

Currently in our country, Nicaragua, the general population is under repression, direct and indirect threats and persecution. They have silenced us and our voices. Talking about a religious issue in Nicaragua is a crime that lands us in prison and the government appropriates our properties. Talking about political issues and expressing anything that does not agree with the ideals of others is a crime [...] There are police officers infiltrated in churches to listen to what is said, in fact no one can pray in public anymore about the situation in our country or for any political prisoner, it is a crime. Bringing help and the word of God, a Bible, to the sick in hospitals, prisons or other educational centres is a crime. [...]

What can really be seen is a country with a population full of fear, trembling, sadness, anguish, psychological trauma, anxiety and depression, we are imprisoned everywhere, from [our] homes, [to our] jobs, our rights are violated in every sense of the word. Children [are] growing up under repression, violence and trauma, their parents and family members are suffering. There is no longer joy, children and families cannot go out into the streets happy and free. [There are] homes where only mother is there because father is in prison, or a relative [is] in jail, children alone without father and mother because they both had to emigrate and go into exile in other countries. The people of Nicaragua are suffering all this and more.

Nicaraguan FoRB defender

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

Executive summary

Under the leadership of President Daniel Ortega, his wife and vice-president, Rosario Murillo, and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), and especially from November 2022 through January 2024 - the period covered by this report - the number and severity of violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Nicaragua have continued to grow. Religious leaders who defend human rights or speak

critically about the government face harassment, threats, and the possibility of physical violence and arbitrary detention. The government monitors religious activities, putting pressure on leaders to practice self-censorship. Preaching about unity or justice or praying for the general situation in the country, for example, can be considered criticism of the government and treated as a crime.

CSW recorded 310 separate FoRB cases during the period covered by this report (November 2022 through January 2024), compared with 156 cases reported in the period covered by our previous report (November 2021 through November 2022). Most cases involved multiple FoRB violations and some affected thousands of people.¹ Members of religion or belief communities and religious leaders, including both Nicaraguan nationals and individuals holding foreign citizenship, have been forcibly exiled, forced to leave, or prevented from re-entering the country. Religious leaders and members of religion or belief communities were subjected to short- and long-term arbitrary detention. 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 government forcibly shut down hundreds of independent civil society organisations (iCSOs), including religious institutions, arbitrarily stripping them of their legal status. The government froze the bank accounts of some groups and began to collect property tax from religious institutions and iCSOs of a religious nature or linked to a religious group or institution in contravention of domestic law exempting them from such taxes. 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.

In 2023 the government became more aggressive in its prohibitions on 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. The display of symbols considered to be religious such as crucifixes, crosses or the Star of David outside one's home is prohibited. Banners alluding to peace, justice, unity or democracy are also not permitted. 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.

¹ 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.

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 illegal collection of taxes from religious institutions 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 Experts 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 on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which the State is party.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Support the OHCHR and the UN Group of Experts 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 September 2022, 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, 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 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

Daniel Ortega has held power in Nicaragua since 2007. He was re-elected as 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 has consolidated power around the presidency since taking office in 2007. 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 support 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'. 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 2021, 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 recent study² by the AmericasBarometer³ noted a 20-percentage point jump between 2018 and 2023 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 2023, US Border Control reported authorising travel for 44,298 Nicaraguans under a humanitarian parole programme introduced by the US in January 2023.⁴ Nicaraguans have also fled to other countries including Canada, Costa Rica, Honduras and Mexico, and several countries in Europe.

On 9 February 2023, following a resolution of the Court of Appeals issued on 8 February, 222 political prisoners were deported to the United States. All 222 were serving sentences for committing acts undermining 'the independence, sovereignty, and self-determination of the people, for inciting violence, terrorism and economic destabilization'. The group included a Protestant pastor, Roman Catholic priests and lay leaders. Two subsequent deportations of imprisoned religious leaders took place in October 2023 and January 2024.

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.

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

3 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.

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

Freedom of assembly

Religious celebrations that, due to tradition and customs, have been held for years, can no longer be carried out in families, neighbourhoods, homes, churches and public places, where the government keeps everything under surveillance, with limited hours to celebrate mass or religious services, and only if authorised by them.

Nicaraguan FoRB defender

Over the period covered by this report, the most commonly reported FoRB violations were those involving the arbitrary cancellation of religious events, activities or services. The PN issued orders directly to religious leaders across the country that no processions outside their respective physical buildings were permitted. This included a moratorium on traditional public marches by Roman Catholics and Protestants in celebration of the Spanish Bible Translation Day in September.

The PN also repeatedly prevented entire groups from holding vigils and religious services. In one example, on 24 December 2022, the PN refused to allow an Assemblies of God church located in a rural area to hold a special Christmas celebration, including a Bible study followed by games, piñatas and food for a group of approximately 20 children. The church has since been prohibited by the PN from holding any religious activities involving children.

In March and July 2023, a second Assemblies of God church in the South Autonomous Caribbean Coast Region (RACCS) Department was denied permission to hold special religious events. Over the past two years, the church has not been allowed to hold any special events or campaigns. Previously religious services were held three times a week, but by order of the government, the church is only permitted one 45-minute meeting on Sundays.⁵ The pastor noted that many church members have withdrawn due to fear of becoming a target of the authorities.

Since 2021, Jehovah's Witnesses have not been permitted to set up magazine stands on the streets. In November 2022, a group of Jehovah's Witnesses in the RACCS Department were informed that they would no longer be allowed to hold Bible studies in their homes or hand out religious pamphlets on the streets (a similar order was issued in Managua the previous year), or to carry out any type of activity without prior authorisation. Officials warned that their place of meeting would be forcibly closed if they continued to hand out magazines, Bibles or other materials in bus stations or

other locations. On 16 May 2023, the group was given verbal notification that their place of meeting was closed until further notice. Since then, the group has been forced to meet virtually.

On several occasions, the government co-opted religious events. On 4 October 2023, members of the San Pedro Roman Catholic Church in Diriá Municipality, Granada Department, reported that the PN prevented them from distributing *atol de ánimas*, a traditional corn drink associated with a traditional festival.⁶ Instead, the mayor, Catalina Maltés, together with Sandinista supporters, distributed more than 3,000 *atol de ánimas* servings in the park square. The activity was monitored by members of the special forces of the PN and government workers. During the distribution, Mayor Maltés publicly thanked President Ortega for 'supporting the traditions of the people'.

In another example, at 10am on 2 November 2023, local Roman Catholic priests attempted to perform a thanksgiving mass at a municipal cemetery in the RACCS Department. They were joined by locals who were there to visit and decorate the graves of deceased loved ones, participate in mass and offer prayers to the deceased. The mass was arbitrarily cancelled by the Municipal PN. The municipal mayor's office, including the mayor, deputy mayor, and the municipal chief of police, along with other local authority leaders, then addressed the few people who remained at the cemetery.

Arbitrary cancellation of legal status

They have closed and confiscated all the NGOs that helped the different sectors and benefited many low-income families.

Nicaraguan teacher and FoRB defender

The Gazette is the feared document where the disappearance of organized civil society is made official, where churches are condemned to disappear, and where the regime gives its friends concessions, shamelessly diverting resources.

FoRB defender

In 2023, the Nicaraguan government continued its campaign to eliminate independent civil society in the country. According to figures released in a report⁷ by the Nicaragua Human Rights Collection Never Again (*Colectivo de Derechos Humanos Nicaragua Nunca Más*), 3,138 iCSOs saw their legal status cancelled in 2022, and a further 293 up until 6

⁵ 45-minute limits on religious services were reported by various Protestant and Roman Catholic churches across the country.

⁶ The "*atol de ánimas*" is a local tradition in Diriá Municipality. From 1 October to 2 November, it is believed that the souls in purgatory visit their relatives. Prayers are held in Dirialeño homes, where a corn drink is distributed to the people, accompanied by a tamale (a traditional Mesoamerican dish made from maize). The tradition involves praying for the eternal rest of the deceased. Through these prayers it is believed they find the light that leads them to enjoy paradise.

⁷ "Closure of Civic Space: Criminalization of the Exercise of Citizenship", Colectivo de Derechos Humanos Nicaragua Nunca Mas, December 2023; <https://colectivodhnicaragua.org/informes/#2023>

November 2023, the closing date of their report. 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. Of the 293 iCSOs, at least 55 were religiously-affiliated and included internationally known and respected organisations such as Caritas and the Society of Jesus (also known as the Jesuit Order). A number of domestic organisations were also stripped of their legal status and forced to close. These included the Daughters in the Holy Spirit of Santa Luisa Marillac Association, Fellowship of the Poor of Jesus Christ Foundation, the Martin Luther King Jr. Nicaraguan Evangelical University (UENIC-MLK), the Jesus My Reason for Living Evangelical Foundation and the Anointing and Fire Pentecostal Ministry Foundation.

In an interview given in October 2023, Martha Patricia Molina Montenegro, the author of the report ‘Nicaragua: A persecuted Church? (2018-2022)’;⁸ updated in 2023, said that she had received evidence that the properties of hundreds of Protestant-Evangelical churches had been confiscated or forced to close by the government.

We have had contact with [Protestant] Evangelical pastors who [say] that they are being persecuted, that their properties, for the most part, are being confiscated [by the government] that is to say that they are the most affected in terms of the number of property confiscations, as we have only [documented] 13 such confiscations experienced by the Catholic Church, while for the [Protestant] Evangelical, there are more than 200 [such cases].⁹

On 24 October 2023, the government cancelled the legal status and confiscated assets of 16 NGOs, most of them Christian. Among those affected was the Franciscan Order which had a 58-year presence in the country. The government claimed that the groups had not reported the origin of their financing and failed to comply with other paperwork-related requirements. Independent media reported that the Ministry of Education and the PN took over and occupied the San Francis of Assisi Institute located in Matagalpa on the same day.

The arbitrary cancellation of legal status extended to institutions of higher learning. Several universities and technical institutes linked to both Roman Catholic and Protestant religious groups were stripped of their legal status, had their property confiscated, or were forced to close due to the government freezing their bank accounts. On 7 March 2023, the government cancelled the legal status of the Autonomous Christian University of Nicaragua

and the John Paul II Catholic University, claiming that the institutions had failed to comply with the regulatory laws. The authorities cited the Law on Non-Profit Legal Entities (Law 147), the Organic Law of the Legislative Power of the Republic of Nicaragua (Law 606), and the Law against Money Laundering, Financing of Terrorism and Financing of the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (Law 977).

In justifying the 24 April 2023 cancellation of the legal status of the Adventist University of Nicaragua (UNADENIC), the government accused the institution of failing to meet enrolment requirements, offering unauthorized courses, and allegedly filing false information with the National Council of Universities (CNU) and the National Council of Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEA). The government again cited Law 147, Law 606, and Law 977. The CNU claimed that UNADENIC did not have ‘adequate study plans’, used unapproved ‘curricular designs’, and did not possess ‘technological support to attend to the online and remote offering’.

The Martin Luther King Jr Evangelical University of Nicaragua (UENIC-MLK), founded in November 1994 in conjunction with 22 Protestant denominations and institutions with the purpose of providing higher education to young people from the religious community and society in general, saw its legal status cancelled on 25 July 2023. The MIGOB claimed that the university had failed to provide information regarding its board of directors and account statements since 2017.

On 15 August 2023, the government cancelled the legal status of the Jesuit-run Central American University (UCA). It went on to confiscate the physical property and seize control of the university’s bank accounts. The government described the UCA as a ‘centre of terrorism’, and claimed it had ‘betrayed the trust of the Nicaraguan people.’ One day later, the Central American Province of the Society of Jesus issued a response, stating that the accusations against the UCA were ‘false and unfounded’:

We hold the Government of Nicaragua responsible for all damages against the students, teaching and administrative staff, and other workers of the University and the cultural heritage of said country that derive from such an unjustified accusation and from the order to confiscate all the immovable, movable and economic assets of the University.

On 22 August 2023 the government went on to cancel the legal status of the Society of Jesus in Nicaragua. In a statement published in The Gazette,¹⁰ the government accused the order of failing to submit its ‘financial statements’ for the

8 “Nicaragua: A Persecuted Church (2018-2022)”, Molina Montenegro, Martha Patricia, June 2022; <https://iglesiaperseguidani.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/000-PERSECUTION-TO-THE-CHURCH-REPORT-ENGLISH-FINAL-VERSION-8-28-2022-1.pdf>

9 “Martha Patricia Molina: 234 ataques contra la Iglesia, continúa la represión contra religiosos”, Confidencial, 5 October 2023; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbtS8Bc_yac

10 The Nicaraguan government publishes laws, decrees, resolutions, agreements, and other actions of general interest ordered by the State in The Gazette.

fiscal years 2020, 2021 and 2022, and of having an ‘expired’ board of directors since 2020, violating laws related to the regulation and control of non-profit organisations. The statement ordered the transfer of the order’s bank accounts and movable and immovable property to the government.

On 3 May 2023, the 30th anniversary of World Press Freedom Day, the Ministry of the Interior (MIGOB) cancelled the legal status of the ENLACE Christian Television Foundation, which brought together Enlace Canal 21 and Radio Nexo, Protestant-Evangelical media outlets run by Reverend Guillermo Antonio Osorno Molina. Reverend Osorno Molina was prevented from leaving the country and his passport was retained the same day.¹¹

Targeting of religious groups’ finances

In the period covered by this report the government employed financial pressure as a way of targeting religious institutions and leaders. This was seen most notably through the freezing of bank accounts and the illegal collection of the Property Tax (IBI), which religious institutions are legally exempt from paying.

On 26 May 2023, the government began to freeze the bank accounts of Nicaraguan Roman Catholic Church dioceses, citing Law 977 against Money Laundering, Financing of Terrorism and Financing of the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction. In press release No. 010-2023¹² issued by the PN on 27 May 2023, the PN justified the freezing of accounts, stating they had been informed of ‘illicit activity in the management of funds and resources in bank accounts that had belonged to people condemned of treason to the fatherland’. The impact was far reaching, with private schools affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church reportedly unable to pay their staff. On 19 June 2023, it was reported that the the San Juan Pablo II National Propaedeutic Seminary in Bluefields, the RACCS Department, had been forced to shut down due to the government-ordered freezing of its bank accounts in May.¹³ In another part of the country, a Roman Catholic-run school informed parents of students that it would only be able to accept cash payments due to their inability to access their bank accounts for the same reason.

In June 2023, the lawyer and human rights defender Martha Patricia Molina Montenegro reported on X¹⁴ that the government had frozen the personal bank accounts of a number of priests from dioceses in the departments of

Estelí, Granada, Jinotega and León. The priests were met with warning messages stating ‘user is blocked’ when they attempted to access their bank accounts using their cards at cashpoints. In July 2023, Ms Molina Montenegro also reported that several elderly priests were not receiving their pensions from the National Priestly Insurance Fund because their bank accounts had been blocked.

In July various Protestant and Roman Catholic churches were notified of the New Real Estate Tax for Religious Associations under Civil Code Article 599, in contravention of Executive Decree #3-95¹⁵ (31 January 1995) which exempts religious institutions from having to pay property tax. Churches across the country reported charges. Protestant-Evangelical churches were charged 12,000 Córdobas (approximately £259 GBP or \$3278.15 USD), while the tax on some Roman Catholic churches was as high as 200,000 Córdobas (approximately £4,319 GBP or \$5,452 USD), approximately 25 times the average monthly salary in Nicaragua. Many of the religious groups targeted indicated that the financial burden would put them in danger of reducing or eliminating activities, calling the government tactic ‘financial asphyxiation’.¹⁶

Arbitrary detention

The number of cases of arbitrary detention of religious leaders more than doubled between November 2022 and January 2024, as compared to the previous CSW reporting period (November 2021-November 2022). In some cases, the detentions were short term. Many appeared to be, at least in part, an attempt to intimidate individuals into refraining from participating in religious activities.

On Monday 17 April, Father Saúl Antonio Robleto Jiménez was detained by the PN while on his way to the Las Coreas community, San Miguelito Municipality, Rio San Juan to celebrate eucharist. The priest was taken to the San Miguelito Municipality police station and held for around three hours. He was interrogated and accused of criticising the government. He was released following complaints from residents of Las Coreas. On 21 December 2023, Father Óscar José Escoto Salgado was detained in Matagalpa, and released on Christmas Eve. Father Jader Danilo Guido Acosta, the vice-dean of Matagalpa Diocese, who prayed for Bishop Rolando Álvarez Lagos during morning mass on the fourth Sunday of Advent, was held for 12 hours after being detained on 24 December 2023.

11 Reverend Guillermo Osorno Molina was a presidential candidate for the Camino Cristiano party of Nicaragua (CCN) in the 2021 national elections. He publicly raised irregularities in the electoral process. In retaliation the government suspended Enlace Canal 21 and Radio Nexo in November 2021, and the telecommunications service provider, Telcor, cancelled the licenses on 3 May 2023, when the decree was officially published in the MIGOB’s official publication “The Gazette.”

12 “Nota de Prensa No. 010- 2023 referida sobre actividad ilícita en el manejo de fondos y cuentas bancarias en diferentes diócesis del país”, Visión Policial Nicaragua, 28 May 2023; <https://twitter.com/vppolicial/status/1662615572884987905/photo/1>

13 “Cierra seminario de Bluefields por congelamiento de cuentas bancarias ordenado por la dictadura”, Confidencial, 29 June 2023; <https://confidencial.digital/nacion/cierra-seminario-de-bluefields-por-congelamiento-de-cuentas-bancarias-ordenado-por-la-dictadura/>

14 X, Martha Patricia M @mpatricia_m, 14 June 2023; https://twitter.com/mpatricia_m/status/1669058653008044040?

15 “Impuesto Sobre Bienes Inmuebles”, La Gaceta, Diario Oficial No. 21 del 31 de enero de 1995; [http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/\(SAll\)/99FBA413A648BF230625726C0061757B](http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/normaweb.nsf/(SAll)/99FBA413A648BF230625726C0061757B)

16 “Régimen cobra impuestos ilegales a iglesias católicas y evangélicas”, Nicaragua Investiga, 6 July 2023; <https://nicaraguainvestiga.com/nacion/124789-regimen-cobra-impuesto-ibi-iglesias-catolicas-evangelicas/>

The government also continued to target congregants and lay leaders with both short- and long-term detention. In February 2023, three men were detained for a number of hours in the RACCS Department, after they questioned why the PN were stopping anyone from entering the local Roman Catholic church for an Ash Wednesday service. The PN claimed that the early morning activity would not be permitted to take place due to a presidential order. A few months later, in April, two men, Emmanuel Gutiérrez and his nephew, Jimmy Antonio Bonilla Gutiérrez, were arrested in Nandaime, Granada after they performed The Passion of Christ with a street theatre group during Holy Week. Both men were reportedly sentenced to eight years in prison, as was a third man, Victor Tikay, a journalist who was arrested around the same time, after he posted footage of a prohibited Easter celebration online. CSW sources report that at least 10 Roman Catholic lay leaders are currently imprisoned.

During the first nine days of October 2023, six Roman Catholic priests¹⁷ were arbitrarily detained. On 11 October 2023, the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States (OAS) unanimously approved a resolution condemning the arrest of the six priests and urging the Nicaraguan government ‘to immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners... to refrain from repressing and arbitrarily detaining leaders of the Catholic Church... (and to) annul the norms that allow citizens to be arbitrarily deprived of their nationality.’ The six men were later released into forced exile along with six others who had been arbitrarily detained on various charges (see the section on forced expulsion). In December a further 16 Roman Catholic leaders were imprisoned, including the Bishop of Siuna, 13 priests and two seminarians.¹⁸

Forced expulsion

Over the period covered by this report, the government stepped up its drive to forcibly expel those deemed critical of government, stripping them of their Nicaraguan citizenship. Among those expelled were religious leaders and members of religion and belief communities. Many were political prisoners who were given the choice of remaining in prison or going into immediate forced exile.

On 9 February 2023, 222 political prisoners who had been sentenced to prison for committing acts undermining ‘the

independence, sovereignty, and self-determination of the people, for inciting violence, terrorism and economic destabilization’, were sent into forced exile in the US. According to an official list released by the government, included in the group were the seven men detained in August 2022 after Nicaraguan security forces stormed the Diocese of Matagalpa curia where they had been forcibly confined along with Bishop Álvarez Lagos and four others for 15 days.¹⁹ The men were found guilty of conspiracy against the state in January 2023 and were awaiting sentencing at the time of their expulsion.

Two additional priests, Father Oscar Danilo Benavidez Dávila and Father Enrique Martínez Gamboa, were listed among the prisoners deported on 9 February. On 16 January 2023 Father Benavidez Dávila was found guilty of the crimes of conspiracy, undermining national integrity, and the propagation of fake news and was sentenced to a cumulative eight years in prison. Father Martínez Gamboa was violently detained on 13 October 2022 and accused of damaging the integrity of the nation and propagation of fake news. He was held in El Chipote Prison.

Also among those sent into forced exile in February was Protestant Pastor Wilber Alberto Pérez. Pastor Pérez was arbitrarily detained on 15 December 2020 for promoting a campaign for ‘Christmas without Political Prisoners’ and was convicted on false charges of selling illegal drugs. In March 2021, he was sentenced to 12 years in prison and, according to CSW sources, was held in solitary confinement in a ‘punishment cell’ with no natural light.

Twelve Roman Catholic priests, arbitrarily detained on various charges and held as political prisoners for varying lengths of time, were released into forced exile in Italy in October. On 18 October, the government issued a statement naming the 12 priests²⁰ who had been released, claiming that it showed ‘the permanent will and commitment [of the Nicaraguan government] to find solutions. In January 2024 the government released into exile an additional two bishops, fifteen Roman Catholic priests and two seminarians.²¹

In a statement²² issued on 14 January 2024 the government thanked Pope Francis and other members of the Roman Catholic Church for ‘the very respectful and discreet

17 Ramón Esteban Angulo Reyes, José Iván Centeno, Cristóbal Gadea, Julio Ricardo Norori, Yessner Cipriano Pineda Meneses and Álvaro Toledo.

18 Carlos José Avilés Cantón, Fernando Isaías Calero Rodríguez, Marcos Francisco Díaz Prado, Óscar José Escoto Salgado, Jader Danilo Guido Acosta, Jhader Antonio Hernández Urbina, Silvio José Fonseca Martínez, Miguel Agustín Mantica Cuadra, Mikel Salvador Monterrey Arias, Isidoro del Carmen Mora Ortega, Tonny Daniel Palacio Sequeira, Gerardo José Rodríguez Pérez, Héctor del Carmen Treminio Vega, Alester de Jesús Sáenz Centeno, Pablo Antonio Villafranca Martínez and Raúl Antonio Zamora Guerra.

19 Sergio José Cárdenas Flores, Melkin Antonio Centeno Sequeira, José Luis Díaz Cruz, Sadiel Antonio Eugarríos, Darwin Esteylin Leiva Mendoza, Ramiro Reynaldo Tijerino Chávez and Raúl Antonio Vega González.

20 The priests who were sent into forced exile were: Osman José Amador Guillén, Ramón Esteban Angulo Reyes, José Iván Centeno Tercero, Cristóbal Reynaldo Gadea Velásquez, Manuel Salvador García Rodríguez, Yessner Cipriano Pineda Meneses, Jaime Iván Montesinos Saucedo, Julio Ricardo Norori Jiménez, Pastor Eugenio Rodríguez Benavides, Álvaro José Toledo Amador, José Leonardo Urbina Rodríguez and Fernando Israel Zamora Silva.

21 Among the group of leaders forced into exile were: Rolando José Álvarez Lagos, Isidoro del Carmen Mora Ortega, Carlos José Avilés Cantón, Silvio José Fonseca Martínez, Marcos Francisco Díaz Prado, Fernando Isaías Calero Rodríguez, Pablo Antonio Villafranca Martínez, Héctor del Carmen Treminio Vega, Mikel Salvador Monterrey Arias, Raúl Antonio Zamora Guerra, Gerardo José Rodríguez Pérez, Miguel Agustín Mantica Cuadra, Jhader Antonio Hernández Urbina, Alester de Jesús Sáenz Centeno, Tonny Daniel Palacio Sequeira, Jader Danilo Guido Acosta, Óscar José Escoto Salgado, Ismael Reineiro Serrano Gudiel and José Gustavo Sandino Ochoa.

22 “Gobierno de Nicaragua y Santa Sede acuerdan envío de Obispos, Sacerdotes y Seminaristas”, El 19 Digital, 14 January 2024; <https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:148277-gobierno-de-nicaragua-y-santa-sede-acuerdan-envio-de-obispos-sacerdotes-y-seminaristas>

coordination carried out to make possible the trip to the Vatican' for the group. Among the group was Bishop Isidoro del Carmen Mora Ortega, who was arrested on 20 December 2023 after he told his congregation that Nicaragua's bishops were 'united in prayer' for Bishop Álvarez Lagos.

While the majority of cases of forced expulsion involved men, some women were also targeted. At midnight on Sunday 2 July 2023, the PN broke into the property of the Fellowship of the Poor of Jesus Christ Foundation, based in León, where four Brazilian missionary nuns resided. The nuns had confirmed their plan to leave Nicaragua the following week after the MIGOB arbitrarily refused to renew their residence visas. The four missionaries were reportedly taken to an unknown destination and expelled the following day.

In another case, on 7 October 2023 at around 7am, Salvador Paguaga and María Asunción Salgado Duarte were arbitrarily detained in Ocotol, Nueva Segovia by two PN patrols led by the Nueva Segovia chief of police, José Balvino Huete. The pair managed the Nuestra Señora de La Asunción Church's social media A=accounts and Mr Paguaga formerly ran the parish radio station which was shut down in August 2022. They were held at the Judicial Assistance Offices of the Ocotol Police Delegation until early in the morning of 8 October 2023, when they were transferred to Police Station #3 of Managua, outside the jurisdiction of their department, where, legally, they should have been tried. Mr Paguaga and Ms Salgado Duarte were accused of 'undermining the sovereignty of Nicaragua' and violating Cybercrime Law 1055. According to CSW sources, Ms Salgado Duarte was stripped of her citizenship and was sent to the United States ten days after her arrest via a flight for which the government forced her family to pay. Mr. Paguaga remains imprisoned in La Modelo, awaiting trial.

Blocked from entering Nicaragua

Over the 12-month period covered by this report, the government prevented at least eight Roman Catholic priests from entering Nicaragua. This included both foreigners residing in Nicaragua and Nicaraguan nationals. The denial of entry was typically ordered by the General Directorate of Migration and Immigration (DGME) and the MIGOB.

On 27 March 2023 Father Néstor Mendoza, parish priest of María Reina de Palacagüina church in Palacagüina municipality, in the Madriz department, and part of the Diocese of Estelí, was denied entry into the country. Father Néstor Mendoza, a native of Uruguay, had been working in Nicaragua for three years, and the Congregation of the Divine Word to which he belongs has been working in the María Reina de Palacagüina parish for more than 25 years. The government did not give a reason for blocking his entry, which left his parish without a priest.

On 9 July 2023 Father Juan Carlos Sánchez, vicar of the San Francisco de Asís parish in Managua, and a Nicaraguan national, was preparing to return to Nicaragua when he was informed by the airline that his entry had been denied by the DGME. He was returning to Nicaragua following a trip to

Bolivia where he participated in a priestly ordination and a trip to the United States to visit relatives.

On 11 August 2023 two more priests were blocked from returning to Nicaragua. Father Tomás Sergio Zamora Calderón, parish priest of the Nuestro Señor de los Milagros Church of the Diocese of León and Chinandega in the Department of León, and Father William Mora Vega, parish priest of the Cristo Rey Church in the Diocese of Siuna in the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region, and both Nicaraguan nationals, were denied entry upon returning from a meeting with Pope Francis at the World Youth Day in Lisbon, Portugal. Father Zamora Calderón was in charge of Cáritas León which was forced to close earlier in 2023, as well as treasurer of the Diocese of León and Chinandega. Father Mora Vega was in charge of the Youth Ministry of the Diocese of Siuna. Five days later, another priest, Father Eladio Sanchez, was blocked from returning to Nicaragua to attend his brother's funeral.

Threats and harassment

The pastors and priests [and religious leaders from other religious groups] who are still in the churches are under surveillance and with conditions, and [at] every celebration there is police presence. The pastor or priest who resists participating in their [political] activities [has committed] a crime, some pastors say they do so because they do not want to go to prison.

FoRB defender

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.

In one case, a retired police commissioner was stationed outside an Assemblies of God church over a period of several months in 2023. On 8 September 2023 the former officer entered the church and recorded the content of the sermon and conversations between the congregants with a mobile phone, causing anxiety in the congregation. On his way out, the ex-policeman threatened the leader of women's ministry with the closure of the church and confiscation of the property '... if she continued to lead a (failed) coup d'état inciting the other members of the church.' The church leader, who has been a target of the government since 2022 when her husband was forced into exile, has since stopped attending the church. Sources told CSW that the pastor is also a target of the government, but he has refused to report his experiences out of concern that the church will be shut down and fear for his own life.

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. In April 2023 the Totogalpa Municipality police arrested Father Alfonso Zamora in his home, apparently after a pro-government schoolteacher recorded the priest praying for Bishop Álvarez Lagos and accused him of criticizing the government. The priest was held for two days, during which time he was interrogated. He was released on 21 April 2023 and warned to stop praying for Bishop Álvarez Lagos.

In one RACCS Department municipality, the PN has posted officers at a local Roman Catholic church daily since 12 October 2023. Each day the police monitor the movements of the two priests who work there, as well as with whom they meet and speak. Their Sunday service, including the content of sermons and prayers, is heavily monitored by the police, creating a high level of fear within the congregation and on the part of the two priests. The church, which has a tradition of commemorating the Last Supper each week with Holy Communion on Thursdays, has been prohibited from holding activities on weekdays or Saturdays.

Discrimination

The government decides to whom to extend its hand and to whom to close it, the Protestant churches that today shake the hand of the dictatorship could tomorrow be strangled by the same hand.

Human rights defender

The government's treatment of religious groups was not uniform. Several Protestant-Evangelical groups held large-scale, public events, 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. The government budget previously allocated to pay for cleaning services in public areas following religious festivities is now reserved for events held by a small group of Protestant-Evangelical churches and other groups supportive of the government.

On 21 July 2023 Reverend Omar Duarte of Ríos de Agua Viva Ministries, and director of Radio Maranatha, and who was present as a guest of honour at the 2022 inauguration of President Daniel Ortega, held the 'Vigil of Miracles', a large-scale event in Tipitapa Municipality, Managua. Two months later, on 2 September 2023, his ministry organised another large, public event with Moisés Duarte, Reverend Duarte's son. On 24 December 2023 the group held an end

of year public vigil on the land where the Rios de Agua Viva Colosseum is being built.

On 1 and 2 June 2023, the Billy Graham Foundation, headquartered in the United States, held an event, coordinated by Pastor Jorge Ulises Rivera, in Managua for the families of Protestant-Evangelical pastors. Two months later, on 19 and 20 August 2023, the Billy Graham Foundation Family Festival was held in Campo Elías Alonso in Matagalpa, bringing together 24,000 people. According to *Urnas Abiertas*, an iCSO committed to defending democracy in Nicaragua, government workers, identifiable by the logo on their clothing, were forced to attend and participate in these events.

Some religious groups have been granted privileges and access, apparently based on their willingness to express public support for President Ortega. The Ministries of Fire Nicaragua (*Ministerios de Fuego Nicaragua*), a Protestant-Evangelical group, has published numerous images and videos on its social media accounts showing pastors from its Apostolic and Prophetic Eagles in Conquest Foundation inside primary and public schools in Estelí Department holding evangelistic campaigns, hosting parties, and preaching to students and teachers with school administrative officers present. In at least one video, the pastor tells the students that President Ortega and Rosario Murillo are 'like kings that God put in Nicaragua to govern' and that as such they should be obeyed and honoured.²³

Privilege is not guaranteed, however. On 12 December 2023 Mountain Gateway, a Protestant-Evangelical organisation based in Texas and which operates in Nicaragua under the name *Puerta de la Montaña*, saw 11 Nicaraguan pastors arrested.²⁴ The organisation, registered in Nicaragua in 2015, was stripped of its legal status and its assets; 47 vehicles and four properties including a 122-acre farm, were confiscated.²⁵ In January the government announced that it was pursuing criminal charges against all those arrested, as well as three US citizens in absentia,²⁶ for alleged money laundering and organised crime.

In a statement on its website, the organisation stated that it held 'eight mass evangelistic gospel campaigns in the country, with the support and assistance of the Nicaraguan government' in 2023 and that it has 'documentation demonstrating that the Nicaraguan government viewed and approved all funds that entered the country, and the organization operated under the government's oversight to ensure that all funds were used and managed appropriately.' Sources told CSW that up until the events of December the organisation had enjoyed a close relationship with the government and had held events with the PN and other high level government officials. In one such event with the PN in

23 Facebook, Ministerio De Fuego Nicaragua, 7 September 2023; <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=211154198622682&ref=sharing>

24 Marcos Sergio Hernández Jirón, Harry Lening Rios Bravo, Manuel de Jesús Ríos Flores, José Luis Orozco Urrutia, Álvaro Daniel Escobar Caldera, Juan Carlos Chavarría Zapata, Juan Luis Moncada, Orvin Alexis Moncada Castellano, César Facundo Buralin Miranda, Walner Omier Blandón Ochoa and Maricela de Fátima Mejía Ruiz.

25 "It's egregious": Mountain Gateway experiencing religious persecution in Nicaragua; Pastors, attorneys jailed", Thomas, Erica, 1819 News, 5 February 2024; <https://1819news.com/news/item/its-egregious-mountain-gateway-experiencing-religious-persecution-in-nicaragua-pastors-attorneys-jailed>

26 Jon Britton Hancock, Jacob Britton Hancock and Cassandra Mae Hancock.

2020, the organisation's local representative, now in prison, praised Ortega and Murillo, and one of the US men facing criminal charges seemingly called for submission to the Nicaraguan government, quoting Bible verses and stating, that 'everyone must submit to public authorities, for there is no authority that God has not arranged; so those that exist were established by him.. [in the police] I see a life of service, dedication and love to the Nicaraguan people and they must submit to their authorities and also obey the highest authority, which is God.'²⁷

Conclusion

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, has become the norm. The reduction in numbers of political prisoners, especially religious leaders, through forced exile appears to now be government policy. It seems likely that this space will continue to shrink in the coming year as a climate of fear becomes entrenched.

The government has been unresponsive to UN and OAS communications. It maintains strong relationships with other human rights violators, including China, Cuba and Venezuela, and appears to be using 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.

Nicaragua has reached difficult situations up to this point. The Ortega-Murillo dictatorship already has total control of all powers, with which it can execute any plan for its party and family benefit. Here no

one can make comments on the street or on social networks. All of their collaborators are called to inform and execute everything directed from above. They have "the commander's order" in their mouths and if it is their people it is worse.

Nicaraguan FoRB defender

27 "Pastor Frank Shelton lleva mensaje de bendición y solidaridad a la Policía de Nicaragua", Sandino, Nohemy, El 19 Digital, 31 January 2020; <https://www.el19digital.com/articulos/ver/titulo:99552-pastor-frank-shelton-lleva-mensaje-de-bendicion-y-solidaridad-a-la-policia-de-nicaragua>

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T +44 (0)20 8329 0010
🐦 @CSWAdvocacy
f /CSWUK
csw.org.uk

PO Box 99
New Malden
Surrey, KT3 3YF
United Kingdom