response, on 19 November 2021, the government of Nicaragua 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 that expressed grave concern about the deterioration of democratic conditions in Nicaragua 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 2018 protests took place across the country in reaction to government modifications to the pension system for the elderly. Leaders in the Roman Catholic Church attempted to mediate between the government and protesters but these efforts broke down after the government began to target Roman Catholic leaders because of their refusal to deny aid to demonstrators in need and because of the support of some clergy for the protesters. Around this time, the government initiated a media campaign against the Roman Catholic Church and its leadership and activated shock troops that attacked churches and other places of worship, including the main cathedral in the country’s capital, Managua.

Fearing similar reprisals, Protestant churches in general were less likely to publicly voice support for the protesters, though it should be noted that there were many individual Protestants involved in the protests, including students at the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua which is affiliated with the Baptist Convention of Nicaragua. Government retaliation against Protestant leaders who did voice messages the government considered to be critical was swift. On 15 December 2020, Protestant Pastor Wilber Alberto Pérez was arbitrarily detained for promoting the ‘Christmas without Political Prisoners’ campaign and falsely convicted of selling illegal drugs. In March 2021, he was sentenced to 12 years in prison and, according to CSW sources, has been placed in isolation in a ‘punishment cell’ with no natural light.

The protests were met with brutal repression from the government. The Guardian reports that 300 people were killed, 2,000 injured and hundreds of people arbitrarily detained and prosecuted in the violent crackdown. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IAHCR) documented 777 arrests, with many detainees subjected to torture, electric shocks, asphyxiation and rape in prison. A report by the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), commissioned by the IAHCR to investigate these acts

of violence, concluded that the crimes committed by the Nicaraguan state amounted to crimes against humanity, and that there was significant evidence that police and paramilitaries had directly shot at citizens during the protests using lethal weapons, including weapons of war, as part of 'a well-defined plan devised by the State's highest authorities for the commission of these crimes.'

In 2020 the Nicaraguan government approved a Special Cybercrime Law in 2020 which introduced penalties of up to ten years in prison for anyone who posts news online that the government deems false. This restriction on freedom of expression follows other measures against the press such as customs limits on the availability of ink and paper in 2018, which led to the eventual closure in 2019 of the 40-year-old "El Nuevo Diario," one of the newspapers most critical of the government.

The number of Nicaraguans fleeing the country has risen dramatically over the past year. While it is difficult to obtain exact figures, between October 2021 and June 2022 US Border Control reported detaining 111,000 Nicaraguans, up from 50,722 the previous year and 3,164 the year before that.¹ In March the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) announced that the number of Nicaraguans seeking asylum in Costa Rica had risen to 150,000.² Nicaraguans have also fled to other countries including Canada, Honduras, Mexico, and European countries.

Threats and harassment

The most commonly reported FoRB violations over the past twelve months were those involving 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. One example is that of the San Juan Bautista Roman Catholic Church in Masaya Municipality, Masaya Department. On the morning of 14 May, church leaders were made aware that a person in civilian clothing was making inquiries in the neighbourhood as to the movements of the parish priest, Harvin Padilla, and regarding the schedule for Mass. The following day, police began a surveillance operation around the church which included officers dressed in riot gear. This escalated on 16 May with the presence of a paramilitary group stationed two doors down from the church, police patrol cars parked and forming a perimeter two blocks from the church, police officers on motorcycles circulating around the building throughout the day, uniformed officers on foot in the park facing the church, and seven police officers in a Toyota Hilux pick-up truck outside the church. On 17 May, Roman Catholic Church leaders made the decision to remove Father Padilla and transfer him to a safe location in Managua. Despite this, months later, the government continued to target the priest. On 5 September, sources told CSW that men in

civilian clothes, who they believe to be intelligence officers, were in Masaya asking questions and trying to find out what had happened to the priest.³

In other cases, government harassment and threats against a religious community continued and in some cases grew worse, even as the leaders of the religious group stepped down, and were replaced with others, indicating that the aim was to shut down the community of faith itself, and not just to remove a specific individual from a position of influence. CSW received documentation throughout the year that outline the experience of one such church community located in the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (SCCAR).⁴ Government agents began to harass the pastor of the church in late January. Individuals wearing masks and hoods would follow the pastor in a white Toyota Hilux pick-up truck daily as he travelled the approximately 5km from his home to the church. The pastor was so frightened that he stopped attending the church for a period of three months and when he finally returned, he did so as a member rather than a leader.

In February, the church secretary noticed that every time she entered or exited the church she was followed by a man on a motorcycle. The man wore a police uniform but kept his face covered. This continued for months until early May when the motorist attempted to run her and her young son over as they exited the church after attending a religious service. The woman was so frightened that she immediately resigned her post as church secretary and a few days later fled the country to seek asylum abroad.

Another church leader who took on the role of pastor after the first pastor resigned in January reported that he then became a government target. He stated that his first few days in the role went smoothly but he then began to be harassed and threatened by the police on a daily basis as he was attempting to carry out his religious work. This had a negative impact on his health and in early April after he received a call late at night from an unknown number warning him to 'leave', he resigned from his position. He and his wife told CSW partners that they are now too fearful to attend any church.

A third pastor of the church was summoned by the police in late April. The pastor, fearing that he would be imprisoned, did not obey the summons. He told CSW that from that point on, however, he and his family were unable to attend services at the church, which was located 4km from his home, because of the constant presence of masked and hooded men following them. In mid-May the pastor and his wife, fearing that he might be arrested and imprisoned imminently, mortgaged their farm in order to raise enough funds to flee the country.

1 Debusmann Jr, Bernd "US immigration: 'They'd rather die than return to Nicaragua'" BBC News 24 June 2022 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-61735603>

2 "Number of displaced Nicaraguans to Costa Rica doubles in less than a year" UNHCR 25 March 2022 <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2022/3/623d894c4/number-displaced-nicaraguans-costa-rica-doubles-year.html>

3 It is worth noting the majority of priests imprisoned in 2022 had a well-documented history of being subjected to government harassment and threats, similar to the experience of Father Padilla.

4 The situation of the church remains sensitive and those involved requested that identifying details be kept confidential.

A fourth man who took over as pastor was approached by men in civilian clothes after a Sunday morning service in October. The men refused to identify themselves when asked and demanded to speak to him on his own. The men then identified themselves as police and threatened the pastor's life, reprimanding him for the content of the service, specifically the fact that he had prayed for the 'people of Nicaragua and the current situation' which they interpreted as critical of the government. The pastor and his wife decided to move to another city but because they now understood that security forces had infiltrated the church, they were too afraid to share the true reasons for their departure, simply stating that it was for personal and health reasons.

Prevented from attending religious services

Over the past twelve months, the government has warned some individuals that they should not participate in any religious activities. In most, but not all, of these cases, the person targeted was either considered by the government to be a pro-democracy activist or someone with close ties, usually family ties, to well-known activists or human rights defenders. In one such case a member of the Constitutionalist Liberal Party was stopped on his way home after attending Sunday morning Mass in the SCCAR in November 2021. He was arbitrarily detained for a few hours by several police and military officers who, before releasing him, warned him that if they saw him at church again, he would be imprisoned or forcibly disappeared.

Similarly, a woman and her husband were blocked from attending their Roman Catholic church in Madriz Department. They believe that they were targeted because the woman is the niece of a well-known anti-government figure. The police threatened both of them, on separate occasions and multiple times, that if they continued to attempt to attend church they would be imprisoned. In January 2022 and after months of daily harassment, the woman fled the country. Her husband followed one month later.

Some individuals who reported being prevented from attending religious services noted that the threats and harassment came from pro-government activists, rather than the government officers. In one such case a member of the anti-government White and Blue Youth reported that in December 2021 she was subjected to 'constant' harassment outside her Roman Catholic church every time she attended Mass and other religious activities. She fled the country in early 2022 after receiving threats to her life.

In some cases, however, the person targeted by the government had no history of activism or public criticism. Shortly before Christmas 2021, a woman who organised and led children's activities at her Roman Catholic Church in the SCCAR was stopped while on her way to attend early morning prayers. She, her two children and two other adults accompanying them were violently forced to return home and the police threatened them with imprisonment if they ever saw them out again at that time. The woman told CSW sources that since this experience, her children regularly experience panic attacks.

Many Nicaraguans are expected to prove their loyalty to the government and choosing to prioritise religious activities can lead to serious consequences. In September, a woman in the SCCAR was fired from her low-level government job because she had decided to attend a religious activity at her Pentecostal church rather than participate in a political activity. A source told CSW that this is a common dilemma for government workers at all levels, who are expected to attend and participate in political activities outside of work hours, which often come into conflict with religious services and events.

Arbitrary cancellation of religious activities and freedom of assembly

Over the twelve-month period, CSW noted an increase in the number of documented cases involving the arbitrary cancellation by the government of a religious service or activity and violations of freedom of assembly. In some cases, these targeted specific congregations and those affected were unsure of the reasons for the government's actions. Two such cases took place in the SCCAR. In January 2022, a Protestant church was holding a worship service in a community basketball court when the police arrived and ordered the pastor to suspend the service immediately, claiming that religious worship in public areas is prohibited. The pastor, who reported the case to CSW, had not been informed of this prohibition and noted that although there had been no problem with such activities taking place outside the church building in the past, from this point on there was a total ban on any public religious activity. In the second case, which took place in September, a Roman Catholic lay leader and missionary was stopped by the police and warned to stop holding Sunday worship services in the region or 'face the consequences'. The police searched him, took his Bible and destroyed it.

The government appeared to be particularly concerned with public activities and processions. On 14 August, the police blocked the entrances to a Roman Catholic church in the SCCAR, preventing those who had gathered there from holding a procession in honour of the Virgin of Fatima, the patron saint of their community. The police officers informed the priest that he did not have authorization to carry out public events and threatened him with imprisonment if he disobeyed their order to cancel the event. Members of the church who had gathered for the procession at first protested, but after they too were threatened with imprisonment they dispersed. The police guarded the church throughout the day, preventing the priest from leaving the building and anyone else from entering. Roman Catholic churches in other parts of the country reported similar experiences the same day.

The scene was repeated on 24 September when police arrived at the Cathedral in the city of Matagalpa to inform church leaders that, for the third consecutive year, they were prohibited from holding a procession in honour of Our Lady of Mercy; on 14 October, when police and 20 trucks with officers in riot gear were deployed outside the San Miguel Arcángel Roman Catholic Church in Masaya in order to prevent the annual procession of Saint Michael

the Archangel from taking place; and in Condega, Estelí on 28 October when the police informed parish priest, Mario Palacios Espinoza, that the procession of San Judas Tadeo, the patron saint of the city, was cancelled in order 'to prevent the group from disturbing the peace of the community'.

Processions and public activities linked to the Day of the Bible, observed in 2022 on 25 September, were also blocked by the government. In one town in the SCCAR, Roman Catholics were ordered by the police not to leave their church and that no activities could take place outside. Many were forced to return home as not all in attendance could physically fit inside the building. The activities inside the building were abruptly cancelled shortly afterwards when the police then ordered everyone to leave. In another city in the SCCAR, students and faculty at a university with religious affiliations were stopped from holding a procession after the police contacted a professor and informed him that the procession was not authorised and that no one would be permitted to 'go into the streets'. Protestant and Roman Catholic churches in other parts of the country reported similar experiences.

Freedom of expression

Ortega is imprisoning all religious [leaders] and any church that raises its voice in favor of the people and against the dictatorship. He wants to give countries abroad the impression that everything is in order and that there is no problem in Nicaragua. Internally, he oppresses the vast majority of the people who live without information due to poverty. Very few have access to social networks because they cannot cover the costs since the little that is earned daily is [dedicated] to the survival of their family. The dictatorship dominates the radio and television media, the private cable networks. It has eliminated religious channels and radio stations little by little. It has done the same thing with private radio stations in order that what is really happening in the country goes uncovered. All of this, the socio-political and economic situation, has led to extreme poverty and the great departure of thousands of Nicaraguans into exile.

Nicaraguan human rights defender and political leader

Between November 2021 and November 2022, the Nicaraguan government also continued its crackdown on freedom of expression. Government attempts to limit this right extended from the targeting of specific individuals to

the mass closures of religious media outlets.

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 all communities of faith with increasing suspicion and is actively and systematically monitoring them. In a case that is emblematic of many others, in September 2022 a priest at a Roman Catholic church in the department of Chontales noticed a well-known paramilitary and pro-government activist outside the church holding a recording device. The person was apparently attempting to record the activities taking place inside the building, presumably in order to share with government security and intelligence agencies.

On 14 August, Father Oscar Danilo Benavides Dávila was arrested by the police, shortly after leading Mass during which he read from the Bible and the Book of Jeremiah. An anonymous source told the press agency Artículo 66, 'The [priest] based the reading of the prophet Jeremiah on the current situation in Nicaragua. The [priest] said that he would not shut up, that he would speak about what is being lived and how it is being lived [in Nicaragua].'⁵ Father Benavides Dávila, who leads the Holy Spirit Parish in Mulukukú and is under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Diocese of Siuna, in the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (NCCAR) was formally charged in October but the specific charges have not been made public. The victim of the priest's unknown crime, according to the government, is the State. According to sources in the NCCAR, the priest had no known history of difficulties with the government.

On 9 November 2021, the only private television and one of the most important radio channels linked to Protestant Evangelicals was forcibly shut down by the government. The directors of Channel 21, which has operated in Nicaragua since 1991 and is run by the family of Reverend Guillermo Osorno Molina, issued a statement explaining that on 9 November officials from the Nicaraguan Institute of Telecommunications and Postal Services (TELCOR), the regulatory body for telecommunications and postal services in Nicaragua, visited the offices of the television and radio channel, claiming they were there for a routine inspection of the two stations' antennas. Later the same day, TELCOR informed the media outlet that its license to operate television and radio channels had been cancelled. Attempts by Channel 21 directors to present evidence that the media outlet was in compliance with all regulations were unsuccessful.⁶

It seems likely that the government targeted the channel for closure because of the pro-democracy and political activities of Reverend Osorno Molina, who ran as a candidate in the presidential elections and subsequently publicly criticized irregularities in the electoral process and called for new general elections. In response to the suspension of the media outlet's television and radio license, Reverend

5 "Ortega acusa formalmente al sacerdote Oscar Danilo Venavidez, de Mulukuku, sin especificar el delito" Artículo 66 26 Septiembre 2022 <https://www.articulo66.com/2022/09/26/presentan-acusacion-sacerdote-oscar-benavidez-iglesia-catolica/>

6 [Official statement of Channel 21](#) 10 November 2021

Osorno noted that the government action against Channel 21 came the day after he had made a public statement saying he would not recognize the results of the 'farcical election' that resulted in the re-election of Daniel Ortega as president. Both Reverend Osorno Molina and his daughter, Rebeca Osorno Larios, director of Channel 21, noted that they have always maintained a strict separation between Reverend Osorno Molina's political activities and the media outlet. Ms Osorno Lario told Evangélico Digital that the decision to cancel their license came as a surprise because 'the channel spends 24 hours a day proclaiming the message of Jesus, it has never been involved in political issues.'⁷ Channel 21 continues to operate via digital media outlets.

Following the forced closure of the Protestant Evangelical television and radio stations, the government went on to effectively shut down two television stations run by the Roman Catholic Church in 2022. On 20 May, TELCOR ordered the cable company Claro to remove Channel 51, also known as Catholic Channel and operated out of Managua, from its programming grid. Channel 51 was targeted a day after the Bishop of Matagalpa, Rolando Alvarez, made a public statement announcing that he was initiating an indefinite fast in protest of ongoing 'persecution' he was suffering at the hands of the police.⁸ A few months later, on 27 June, Claro also removed Merced, a television channel run by the Roman Catholic diocese of Matagalpa, after receiving a similar order from TELCOR.

The Diocese of Matagalpa continued to be a target of the government in the following months and in August TELCOR ordered the diocese to cease transmissions from eight radio stations run by the Roman Catholic Church in the department of Matagalpa.⁹ Leaders of the Matagalpa Diocese stated that they had received a letter from Nahima Janett Díaz Flores, general director of TELCOR, claiming that the radio stations were operating without necessary authorisations. The diocese refuted this, pointing out that on 7 June 2016 Monsignor Alvarez personally submitted all of the required documentation to the now deceased director of TELCOR, Orlando Castillo, requesting valid titles for the radio stations and noted that it was TELCOR that had failed acknowledge receipt of the documentation.

Arbitrary cancellation of legal status

In 2022, the Nicaraguan government dramatically stepped up its efforts to eliminate independent civil society in the country. In the first nine months of 2022, the legal status of 1545 civil society organisations (CSOs) was cancelled, up from 51 in 2021 and a combined total of 18 in 2018, 2019 and 2020. While CSOs linked to religious groups were not exclusively targeted, 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. These included internationally known and respected international organisations such as CAFOD, Caritas, Christian Aid and Compassion International, and domestic organisations including the Council of Missionary Churches of Christ and the Jesus Saviour of the World Foundation, and some, like the Justice and Peace Commission, a Roman Catholic CSO that provided human rights advice and some legal assistance to people of limited resources in Estelí Department. The Justice and Peace Commission was the last human rights office still operating in Estelí after the forced closure in 2018 of the Estelí branch of the Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights (CENIDH).

The cancellation of legal status extended to institutions of higher learning. On 2 February several universities and technical institutes linked to both Roman Catholic and Protestant religious groups were stripped of their legal status. This included the Catholic University of Dry Tropic Farming and Livestock (UCATSE), the Diocese of Estelí Agriculture and Livestock Technical Institute (ITADE), the Paulo Freire University (UPF), and the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua which was affiliated with the Baptist Convention of Nicaragua.

The government claimed that the legal status of the UPF was cancelled because the administration had failed to deliver financial reports to the Ministry of the Interior's Registration and Control Department. In response, the founding rector of the university, Dr Adrián Meza Sosa, said that had he personally maintained the records, presenting them to the Ministry of the Interior on a yearly basis, and the government had never previously indicated there was any problem with the reports. Human rights defenders believe that in fact the UPF was targeted because of public calls by Dr Meza Sosa on 9 November 2021 for the release of 22-year-old Samantha Jirón Padilla, an imprisoned third-year student in Political Science at the university and a candidate for the opposition, even though Dr Meza Sosa made it clear that he was speaking for himself and not on behalf of the university.

In justifying the cancellation of the legal status of the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua the government accused the institution of a lack of transparency regarding use of funds, concerns about the way in which the funds were used and whether these were in line with the stated objectives of the university. Confidential sources told CSW that they believed the university was in fact targeted because many of its students had participated in pro-democracy protests.¹⁰

The UCATSE has been a target of the government since 2018, leading up to the cancellation of its legal status on 2 February

7 "Régimen de Ortega ordena cese de transmisiones al único canal cristiano en Nicaragua" Evangélico Digital; 11 Nov 2021 <https://www.evangelicodigital.com/latinoamerica/20976/regimen-de-ortega-ordena-cese-de-transmisiones-al-unico-canal-cristiano-en-nicaragua>

8 "Monseñor Rolando Álvarez denuncia persecución del policía y se resguarda en la parroquia de Santo Cristo de Esquipulas" La Prensa 19 May 2022 <https://www.laprensani.com/2022/05/19/politica/2996419-monsenor-rolando-alvarez-denuncia-persecucion-de-la-policia-y-se-resguarda-en-la-parroquia-de-santo-cristo-de-esquipulas>

9 The radio stations ordered to close were Our Lady of Lourdes Radio in La Dalia, Our Lady of Fatima Radio in Rancho Grande, Alliens Radio in San Dionisio, Saint Lucy Radio in Darío, and Monte Carmelo Radio in Río Blanco, Brothers Radio, Sebaco Catholic Radio y Saint Joseph Radio in Matiguas.

10 The same sources added that the Baptist Convention of Nicaragua refrained from commenting publicly on the confiscation out of concerns that the government could strip the denomination of its legal status as well, which would put all of its affiliated churches across the country at risk of closure.

2022. In recent years, the Ministry of Health (MINSa) refused to renew internship contracts for UCATSE medical students at the San Juan de Dios de Estelí and Pedro Altamirano de la Trinidad hospitals, making it difficult for the university to be able to approve professional licenses for the students. In 2021, the National Council of Universities (CNU) reduced the UCATSE budget by 20 million córdobas,¹¹ negatively affecting more than 1,200 young people who were studying on university scholarships.

Similar to the case of other institutions of higher learning whose legal status was cancelled, CSW sources believe that the UCATSE was targeted because of a perceived lack of loyalty to the Ortega government by its leadership and students. Monsignor Juan Abelardo Mata Guevara, the rector of the university and Bishop Emeritus of Estelí, has been characterized by the government as ‘belligerent’ because of his public statements regarding government abuse of power, primarily regarding attacks on young people from the countryside and members of the Roman Catholic Church.

In many cases, the loss of legal status was accompanied by the government confiscation of property. After their legal status was cancelled on 2 February, the Polytechnic University and the ITADE campuses were confiscated by the Ministry of Education. The same day the María Albir de Fabretto Education Centre, the Padre Fabretto Foundation, and the Oratorio Mamá Margarita Education Centre were confiscated by the government. Sources told CSW that residents San José de Cusmapa unsuccessfully attempted to occupy the Padre Fabretto Foundation facilities in order to prevent the Ministry of Education and the National from taking them over. Nine days later, on 11 February, the María Auxiliadora de Fabretto Education Centre property was confiscated as well. The centres were four of eight education centres founded by the Fabretto Foundation, a Roman Catholic institution aimed at empowering underserved children and their families in Nicaragua to reach their full potential, improve their livelihoods, and take advantage of economic opportunity through education. On 13 July the government confiscated 400m of property belonging to the Baptist Convention of Nicaragua on the campus of the Baptist Theological Seminary. However, sources told CSW that this did not affect the operations of the seminary or the churches that meet there.

Arbitrary detention

The number of cases of arbitrary detention of religious leaders, including lay leaders, increased over the twelve-month period between November 2021 and November 2022. In some cases, the detentions were short term and appeared to be, at least in part, an attempt to intimidate individuals into refraining from participating in religious activities. In one case in March 2022 a member of a Protestant church was returning home after work in the SCCAR. While waiting at a bus station, a police officer approached the man and ordered him to accompany them to the police station. At

the station the man was informed that an accusation had been made against him and he was interrogated about his participation in roadblocks. The government officers also asked the man if his church supported the roadblocks and threatened to investigate his family and other members of the church. After he was finally released two days later, the man was warned that if he participated in any anti-government activities or any religious activities he would be imprisoned.

In mid-October, a lay leader in a Roman Catholic Church in the SCCAR was followed by the police as he went to and from a meeting at his church. After he returned home, the police demanded to see his identification and questioned him about his involvement in the church. When the man explained that he had attended a meeting as part of efforts to organise a celebration of the Immaculate Conception in December, the police responded that this was ‘forbidden’. He was arrested without explanation and refused access to a lawyer. When the man’s wife attempted to obtain information about what had happened to her husband, she was told that he was under investigation for unspecified crimes and that he would be taken to El Chipote Prison where he would not be permitted to receive food, clothing, medicine or a Bible. He was held for four days, before he was informed that he was accused of ‘organised crime’ and was subsequently allowed to leave the prison but was placed under house arrest. A few weeks later, a woman from the same church was detained while on her way to attend Sunday mass. She was held for five hours and then released but under caution not to attend church again.

The 2 June arrest of Father Manuel Salvador Garcia in Nandaime Municipality, Granada Department, was the first of a series of long-term detentions of Roman Catholic priests in the following months. Father Garcia was arrested by police in disputed circumstances.¹² He was later found guilty of the crime of causing ‘psychological and physical injuries’ despite the fact that the alleged victim recanted and refused to testify against him. She, in turn, was charged with providing false testimony. Father Garcia was sentenced by Judge Ana Xochilt Fonseca Laguna to two years and eight months in prison which he is serving in the Granada prison known as ‘La Granja.’

One month later, on 13 July, Monsignor José Leonardo Urbina Rodríguez was arrested in Boaco and charged with rape of a minor. On 1 September Judge Edén Aguilar sentenced the bishop to 30 years in prison for two crimes of sexual abuse and one of rape of a minor under the age of fourteen. Human rights defenders questioned the lack of transparency in the trial and noted that the priest’s close relatives were not allowed to attend or observe remotely. The priest was represented by a public defender appointed by Judge Jennifer Eliett Hernández Granera and prosecutor Emanuel Álvarez. At the sentencing, the priest was given an accessory sentence of ‘absolute disqualification’, although the sentence does not explain what this means or from

¹¹ Approximately 550,000 USD or 450,000 pound sterling.

¹² “Nicaragua priest jailed under strange circumstances” Havana Times/La Prensa 3 June 2022 <https://havanatimes.org/news/nicaragua-priest-jailed-under-strange-circumstances/>

what he is disqualified. In a similar case, on 13 October, police arrested a Roman Catholic lay leader in the SCCAR and accused him of abuse of a minor. CSW sources said that they believe the lay leader has been targeted because of his leadership roles in a Roman Catholic institution and a church that have been targeted by the government and because he has been openly critical of government attacks on the Roman Catholic Church.

While the charges against the SCCAR Roman Catholic lay leader and Monsignor Urbina Rodríguez are very grave and accusations of sexual assault should always be taken seriously, the lack of transparency and due process afforded to Monsignor Urbina and the SCCAR Roman Catholic lay leader give serious cause for concern. In both cases, the accused have a history of public criticism of the Ortega-Murillo government and the alleged victims are the granddaughter and daughter, respectively, of well-known pro-government activists. In regard to the trial of Monsignor Urbina, former political prisoner Jaime Ampié noted to the media outlet Confidencial that a key witness in the trial of the bishop was ‘

*Mrs. Reyna Oporta, a Sandinista councilwoman who was a witness in the trial against me, clearly lying for the trial, even cried and pointed out that she had seen me shoot, and was now asked to be part of another Sandinista lynching, but this time against Monsignor Leonardo Urbina...*¹³

In August, the government orders to shut down Roman Catholic radio stations in Matagalpa department and subsequent attempts by security forces to confiscate station equipment led to confrontations and confinement and later imprisonment or house arrest of priests and lay leaders there. Father Uriel Vallejos was surrounded and forcibly confined to a parish house in the city of Sébaco by the police and paramilitaries from 1 August until late morning on 4 August. On 1 August, the police accompanied by paramilitaries stormed the Infant Jesus of Prague Chapel, part of the Jesus of Divine Mercy Parish in Sébaco, in order to confiscate radio and television equipment inside the church. Worshippers inside the church attempted to stop the police from entering and at least two were injured. Father Vallejos and a number of worshippers took refuge inside the parish house adjacent to the chapel and were then blockaded inside by the security forces until late morning on 4 August when the security forces withdrew and the priest escaped and went into hiding before going into exile. During the blockade, the priest, who is diabetic, subsisted on bread and water.

On 4 August, in the city of Matagalpa, Monsignor Rolando Jose Álvarez was blockaded inside the curia along with priests and lay leaders by security forces for 15 days beginning on 4 August, before the security forces stormed the curia and arrested the group. Monsignor Álvarez was placed under house arrest and seven men, Father Ramiro Tijerino, Father Sadiel Eugarríos, Father Raúl González, Father José Luis Díaz, seminarians Darvin Leiva and Melkin Sequeira, and cameraman Sergio Cárdenas, were imprisoned at El

Chipote. Four of those who had been confined with the group inside the curia, two chorists, a cameraman and Vicar General Óscar Escoto, were released. On 4 October, those still detained were charged with ‘organizing violent groups’ and encouraging them ‘to carry out acts of hate against the population.’

On Thursday 13 October, Roman Catholic priest Enrique Martínez Gamboa was at home when police broke into his house and violently detained him. The police did not give a reason for his detention or provide any information on an investigation at the time of his arrest but the priest, who belongs to the Diocese of León but carries out his ministry in Managua, was later charged with the crimes of ‘conspiracy’ and ‘the propagation of false news’. Father Martínez Gamboa has been a target of the government since he gave a speech at protests on 30 May 2018 during which he referred to Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo as ‘murderers’. He is currently imprisoned in El Chipote.

CSW received a number of reports that prisoners, and political prisoners in particular, were denied the right to have a Bible or other religious literature or receive visits from a religious representative of their choice. In one case, on 24 March, family members of Edgard Francisco Parrales Castillo, a former priest and former Nicaraguan ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS), reported that he was being blocked from receiving any visits including from Roman Catholic priests for religious attention, as well as from doctors or relatives. Mr Parrales Castillo was arbitrarily detained outside his home on 22 November 2021 and was held in El Chipote Prison until he was placed under house arrest on 28 February 2022 due to his health.

Forced expulsion

Over the twelve-month period a number of religious leaders or members of religious communities were forcibly expelled from Nicaragua or prevented from entering the country. One of the highest profile of these was the 6 March expulsion of the Apostolic Nuncio, Monsignor Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag, who left his diplomatic mission after the government withdrew his accreditation, forcing him to leave the country immediately. Sources told CSW that they believe that Monsignor Stanislaw Sommertag was targeted for having requested the release of political prisoners and an improvement in their prison conditions.

Protestants were also affected. On 21 April US pastor Tom Guess and his wife Debbie were denied entry at the Augusto C. Sandino International Airport. According to Pastor Guess:

We arrived in Nicaragua at 4:00pm on Thursday. We proceeded to the immigration area and presented our passports. Immigration pulled our information on the computer and for some reason we were flagged. They proceeded to ask us many questions, took our passports and entered their office. This whole process took about an hour... From 5pm until 10:15pm we sat in this room. We had no idea what was going on. We had to ask for water. We had to ask permission to go to the bathroom. We were told

13 “The regime had Monsignor Urbina on file as Blue and White” Confidencial 18 July 2022 <https://www.confidencial.digital/english/the-regime-had-monsignor-urbina-on-file-as-blue-and-white/>

to completely turn off our phones or they would be confiscated. That's why we couldn't communicate with anyone. During all this time we received no instructions, no explanation of why we were detained. Just promises that we were going to have a meeting with someone. Finally, at 10pm, a security officer told us that we would be boarding a plane back to Miami in 20 minutes. We were stunned. We ask for a reason; we received no explanation. We were escorted directly to the plane by two security agents. The airline held our passports on the plane until we arrived in Miami.

It is believed that they were denied entry because of statements they had made, which they consider to be prophesies, and which the government interpreted as critical of its policies.

In addition to blocking foreign visitors from entering Nicaragua, the government also stopped Nicaraguan nationals from returning to their country. On 13 September, Father Juan de Dios García was blocked from entering Nicaragua. The priest, who is the vicar of the Santo Cristo de Las Colinas Parish in Managua was returning to the country after a two-month vacation in the United States. Father Garcia was prevented from boarding his flight in Miami. While in the US, the priest had reportedly received two emails from the Nicaraguan government indicating that he was prohibited from returning to the country.

On 27 September, the Ministry of Immigration and Foreigners refused entry to Father Guillermo Trinidad Blandón González. The priest, who leads the Santa Lucía Catholic Church, in Boaco Department was prevented from boarding a flight from Miami to Nicaragua, following a visit to Israel. Similarly, on 18 October, Father Deyvis López from the San Gregorio Magno Parish in Diriamba, Carazo, was denied entry to Nicaragua. Article 66 reported that the priest planned to return to Nicaragua on Monday 17 October, after approximately 15 days visiting the United States, but was informed by the airline that the Nicaraguan government would not allow him back into the country.¹⁴

In two cases, entire religious orders were targeted. On 28 June, the Missionaries of Charity Association was stripped of its legal status, an act the government justified by claiming that the association was not accredited to act as nursing home or child development centre. Subsequently, the Managua headquarters of the religious organisation were taken over by the police. Eighteen nuns who are part of the Missionaries of Charity and who worked in different parts of the country were escorted by the General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners (DGME) to the border with Costa Rica and expelled. Two of the expelled women are Nicaraguan nationals.

A little less than three months later, nuns affiliated with The Cross of the Sacred Heart of Jesus were also forced to leave Nicaragua. On 20 September, the nuns arrived in Mexico, where they were received by nuns from the same religious order. The order of nuns was attached to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Matagalpa, led by Bishop Rolando José

Álvarez Lagos. The government did not make any public statement about why the nuns were expelled, but sources told CSW that they were forced to leave after police officers tried to force them to name people who had met with Bishop Álvarez and subjected them to constant harassment and questioning.

A number of cases were less clear cut in terms of specific government actions forcing religious leaders into exile, but it seems clear that increasing repression, much of it targeting religious leaders, has left many feeling they have no option but to leave the country. CSW received reports in October that more than 50 Nicaraguan priests were requesting asylum in Costa Rica and Honduras 'due to the ongoing acts of repression and harassment against their work'. Many reported that they were under surveillance and had been warned that the government had begun to build criminal cases against them, because they were perceived as unsupportive of the government. As mentioned earlier in this report Father Uriel Vallejos fled the country and went into exile abroad after the government's siege of his parish church in August. In September, Father Erick Díaz, who leads the San José Obrero Parish in El Tuma-La Dalia, confirmed publicly that he had gone exile 'to protect his life and his freedom'.

The hostile environment for religious leaders has also affected Protestant groups, although many are less likely to report their cases out of fear and those who do almost always request that identifying details be kept confidential. One such case involved a youth leader of a Protestant church in the SCCAR who fled Nicaragua in 2018 after he was accused of participating in roadblocks and protests. The leader told CSW that he and his wife were only engaged in activities to support their church and they were not involved in the roadblocks. In 2021, the situation appeared to have calmed down and the youth leader returned to Nicaragua with his family, rejoined his church and took up his leadership position again. In April, police officers came to his house and asked if it was true that he had returned from exile. From that point on, the leader told CSW partners he was forced to remain in hiding in his house while the police visited his home and his church daily, making it clear they were looking for him. The church leader was forced to flee into exile a second time, where he now remains.

Conclusion

Developments in Nicaragua during the twelve-month period between November 2021 and November 2022 give great cause for concern. The number of human rights violations, including FoRB violations, continued to rise. Intrusive monitoring, surveillance and intimidation tactics targeting individuals and groups, including religious groups, has become the norm. The government appears to be intent on eradicating independent civil society, along the lines of the Cuba model, from Nicaragua. Religious groups and communities of faith have been negatively affected by this, and it can be expected that this space will continue to

¹⁴ Perez Miranda, Noel "Migración de Nicaragua niega la entrada al país al sacerdote Deyvis Lopez, de Diriamba" Artículo 66 18 October 2022 <https://www.articulo66.com/2022/10/18/migracion-niega-entrada-nicaragua-sacerdote-deyvis-lopez-diriamba/>

shrink in the months ahead. In the same way, it is becoming clear that the government has no compunction in regard to eliminating critical voices through imprisonment or forced exile, and there will be no exemptions for religious leaders, including high ranking members of the Roman Catholic clergy. A climate of fear is growing and becoming entrenched, contributing to another unfavourable parallel with Cuba; like the island country, Nicaragua is also experiencing a historic wave of migration unprecedented since 1990.

The government shows no sign of responding positively to criticism from the international community. Its strong relationships with other notorious human rights violators including those in the region like Cuba, and outside like China, with which Nicaragua restored diplomatic relations in 2021 and has signed a free trade agreement, will probably make it even less likely to respond to pressure from the United States, European countries or bodies like the OAS. The government's efforts to suppress independent civil society and stamp out critical voices show that it understands that the biggest threat to its survival comes from within. Members of the international community who hope to see the restoration of pluralistic democracy and respect for fundamental human rights to Nicaragua must seek creative and effective ways to support and strengthen independent civil society, including religious groups and communities of faith, both in the country and in exile, identifying ways to reinforce the links between the two groups so that they can work together for positive change. It is of vital importance to the future of Nicaragua that the government is not successful in its attempts to neutralise the potential of its people through repression and intimidation in the country or by forcing them outside of it into exile. In the words of one political leader and devout Roman Catholic:

The actions [the international community] take[s] must be immediate due to the situation that Nicaraguans are experiencing with the prison state in the country ... personal sanctions are not enough ... they must apply all international statutes to help get rid of this dynastic dictatorship because Nicaraguans are already fatigued of shedding their blood just so they will be listened to and their freedoms respected.

Nicaraguan human rights defender and political leader

