

Name: Efrén Antonio Vílchez López

Location: 'La Modelo' Jorge Navarro National Penitentiary System

Date of birth: 9 June 1974

Religious group: Centro Misionero Internacional Capilla del Espíritu (Asociación Ministerios Capilla del Espíritu - MECE)

From: San Rafael del Sur Municipality, Managua Department

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 frequently sought out by foreign Christian groups to help organise large scale public events. Pastor Vílchez López also has a history of criticising the government of President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo. 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 working in the funeral business at his home in San Rafael del Sur, he received a call requesting a coffin. As he was leaving his home to attend to the request, he was beaten and detained by police officers. 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. On 18 May Pastor Vílchez López was brought to a preliminary hearing at the First District Court for Adolescents and Violence in Managua, presided over by Judge Roger Antonio Sánchez Báez. The court announced the charge of aggravated rape combined with the crime of minor psychological injuries against an 18-year-old man with a disability that gives him the mental age of an 11-year-old. 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.

Trial hearings took place at the Third Specialized District Court for Violence in Managua between 21 July and 20 September 2022, presided over by Judge Edén Enrique Aguilar Castro, who issued the guilty verdict on 20 September. On 21 September 2022 the court sentenced Pastor Vílchez López to 23 years in prison for the crime of raping a 14-year-old minor, changing the classification of the crime of which he was originally accused. The decision was confirmed by the court of appeals on 21 April 2023. The courts refused to consider evidence supporting the pastor's innocence, including CCTV footage proving the pastor's whereabouts at the time of the supposed violation. It should be noted that the Nicaraguan government has a record of using dubious sexual assault cases to charge 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.¹

Pastor Vílchez López was treated as a 'common' prisoner until July 2024, when he was transferred to a maximum-security cell in 'Gallery 300', a wing of 'La Modelo' prison used to imprison the worst of criminals, and those considered particularly dangerous, 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 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.

On 12 November 2024 the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) requested information from the government of Nicaragua. No response was provided, and on 16 December 2024 the IACHR issued a request for urgent precautionary measures on behalf of Pastor Vílchez López.²

¹ The bishop was freed and sent into forced exile in October 2023.

² Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Resolution 100/2024, 16 December 2024 https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/decisiones/mc/2024/res_100-24_mc_1245-24_ni_es.pdf

**CSW everyone
free to believe**

T +44 (0)20 8329 0010

🐦 @CSWAdvocacy

f /CSWUK

csw.org.uk

PO Box 99

New Malden

Surrey, KT3 3YF

United Kingdom