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## **Protestant, Catholic, Critic, Ally: No-one is safe**

[Forb in Full](#) (21.05.2024) - On Tuesday 12 December 2023, Nicaraguan security forces carried out an operation that would see 11 Protestant leaders arrested and detained across the country by the end of the day. The organisation with which the leaders were affiliated, Mountain Gateway, a Protestant organisation based out of Texas, and which has operated legally in Nicaragua since 2015 under the name *Puerta de la Montana*, was stripped of its legal status, and its assets, including 47 vehicles and four properties, were confiscated by the government.

One month later, the government announced that it was pursuing criminal charges against those detained as well as three United States citizens (in absentia), on accusations of money laundering and organised crime. Show trials, in which the government produced no evidence to back up the charges, were held, and in March 2024, the 11 detainees were sentenced to between 12 and 15 years in prison and fined \$80 million US dollars.

International outrage was immediate and sustained. Mountain Gateway has published numerous statements decrying the arrest of its leaders and expressing incomprehension at the false charges, referencing the positive relationship organisation had with the Nicaraguan government up until shortly before the December arrests. Members of the United States Congress have called for the release of the imprisoned Mountain Gateway church leaders, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has added them to the Frank B. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List, and the Inter American Commission for Human Rights has granted precautionary measures in favour of the Mountain Gateway prisoners.

There is no question that the group has suffered serious human rights violations. The case has helped to expand scrutiny of violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) experienced by the Roman Catholic Church, which has been brutally and systematically targeted by the Nicaraguan government over the past few years, to the experience of other religious groups, including Protestants, who, according to various surveys, now make up around 40% of the population.

***Because of the high profile of the Mountain Gateway case, however, there is a risk that it may be interpreted as emblematic of the experience of Protestants in Nicaragua, or as an anomaly. It is neither.***

Over the past few years, Protestant Christians' experiences of FoRB violations have received far less attention than those of the Roman Catholic Church, both domestically and internationally. There are various reasons for this. Many are connected to the nature of the two groups, specifically the Roman Catholic Church's structure, as a single religious organisation spread geographically across the country and with a clear and very public facing hierarchy. In contrast, the Protestant Church, is made up of many different denominations and independent churches, some of which may be dominant in one part of the country and absent in another, and which do not necessarily work together or even communicate with one another.

For the most part, the regime of President Daniel Ortega and his wife and vice-president, Rosario Murillo, has responded to these two realities strategically, with a full-frontal assault on the Roman Catholic Church, especially targeting the hierarchy, and reserving more subtle but no less effective tactics targeting individual Protestant churches and their leaders.

Violations reported by Protestant leaders are similar in many ways to those experienced by their Roman Catholic compatriots. These include restrictions on the length, location, and frequency of religious services, a ban on public activities, government interference with religious activities in the form of disruption or acts of intimidation, the planting of informants in congregations, and the forced closure and confiscation of affiliated educational institutions and local charities.

Such violations affecting Protestants are widespread and common, but all too often go unreported. The victims either lack relevant internal structures within their denomination and have no idea to whom they should report the FoRB violations they have experienced or are experiencing, or they are too afraid, citing the not unlikely outcome that, by doing so, they will exacerbate the situation, putting themselves, family members, or members of their congregations at risk of violence, arbitrary detention or forced disappearance.

The government's relentless targeting of the Roman Catholic Church has continued into 2024, despite the imprisonment and forced exile of scores of its leaders. Many lay leaders remain in prison. Similarly, in the first quarter of the year, CSW has documented the forced closure and confiscation of numerous Protestant institutions and properties including churches, local charities, media outlets and schools in different parts of the country. Although those affected have been willing to report their experiences to CSW, in every case they have done so with the understanding that the details will be kept confidential for the reasons outlined above.

***The Nicaraguan government has also borrowed strategies from the Cuban government, seeking to create an illusion of respect for FoRB, in part by fomenting division within the Protestant Church, elevating some groups or leaders for privileged treatment in return for their public support of the regime, including denials that the government violates FoRB in any way.***

While the requests of many Protestant churches and denominations across the country, like their Roman Catholic counterparts, to hold public events are systematically refused, others, like the Ríos de Agua Vivo Ministries, whose leader Reverend Omar Duarte was present as a guest of honour at President Ortega's 2022 inauguration, and The Billy Graham Foundation, were authorised on multiple occasions in 2023 to hold large-scale public events, often carried out with the approval and overt support of the government, including the allocation of government funds and visible presence of high ranking officials.

At the same time as the government has been systematically shutting down, stripping the legal status and confiscating the properties of Roman Catholic and Protestant run

schools of all levels – from pre-school to university, a few Protestant groups have been invited by the government into primary and secondary schools, where they have proselytized assemblies of students and teachers while also cynically promoting support for the president and vice president.

[The Ministries of Fire Nicaragua](#) (*Ministerios de Fuego Nicaragua*), for example, 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 encouraging students and teachers in the presence of school administrative officers to convert. In at least one video, the pastor tells the students that President Ortega and Vice-President Murillo are *'like kings that God put in Nicaragua to govern'* and that as such they should be obeyed and honoured.<sup>1</sup>

Mountain Gateway was one of these groups, supportive of and supported by the Nicaraguan regime, until only a few months ago. It is still unclear what changed in the relationship between the Mountain Gateway group and the Nicaraguan government and speculation has run rampant. Unlike the myriad cases involving imprisoned Roman Catholic bishops, priests and lay leaders who have been critical of the government and its policies or made public calls for respect for FoRB, those affiliated with the Mountain Gateway group regularly voiced their enthusiasm for the regime of President Ortega and Vice-President Murillo.

In a 2020 event with leaders of the National Police, including some directly implicated in serious human rights violations, Pastor Walner Omier Blandón, one of the 11 imprisoned Mountain Gateway leaders, praised Ortega and Murillo as well as the police, declaring 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 [the Nicaraguan people] must submit to their authorities and also obey the highest authority, which is God.'*<sup>2</sup> In 2023, Mountain Gateway held eight large scale events across the country, not only with permission but with the active support and engagement of the Nicaraguan authorities.

In the dearth of clear reasons for the government's attack on the Mountain Gateway group, many Nicaraguan religious leaders, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, and human rights organisations have appeared conflicted when it comes to speaking out about the case. Some leaders have expressed a fear that that the case has overshadowed the ongoing experiences of the many Protestant leaders who have been quietly carrying out their work over the last few years despite threats and intimidation. Others remain suspicious of the group given its history of support for the regime. Whatever the reasons behind the government's turn on the Mountain Gateway group, however, it is clear that the 11 leaders did not receive fair trials and serious violations of human rights have been committed.

While the case is unusual in many ways, the government's targeting of the Mountain Gateway group must still be understood within the larger crackdown on independent civil society, including on the Roman Catholic Church and on Protestant groups. It is not slowing down, and it is not growing less harsh. Discretion, attempting to stay carefully within the parameters of the law, avoiding 'politics', and remaining silent in the face of injustice experienced by others will no longer be sufficient to keep one and one's religious group safe. Neither will obsequiousness. If the Ortega Murillo regime can come for Mountain Gateway, they can come for anyone, at any moment. The government is blasting out a clear, unambiguous message to all religious groups: no one is safe in Nicaragua.

**By CSW's Head of Advocacy and Americas Team Leader Anna Lee Stangl**

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## **New Report finds worsening violations of freedom of religion or belief**

[CSW](#) (13.02.2024) – Christian Solidarity Worldwide has published a [new report](#) which finds that the number and severity of violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Nicaragua have continued to grow.

The [report](#), entitled 'Hostile takeover: Tightening reins on freedom of religion or belief in Nicaragua', covers the period from November 2022 through January 2024, during which CSW recorded 310 separate FoRB cases, most of which involved multiple FoRB violations and in some instances affected thousands of people. This is a significant increase on 156 cases which were documented in a previous report which covered the period of November 2021 through November 2022.

The report is based on firsthand documentation provided by Nicaraguan human rights defenders (HRDs) in the country, in co-ordination with other Nicaraguan HRDs who have been forced into exile.

The most commonly reported FoRB violations during the period covered by the report were those involving the arbitrary cancellation of religious events, activities or services as 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.

Other documented violations against members of religion or belief communities and religious leaders include, but are not limited to, threats, harassment, denial of entry or re-entry to Nicaragua, the forced closure of religious institutions among that of hundreds of independent civil society organisations, and the imposition of property taxes on religious institutions in contravention of domestic law exempting them from such taxes. The report also finds that 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. 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.

The government also stepped up its drive to forcibly expel those deemed critical of the government, stripping them of their Nicaraguan citizenship. The practice appears to have become government policy, as exemplified by the expulsion of [222 political prisoners](#) in February 2023, of 12 [Roman Catholic priests](#) in October 2023, and a further 19 [Roman Catholic political prisoners](#) in January 2024.

CSW's Head of Advocacy Anna Lee Stangl said: 'This report demonstrates just how severely the situation of freedom of religion or belief and other human rights has continued to deteriorate in Nicaragua over the past year, and how it will continue to do so if the international community does not increase its efforts to hold the Nicaraguan government to account for its crimes. In the bleakness of the situation, the Nicaraguans in the country, and in exile, who, despite grave risk, continue to defend human rights

and to work to restore democracy cannot be forgotten. CSW thanks all those still inside Nicaragua who went to great lengths to carry out the documentation on which this report is based. CSW stands with all those working for a free and democratic Nicaragua in which the rights of all are respected.'

[Click here to download CSW's new report on Nicaragua as a PDF.](#)

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## Nicaragua jails pastors for alleged 'money laundering'

- **347 Christian buildings shut down, confiscated or destroyed from 1 October 2022 to 30 September 2023**
- **342 religious organizations, including 256 evangelical Christian associations, 43 Catholic ones and 43 others closed or dissolved**

By [Edward Ross](#)



*Jon Britton Hancock of Mountain Gateway at evangelistic event in Nicaragua in 2023. | (Mountain Gateway)*

[Christian Daily](#) (19.01.2024) - Authorities in Nicaragua have jailed nine pastors for more than a month on charges that they formed part of a criminal operation along with three U.S. missionaries, according to the mission organization.

The Nicaraguan Attorney General's office has charged the three U.S. missionaries of Texas-based Mountain Gateway and 11 Nicaraguans with forming part of a "criminal structure" involved in money laundering and organized crime and has reportedly issued warrants for their arrest.



"Mountain Gateway would like to publicly state it denies these allegations, and it is saddened by this situation," the group said in a press statement. "These charges are based on erroneous information, and Mountain Gateway will do everything in its power to resolve this through diplomatic channels."

Mountain Gateway, which operates in the Central American country as Puerta de la Montaña, said prosecutors believed the Nicaraguan pastors were under the direction of the mission group's Jon Britton Hancock, Jacob Britton Hancock and Cassandra Mae Hancock, all U.S. citizens, and Nicaraguans Walner Omier Blandón Ochoa and Maricela de Fátima Mejía Ruiz.

"While the Nicaraguan government says the [Nicaraguan] pastors are innocent, the pastors have been imprisoned for over a month with no legal representation or contact with their families," Mountain Gateway stated. At the same time, it added that the government has since "allowed a lawyer to be appointed to represent the Mountain Gateway Nicaraguan pastors but has not provided their legal counsel with the charging documents or any files to prepare a defense."

Mountain Gateway stated that it had diligently followed all legal requirements in the U.S. and Nicaragua and had documentation showing the Nicaraguan government approved all funds entering the country and ensured they were used appropriately.

"Nicaragua has revoked the registration of hundreds of non-profit and faith-based organizations in the last five years, including most recently, expelling numerous members of the Catholic Church and seizing church property," the group stated. "In these cases, the government often includes the charge of money laundering or other financial charges as the reason for revocation."

Mountain Gateway held eight large evangelistic events in Nicaragua last year under strict accounting by in-house staff and budget reviews by the Nicaraguan government, the group stated.

"No members of Mountain Gateway have personally profited from funds sent to Nicaragua for ministry functions," it said.

The missions group announced on Dec. 22 that the Nicaraguan government had canceled its registration as a ministry in the country.

**Nicaragua shut down, confiscated or destroyed 347 Christian buildings from Oct. 1, 2022 to Sept. 30, 2023**, the fourth highest worldwide behind only China, India and Nigeria, according to Open Doors' 2024 World Watch List (WWL) of the countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian. Nicaraguan authorities detained 38 Christians during this period, according the WWL report.

Open government hostility toward Christians during the period resulted in Nicaragua vaulting from 50th place the prior year to 30th among the 50 countries where persecution of Christians is worst. The WWL report also cited Nicaragua's legislative restrictions on religious freedom and the arrest or exile of religious leaders.

Mountain Gateway said in its press statement that its U.S. pastors “have nothing to hide and have requested to have an attorney appointed to represent them in this legal process.”

“Mountain Gateway does not understand why this is happening in a country that it loves dearly and has worked steadfastly to abide by the government’s regulations and laws,” the group stated. “While Mountain Gateway’s attorney and legal team are advising Mountain Gateway to trust the legal system, it does have questions. It appears this could be more politically motivated than legally motivated.”

**Imprisoned were nine of Mountain Gateway’s Nicaraguan pastors: 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 Burgalin Miranda.**

The AP reported that the Prosecutor’s Office said in a press statement that 11 Nicaraguans were charged, along with the legal representative and financial manager of Puerta de la Montaña. Prosecutors claimed that detailed investigations into money laundering showed the 13 nationals were allegedly involved in appearing as representatives in the purchase of real estate.

**The government of Daniel Ortega has closed or dissolved 342 religious organizations, including 256 evangelical Christian associations, 43 Catholic ones and 43 belonging to other churches,** according to The AP, citing a December report by Nicaragua Never Again Human Rights Collective. Ortega has been president since 2007, after having previously led the country from 1979 to 1990.

The government has set a hearing for the Nicaraguan pastors on Jan. 26.

Mountain Gateway Order, Inc., based in Dripping Springs, Texas, states on its website that it focuses on discipling national leaders through house churches and corporate worship and training national pastors to reach the lost in their nation. Mountain Gateway also runs a ministry training school in the United States to teach believers to take the gospel into any context or culture.

“Since 2013, Mountain Gateway has served the citizens of Nicaragua through discipleship, church planting, feeding and clothing those in need, providing food, water, equipment, and recovery assistance during natural disasters, and sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ in mass evangelistic campaigns,” the group said in its press statement.

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## **Bishop Alvarez Lagos among 19 Catholic prisoners released and expelled from the country**

[CSW](#) (15.01.2024) - Roman Catholic Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos was expelled from Nicaragua on 14 January, almost a year after he was [sentenced](#) to 26 years and four months in prison on unfounded [charges](#) of conspiracy against the state.

According to a [statement](#) from the Nicaraguan government, Bishop Álvarez Lagos was one of 19 Roman Catholic political prisoners who were expelled to the Vatican. Also 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.

In its statement on 14 January the government thanked Pope Francis and other members of the Roman Catholic Church for 'the very respectful and discreet coordination carried out to make possible the trip to the Vatican' for the group, which also included 15 priests and two seminarians.

Bishop Álvarez Lagos – a prominent critic of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega – was placed under house arrest on 19 August 2022. On 10 February 2023, he was sentenced to 26 years and four months in prison in a summary trial one day after the Nicaraguan government [released](#) 222 political prisoners into exile in the United States. The bishop was stripped of his Nicaraguan nationality and his civil rights for life, and was also not among a group of 12 other political prisoners – all Roman Catholic priests – who were [released](#) into exile in Rome in October 2023.

CSW's Head of Advocacy Anna Lee Stangl said: 'While CSW welcomes the news that these religious leaders are now free, this should not be interpreted as a gesture of good will on the part of the government. Bishop Álvarez Lagos, Bishop Mora Ortega and the 17 others have been forced to leave their country because the government compels those who are critical of the regime to choose between prison or exile. We continue to call for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners in Nicaragua, for the restoration of citizenship for Bishop Álvarez Lagos and all others who have been stripped of their nationality, and for the international community to hold President Ortega to account for the campaign to eliminate independent voices in the country.'

Note to Editors:

1. The full list of those released is as follows:

1. Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos
2. Bishop Isidoro del Carmen Mora Ortega
3. Oscar José Escoto Salgado
4. Jader Danilo Guido Acosta
5. Pablo Antonio Villafranca Martínez
6. Carlos José Avilés Cantón
7. Héctor del Carmen Treminio Vega
8. Marcos Francisco Diaz Prado
9. Fernando Isaías Calero Rodríguez
10. Silvio José Fonseca Martínez
11. Mikel Salvador Monterrey Arias
12. Raúl Antonio Zamora Guerra
13. Miguel Agustín Mántica Cuadra
14. Jhader Antonio Hernández Urbina
15. Gerardo José Rodríguez Pérez
16. Ismael Reineiro Serrano Gudiel
17. José Gustavo Sandino Ochoa
18. Tonny Daniel Palacio Sequeira
19. Alester de Jesús Sáenz Centeno



## Over a dozen Catholic clergymen in jail

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (08.01.2024) - In Nicaragua, 2023 ended with more than a dozen Catholic clergy in jail, the [USCIRF Database of religious prisoners](#) documenting 17 cases as of 8 January 2024. President Daniel Ortega is [reported](#) to have "ordered the arrest of, forced into exile, and verbally attacked priests and bishops, labeled them 'criminals' and 'coup-plotters,' and accused them of inciting violence." The most recent arrests took place on New Year's Eve.

### *Six former employees of Caritas sentenced to six years in prison*

A new report says that as 2024 begins, the Ortega regime has arrested and detains [2 bishops, 15 priests and 2 seminarians](#).

On 24 December 2023 (Christmas Eve), the government [sentenced](#) to six years imprisonment on dubious money laundering charges six lay staff members from a now-closed diocesan chapter of the Catholic charity Caritas: **Julio Sevilla, Julio Berríos, Bladimir Pallés, María Verónica Herrera Galeano, Freydell Andino, and Mariví Andino**.

This follows several other attacks against religious leaders over the months, including the sentencing of [Bishop Rolando Álvarez](#) to 26 years imprisonment, expelling religious prisoners of conscience to the United States and the Vatican, and shuttering Catholic charitable and educational institutions such as the Jesuit-run University of Central America.

### *Bishop Rolando Alvarez sentenced to 26 years in prison*

Rolando Álvarez, bishop of the Matagalpa diocese, is imprisoned for criticizing religious freedom conditions.

On 4 August 2022, police prevented Álvarez from leaving his home to perform mass at a local cathedral after he criticized the government's closure of several Catholic radio stations and its human rights record. Álvarez remained under de facto house arrest as authorities investigated him for "organizing violent groups" and encouraging them "to carry out acts of hate against the population."

On 19 August 2022, police arrested Álvarez from his residence. It is reported that he was taken to Managua and placed under house arrest in his parents' home.

In December 2022, a court ordered that Álvarez remain under house arrest on charges of "conspiracy" and "spreading false news." He was also accused of "damaging the Nicaraguan government and society."

On 10 February 2023, a court sentenced Álvarez to 26 years in prison after he declined to be exiled to the United States the day before. Álvarez was reportedly convicted of several charges, including treason, undermining national integrity and spreading false news. He was also fined and stripped of his citizenship.

Álvarez is imprisoned at Sistema Penitenciario Nacional Jorge Navarro in Tipitapa.

Around Christmas 2023, the government arbitrarily arrested and detained **Bishop Isidro Mora** (on 20 December), **Father Pablo Villafranca** (on 26 December) and **Father**

**Silvio Fonseca** (on 29 December), each of whom offered prayers for the wrongfully imprisoned Bishop Rolando Álvarez prior to their arrests. (Source: USCIRF).

### ***Statement of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights***

Recent months (and years) have seen a crackdown by the Nicaraguan government against religious leaders and religious institutions in the country.

Martha Patricia Molina, a Nicaraguan lawyer and author of the study *Nicaragua: A Persecuted Church?* reports that the Ortega government has carried out more than 770 arrests, attacks, expropriations and harassments against the Catholic Church, including "impediments to processions, prayers, masses in cemeteries," as well as spread hate messages, since 2018.

2022 saw [shutdowns and confiscations](#) of assets belonging to several organizations linked to the Roman Catholic Church, including the Catholic University of Dry Tropic Farming and Livestock, several schools in the Estelí diocese, and Saint Teresa of Calcutta's Missionaries of Charity, whose members were expelled from Nicaragua.

Because of these attacks, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) [condemned](#) the "escalating repression against members of the Roman Catholic Church in Nicaragua."

IACHR [classified](#) the acts as "systematic persecution, criminalization, harassment, police hounding, stigmatizing comments by State authorities, and, more generally, acts of repression targeting members of the Roman Catholic Church in Nicaragua, due to its mediation efforts in the national talks of 2018 and its critical position to denounce human rights violations committed in the context of Nicaragua's ongoing crisis."

### ***Nicaragua, a Country of Particular Concern in Washington***

On 4 January 2024, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)) issued a statement strongly condemning the Nicaraguan government. USCIRF Vice Chair Frederick A. Davie said that "USCIRF is outraged that the Nicaraguan government has chosen to continue its brutal crackdown on members of the Catholic Church for speaking out about the religious freedom and human rights violations occurring in the country."

USCIRF Commissioner [Frank Wolf](#) added: "We urge the U.S. Congress to help stem these egregious religious freedom violations and hold violators accountable by passing the bipartisan [Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights in Nicaragua Act of 2023](#). This bill expands the U.S. government's ability to sanction officials responsible for religious freedom and human rights violations and ensures the U.S. government's support for the United Nations Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua, which is working diligently to investigate all alleged human rights violations and abuses committed in the country since 2018."

Because of the dire situation in Nicaragua, in its [2023 Annual Report](#), USCIRF recommended the U.S. Department of State redesignate Nicaragua as a Country of Particular Concern for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.

On 4 January 2024, Secretary Blinken ultimately [announced](#) that he designated Nicaragua, among other countries, as a Country of Particular Concern (CRC) for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

