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Another bishop arrested

Bishop Isidro Moran was arrested after speaking in a homily about Bishop Rolando Alvarez, who was sentenced by the regime to 26 years in prison

By **[Alix Champlon](#)**

[La Croix International](#) (28.12.2023) - A second bishop arrested in Nicaragua. Bishop Isidro Moran was on his way to celebrate confirmations in La Cruz de Rio Grande, a town in eastern Nicaragua, when he was taken away in a Nicaraguan police van. While the arrest was confirmed by ecclesiastical authorities to the Nicaraguan television channel *100% Noticias*, the location of the bishop and the two seminarians accompanying him was still unknown as of December 22.

Nicaraguan media and exiled attorney Martha Patricia Molina quickly drew a connection between the arrest of the bishop of Sinua on December 20, and his homily delivered the previous day in the St. Peter's Cathedral of Matagalpa, in the diocese of [Bishop Rolando Alvarez](#), who is imprisoned and sentenced to 26 years in prison.

He who must not be named

In front of the faithful celebrating the 99th anniversary of the canonical creation of their diocese, Bishop Isidro Moran prayed, on behalf of the episcopal conference, "for this dear Diocese of Matagalpa," but also for its bishop, "Bishop Rolando" Referring to the figure of the Good Shepherd, ready to give his life for his sheep, Bishop Moran's homily implicitly referenced Bishop Alvarez. "In discouragement, there are always people of faith, people who are there in silence, there to serve the Church, to persevere, to take responsibilities," reported *100% Noticias*.

For Martha Patricia, the mention of this name was enough to provoke the regime's anger. "In Nicaragua, it is forbidden for all bishops, priests, and laypeople to mention the name of Bishop Alvarez," the attorney concluded on X (formerly Twitter), the day after the bishop was taken. A prominent figure in the opposition to Daniel Ortega's regime, Bishop Alvarez was sentenced in February 2023 for "conspiracy and dissemination of false news." He has been in detention for more than 500 days.

For Nicaraguan human rights activist Haydee Castillo, who also spoke to the media outlet *100% Noticias*, the arrest of a second bishop is a clear message sent by the government, determined to "[annihilate in Nicaragua any minimal expression of solidarity](#) with political prisoners and detainees."

US Congress held a hearing for unjustly imprisoned Nicaraguan Catholic Bishop

- Foreign Affairs subcommittee heard testimony on case of Bishop Rolando Álvarez, sentenced to 26 years in prison for preaching on the human rights violations perpetrated by the Nicaraguan government.
- ADF International, which petitioned the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on behalf of the bishop, submitted a statement for the hearing record.

[ADF](#) - (30.11.2023) - Members of the House Foreign Affairs' Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations hosted a [hearing](#) titled "An Urgent Appeal to Let Bishop Álvarez go". Witness and expert testimony was provided on the ongoing human rights crisis in Nicaragua. US Members of congress, including Congressman Chris Smith (R-New Jersey), Congresswoman Susan Wild (D-Pennsylvania), and Congresswoman Maria Salazar (R-Florida) led and asked questions during the hearing that featured testimonies from three members of the Nicaraguan Catholic Church, who served as anonymous witnesses for their safety.

ADF International, which has submitted a petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on behalf of the bishop regarding violations of his rights to religious freedom and freedom of expression, has also submitted a statement to the record regarding legal abuses during his sham conviction and greater human rights violations of his case.

"We are grateful to the subcommittee for raising the critical issue of religious persecution in Nicaragua and for hosting this vital congressional hearing," said Kristina Hjelkrem, legal counsel for Latin America for ADF International, and lead lawyer on the bishop's case.

Hjelkrem continued: "Bishop Álvarez has been harassed and unjustly imprisoned by the Nicaraguan government for simply fulfilling his duties as a Catholic bishop. No person should be punished or prosecuted for expressing their faith, and we are thankful to the US Congress members who are joining us in advocating for the rights of Bishop Álvarez and all Nicaraguans whose rights have been violated. We will continue to seek justice for the bishop, and hopefully, put an end to the suppression of religious freedom in Nicaragua."

"The international community can no longer turn a blind eye to what is happening to the people of Nicaragua"

A part of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations has oversight of

issues and legislation pertaining to the implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and other matters relating to internationally-recognized human rights.

The subcommittee hosted today's hearing, which included testimony from two anonymous prisoners of conscience who were exiled from Nicaragua, and testimony from a mother of a Nicaraguan prisoner of conscience, who also remained anonymous. The hearing also featured testimony from Deborah Ullmer, the National Democratic Institute's Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean.

"Bishop Álvarez is an innocent man enduring unspeakable suffering. Today, we appeal to President Daniel Ortega: release him from prison, let Bishop Álvarez go," said Congressman Chris Smith, who also serves as the subcommittee chairman. "The international community can no longer turn a blind eye to what is happening to the people of Nicaragua, including, and especially, people of faith. Bishop Álvarez deserves to be respected and revered and free, not persecuted and incarcerated. We again appeal to President Daniel Ortega, let Bishop Álvarez go. Release him from prison. The United States needs to act quickly and use every single tool at our disposal," he further stated.

"What is inconceivable is that Daniel Ortega meddles or interferes with the Catholic Church. He's holding as a prisoner one of the most important members of the Catholic Church of Nicaragua for more than a year now," said Congresswoman Maria Salazar of Florida.

The hearing can be viewed in its entirety [here](#).

Imprisoned for the faith

The persecution of [Bishop Álvarez](#) by Nicaraguan authorities started on August 4, 2022, when police agents prevented him from leaving his residence, the Episcopal Curia of Matagalpa, to celebrate Mass at a nearby cathedral. The Bishop, along with seminarians, priests, and a cameraman, was forcibly detained by police in the diocesan offices for 15 days.

Later, on August 19, 2022, police forcibly entered the residence, and arbitrarily arrested Bishop Álvarez and seven other members of the Catholic Church without a warrant. Bishop Álvarez then was placed under house arrest by authorities.

Following the arrest, Nicaraguan authorities opened a criminal investigation into the bishop for the crimes of "undermining national integrity" and "propagation of false news through information and communication technologies". Bishop Álvarez later was found guilty of these crimes, along with "aggravated obstruction of functions" and "disobedience of contempt for authority".

The Bishop's charges were based on sermons that he had delivered from the pulpit as a result of what he considered a religious duty to preach on God-given freedoms and about governmental human rights violations. He was convicted after a trial that he did not know was taking place, and at which he, therefore, could not testify nor cross-examine witnesses.

Bishop Álvarez was deprived of his nationality and citizenship rights according to a problematic national law, and sentenced to 26 years and 4 months in

prison, in addition to being ordered to pay 800 days worth of fines, amounting to almost \$5000 USD. He now has been held in prison for 9 months, deprived of contact with legal representation.

In a clear media stunt aimed at diverting the international community's attention ahead of today's congressional hearing, the day immediately after the notice of the hearing was made, Nicaraguan authorities published a press release with the following statement, along with pictures and videos of Bishop Álvarez: "the conditions of confinement are preferential and the regime of medical consultations, family visits, remission and receipt of packages is strictly complied with, contrary to what slanderous campaigns pretend to make believe". Reliable sources assure that Álvarez's prison conditions are terrifying.

An appeal to the Managua Court of Appeals against the conviction resulting from the sham trial was refused on procedural grounds for failing to challenge specific parts of the judgment, which the court had not provided. Further, the Bishop initially was denied his lawyer of choice, and his legal representation since has been refused basic information about his case. There is no further effective legal recourse available to him in Nicaragua.

HRWF Comment: Database of FORB Prisoners

Christians – Catholics

[Rolando ALVAREZ](#)

[Leonardo Guevara GUTIERREZ](#)

Government cancels legal status of Jesuit order

The government of Nicaragua cancelled the legal status of the Society of Jesus, also known as the Order of Jesuits, on 22 August.

[CSW](#) (25.08.2023) - In a [statement](#) published in the Ministry of the Interior's official gazette, and approved by Minister Maria Amelia Coronel, the government accused the order of not reporting its 'financial statements' for the fiscal years 2020, 2021 and 2022, and of having an 'expired' board of directors since 2020, violating the provisions of Articles 34 and 35 of Law No. 1115, which establishes the regulation and control of non-profit organisations.

The statement orders the transfer of the order's bank accounts and movable and immovable property to the government of Nicaragua. It is expected that at least three schools administered by the society will be forced to close: Loyola, Centroamérica and Fe y Esperanza.

The cancellation comes just one week after the regime [cancelled](#) the legal status and froze the bank accounts of the Jesuit-run Central American University (UCA). At least 26 universities have been shut down in Nicaragua so far this year.

The government described the UCA as a 'centre of terrorism', blaming it for having 'betrayed the trust of the Nicaraguan people.' The Central American Province of the

Society of Jesus issued a [response](#) on August 16, clarifying that the accusations against the UCA are 'false and unfounded' stating: '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 19 August, the government also seized the homes of members of the Jesuit community in the capital, Managua. Another [statement](#) from the Central American Province of the Society of Jesus explained: 'The police appeared together with members of the judiciary at the home of the Jesuits Villa del Carmen residence, to demand their eviction arguing that this house is also government property.'

In May 2023, Deutsche Welle news [reported](#) that the government of Nicaragua had dissolved almost 3,500 registered non-governmental organisations (NGOs) since protests spread across the country in April 2018. Groups that have been shut down include environmental and human rights organisations, and others that provide medical, social and educational services to areas in need.

CSW's Head of Advocacy Anna Lee Stangl said: '***The Nicaraguan government's move to cancel the legal status of the Society of Jesus is alarming, if not surprising. The Ortega regime has repeatedly targeted religious institutions that have not allied with the dictatorship, and their efforts are intensifying. We call on the government to reverse the order targeting the Society of Jesus and all other civil society organisations who have been stripped of their legal status in recent years, to cease its harassment of religious leaders and institutions, and to release all those who have been arbitrarily detained or imprisoned. We urge international community to hold President Ortega and his regime to account for their ongoing crackdown on independent civil society and severe violations of human rights.***'

USCIRF condemns Nicaragua's 26-year prison sentence for Bishop Rolando Álvarez

[USCIRF](#) (14.02.2023) - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)) condemns the Nicaraguan government's [sentencing](#) of Catholic Bishop [Rolando Álvarez](#) to 26 years in prison for the alleged [crimes](#) of "undermining national security and sovereignty, spreading [fake news] through information technology, obstructing an official in the performance of his duties, [and] aggravated disobedience or contempt of authority." The Ortega regime imprisoned Bishop Álvarez for criticizing Nicaragua's religious freedom conditions after holding him under house arrest for six months and depriving him of due process.

"We are appalled that Bishop Álvarez will now serve 26 years in prison for raising concerns about Nicaragua's many religious freedom violations. This miscarriage of justice will not be forgotten," said USCIRF Commissioner [Frederick A. Davie](#). "USCIRF urges the U.S. government to call on the Nicaraguan government to release Bishop Álvarez immediately and unconditionally."

The Nicaraguan government, led by President Daniel Ortega and his wife Vice President Rosario Murillo, has [persecuted](#) the Catholic Church with increasing vigor over the past five years. In 2022, the regime targeted clergy, eliminated Church-affiliated organizations, and placed restrictions on religious observances. Additionally, the

government arrested and/or imprisoned nearly a dozen Catholic clergy and laypeople in 2022, including Bishop Álvarez.

On February 9, 2023, the regime [released](#) from prison and forced into exile 222 political prisoners who had been indefinitely held in jails, prisons, and under house arrest, including eight religious prisoners featured in USCIRF's [Freedom of Religion or Belief \(FoRB\) Victims List](#). Authorities reportedly gave Bishop Álvarez the opportunity to join the exiled prisoners, but he chose to stay in his native country to be with the Catholic community under repression by the Ortega regime. In [addition](#) to the prison sentence, he will be fined and stripped of his Nicaraguan citizenship.

"While the release of the 222 political prisoners was a welcome gesture by the Nicaraguan government, it is not enough. The subsequent sentencing of Bishop Álvarez demonstrates that the regime's campaign against the Catholic Church will not soon abate," said USCIRF Commissioner [Frank Wolf](#). *"The U.S. government should use every tool at their disposal to encourage the restoration of democracy and human rights in Nicaragua."*

USCIRF recently published a [country update](#) on religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua in 2022, held a [hearing](#) on the "Crackdown on Religious Freedom in Nicaragua," and discussed the situation in an [episode](#) of the USCIRF Spotlight Podcast.
