

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING ON CRACKDOWN ON RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM IN NICARAGUA

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Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Nury Turkel, Chair
David Curry
Frederick A. Davie
Eric Ueland
Frank R. Wolf

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR TURKEL: Good afternoon. Welcome to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing, Crackdown on Religious Freedom in Nicaragua.

I'd like to begin by thanking our distinguished witnesses for joining us and offering their expertise today. I also wanted to thank my fellow commissioners for taking the time to join in today's hearing.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or commonly known as USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body, created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA.

The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the United States government.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing. Today's hearing will examine religious

freedom in Nicaragua under President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo. We will hear from witnesses about the increasing severity of President Ortega's crackdown on religious communities and how the United States policy toward Nicaragua can more effectively address religious freedom concerns.

President Ortega achieved his grip on power by crippling democratic institutions. He and his party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, have come to exercise authority and control over all sectors of the government and the electoral process.

In the run-up to his 2021 reelection, Ortega arrested, disqualified numerous opposition candidates, imprisoned other critical figures, such as journalists, human rights defenders, and raided independent news organizations.

President Ortega's increasing repression of religious freedom began with lashing out at the Catholic Church after it aided demonstrators and individual Catholic clergy who voiced opposition to

the government during the peaceful protests in April 2018.

Since then, government actors, citizens sympathetic to the Ortega regime have, with impunity, routinely intimidated and harassed worshippers, violently targeted churches, and harassed clergy with tactics, including defamatory accusations, arbitrary arrests, death threats on social media, deportation, and violent attacks.

This year, the Nicaraguan government has increased its pattern of harassment against the Catholic Church with actions that have clearly crossed the threshold of severity not previously witnessed.

Notably, Catholic clergy have come under direct detention and imprisonment with some priests facing multiple years in prison on suspicious charges.

In March, the government expelled the papal nuncio, the Vatican's chief diplomat in the country, for unexplained reasons.

In August, the authorities surrounded the

home of Bishop Rolando Alvarez, an outspoken critic of the regime, and arrested him and several of his companions.

Bishop Alvarez has now been under house arrest for over two-and-a-half months under the pretext of organizing violent groups and encouraging them to carry out acts of hate against the population.

Additionally, the government has turned its wrath on Catholic-affiliated organizations by arbitrarily shutting down charities and expelling their workers, stripping universities of funding and legal status, shutting down news media, and eliminating non-governmental organizations.

Officials also needlessly cancelled or significantly reduced the observance of several Catholic masses, processions, and rituals.

Now, I would like to give the floor to Commissioner Fred Davie to provide more context for today's hearing.

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: Thank you very much, Chair Turkel.

I would like to join in welcoming everybody to today's hearing and add my thanks to our witnesses for taking time to be here today.

Several important areas of interest we would like to discuss today include an explanation of how President Ortega and Vice President Murillo transformed Nicaragua into a corrupt, illiberal democracy; a detailed summary of current religious freedom conditions; and the response from the Roman Catholic hierarchy to these threats that their clergy and worshippers are facing.

Witnesses will give an overview of current U.S. strategy in deterring the Ortega dictatorship's persecution of religious communities, such as through targeted sanctions, promoting human rights and religious freedom, and working with allies in the region.

We also intend to explore additional options for U.S. policy, considering some of the ways that the U.S. government and international community can better work to protect religious freedom of all Nicaraguans.

I would like to add that this hearing is particularly timely. Last month, the Biden administration announced a slate of new sanctions against individuals and entities in Nicaragua to, quote, "hold the Ortega-Murillo regime accountable for its escalating human rights violations, continued dismantling of democratic institutions, attacks on civil society and increasing security cooperation with Russia." End quote.

These measures put pressure on Nicaragua's gold sector, allow for future trade restrictions, and impose visa restrictions on more than 500 individuals who, quote, "work for the Nicaraguan government or formulate, implement, or benefit from policies or actions that undermine or injury democratic institutions." End quote.

Thank you all for being here. I will now turn the floor back to Chair Turkel.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Commissioner Davie.

Now, we have pre-recorded remarks from Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart, who is the senior

member of the House Committee on Appropriations.

I would like to give the floor to Congressman Diaz-Balart for his recorded remarks.

MR. DIAZ-BALART: [Pre-recorded remarks as follows:] Thank you to the Commission on International Religious Freedom for hosting this important hearing on the relentless crackdown on religious freedom in Nicaragua.

In September 2022, I sent a letter on this issue to Ambassador-at-Large Rashad Hussain, at the Department of State's Office of Religious Freedom, calling for action on the escalating suppression of religious freedom in Nicaragua.

The Biden administration imposed new sanctions on the Ortega dictatorship this year, but much more remains to be done.

We must continue to maintain solidarity with the Nicaraguan people by cutting off resources to the abusers and hold perpetrators accountable for their human rights abuses.

Examples of the Ortega crackdown on religious freedom and religious leadership are

unfortunately very plentiful.

In March, the Ortega regime expelled the nuncio from Nicaragua. In July, the Ortega dictatorship expelled Missionaries of Charity, an organization founded by Mother Teresa that had been working in Nicaragua since 1988.

Additionally, Bishop Rolando Alvarez was arrested on August 19th, and eight of his associates were additionally imprisoned.

At least seven other priests have been arrested since June of this year. Priest Uriel Vallejos, who managed a Catholic radio station was forced into hiding when state securities surrounded his home. Ortega and his wife have harassed religious leaders, calling them coup plotters and terrorists.

The State Department's 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom condemned Ortega's followers, Sandinistas, and high-level members of Ortega's dictatorship for having conducted widespread systematic harassment of religious leaders and worshippers.

This religious persecution earned Nicaragua a place on the Special Watch List for having, quote, "for having engaged or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom." End of quote.

The Ortega regime displays the utter disdain for religious organizations and the fundamental right of religious freedom for the people of Nicaragua. And certainly the abuses of the Ortega regime deserve a lot more attention, as do the regime's expanded number of victims.

So, again, thank the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for its focus on the reprehensible escalating suppression of religious freedom and religion in general taking place in Nicaragua under the Ortega dictatorship today.

We must all, all, keep the pressure on until the Nicaraguan people are finally free to speak, to associate, to vote, and to worship as they please.

Thank you very much.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart, who has been a champion of religious freedom and human rights issues, not only in Nicaragua, but also in other countries.

Now, I'd like to give the virtual floor to Congresswoman Maria Elvira Salazar, who has provided us a pre-recorded remarks.

Representative Salazar is a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and champion of the RENACER Act.

MS. SALAZAR: [Pre-recorded remarks as follows:] Thank you to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom for the invitation to speak on this important topic.

Nicaragua is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a Christian. The dictator in Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, has dared to attack the Catholic Church in an attempt to eliminate any threat to his authority.

He wants to destroy the Catholic faith because it is the only organization which will not

bow down before him.

Their only allegiance is to God. I fought hard as a member of Congress to pass the RENACER law to ensure that his dictatorship is not allowed another dollar from the United States taxpayers.

No more sweet deals for Ortega. We cannot compromise our defense of freedom. Although we have seen some steps in the right direction, we cannot be satisfied by the half-measures taken by the White House, such as sanctioning gold trade with Nicaragua.

I'm also calling on the IMF and the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank to suspend all lending to Ortega's regime.

And thank you to the Commission for hosting this hearing, and together we can cut the oxygen from Ortega's repressive apparatus.

And I will end with a personal reminder to both him, the dictator Ortega, and his wife, Rosario Murillo, you will not be able to escape history. The church, the Catholic Church, has outlived every king, every empire and every

dictator that has ever lived, and it will surely outlive you.

Thank you for allowing me to participate.

CHAIR TURKEL: We want to thank Congresswoman Salazar for her remarks.

Now, I would like to turn to our witnesses. We will have in our first witness panel testimony from Patrick Ventrell, who is the Director of the Office for Central American Affairs at the U.S. State Department.

Mr. Ventrell, you may begin your testimony.

MR. VENTRELL: Thank you so much, and thank you for the opportunity to be here today to speak about freedom of religion or belief concerns in Nicaragua, and to implore all those here today and the international community to continue our fight for fundamental freedoms throughout the world.

Promoting respect for human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, is a core part of our foreign policy in Nicaragua.

As Secretary Blinken has noted before, freedom of religion or belief has been central to the American experience since our nation's inception. It is a cherished American value and universal human right.

Our own experience compels us to advocate for the rights of marginalized and underrepresented individuals around the world.

The United States maintains its unwavering support to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief for all.

We remain committed to working with civil society and governments to confront global challenges, including blasphemy and apostasy laws or other efforts to criminalize forms of speech and expression, discriminatory laws and abuses by authorities, or excessive and onerous government regulation of religion and religious life.

Whether by shining a spotlight on the worst offenders and abuses of religious freedom or seeking justice for victims and accountability for perpetrators of such abuses, we must work to

advance international religious freedom together.

The Department of State recognizes the current situation in Nicaragua as critical, and we continue to use all diplomatic and economic tools at our disposal to promote accountability for abuses, perpetrated by the regime and those who support it, and help the Nicaraguan people restore democracy and rule of law in their country.

The Ortega-Murillo regime has dramatically increased its efforts to erode respect for democratic principles and human rights in Nicaragua, including harassment and unjust imprisonment of democratic leaders, members of the political opposition, students, journalists, and now religious leaders, including eight Catholic priests and a bishop since June.

One year ago today, on November 15, 2021, Secretary Blinken again placed Nicaragua on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom.

The Secretary is required by the International Religious Freedom Act, as amended, to

publicly designate countries 180 days following the release of the International Religious Freedom Report.

This year, we will get all the facts, data, and evidence, as the law requires. We make the decision to recommend designating or not, designating a given country, in collaboration with multiple offices across the State Department.

Senior U.S. government officials repeatedly call upon the regime to cease violence against and attacks on Catholic clergy, parishioners, and churches.

As President Biden has said, members of the Nicaraguan National Police, along with violent mobs, program supporters, also controlled by government actors, have attacked religious institutions in retaliation for their support for political and religious leaders.

In September, on the margins of the U.N. General Assembly, our Ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom, Rashad Hussain, publicly called on Nicaragua to immediately release

unjustly detained Catholic clergy so that they could return to their ministries.

We remain concerned about government-associated groups that continue to harass, assault and make death threats against Catholic clergy.

We also express concern for the continuing verbal harassment and inflammatory rhetoric directed at religious leaders from President Daniel Ortega himself and Vice President Rosario Murillo who have labeled priests and bishops "terrorists in cassocks," and coup plotters, accused them of committing crimes, including so-called "crimes against spirituality" and threaten them with prosecution on trumped up accusations of inciting hatred against pro-government supporters.

The State Department condemns the Ortega-Murillo regime's continued arrests of Catholic clergy, expulsion of religious actors, hounding in exile Catholic priests, denied entry and reentry of religious actors into the country, including Nicaraguan citizens, and its shuttering of Catholic radio stations, faith-based organizations, and the

Catholic University in Nicaragua.

We continue to work with our interagency partners to impose economic sanctions and visa restrictions, as appropriate, in connection with members of the regime and its supporters, including some of those involved in harassment and imprisonment of clergy.

This is part of our broader strategy to press Nicaragua to change course, unconditionally release all political prisoners, and to take concrete steps to restore democracy.

The Office of International Religious Freedom collaborates across the department to collect data on the perpetrators of religious freedom violations for which there are specific visa ineligibilities to prevent their entering into the United States.

The department will continue to identify individuals intensifying repression inside Nicaragua, including those involved in oppression against the Catholic Church and take actions to prevent their entering into the United States.

The United States regularly consults with civil society throughout the Western Hemisphere to understand the unique religious freedom challenges in the region.

Nicaraguan human rights defenders and religious freedom advocates describe rapidly deteriorating conditions for human rights, including freedom of religion or belief.

The United States maintains regular consultations with Nicaraguan civil society to ensure that U.S. foreign policy promotes respect for and protects religious freedom for all.

The United States at the OAS supported the recent resolution to condemn the Ortega-Murillo regime's harassment of the Catholic Church and overall repression of human rights in Nicaragua.

Our mission to the OAS has also joined the majority of governments in the Western Hemisphere to speak out repeatedly on the ongoing repression of human rights organizations.

As part of this repression, the regime has stripped over 2,000 NGOs and civil society

organizations of their registrations, including faith-based organizations that seek to document human rights violations, support Nicaragua's most vulnerable communities, offer humanitarian assistance, and provide legal representation to political prisoners.

We continue to be concerned about the status of religious leaders unjustly detained and sentenced in Nicaragua, including Bishop Rolando Alvarez, who's unjust detention is now at over 100 days.

We have publicly called on Nicaragua to protect religious leaders and to respect freedom of religion or belief including that of political prisoners whose pleas for basic things and necessities, including bibles and collective prayer in prison, have been unanswered.

We reiterate our call urging the Nicaraguan government to promote rather than undermine the safety of clergy and worshippers, along with the security of all places of worship and the sacred spaces of Nicaragua's diverse

indigenous communities.

Thank you very much. I look forward to the questions.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Mr. Ventrell.

If I may, I'd like to start asking you some policy questions. When the Biden administration excluded Daniel Ortega from the Summit of the Americas this past summer, some of our allies in the region criticized the administration's decision, saying that excluding leaders with whom we disagree makes it harder to achieve any results.

Is it possible for the Biden administration to demonstrate the United States' opposition to Nicaragua's authoritarianism and influence positive change in the country without alienating Ortega?

If not, what steps should the United States' policy take to manage the relationship with our allies in the region in a way that supports human rights and religious freedom in Nicaragua?

If you can address those questions, it would be great.

MR. VENTRELL: Well, thank you very much for the question.

There is no doubt that the actions that the Ortega-Murillo regime have taken have very much isolated themselves politically and diplomatically from much of the hemisphere.

What I would underscore in this setting is that throughout this process, as we have increased our sanctions, as we have increased multilateral repression on the regime for their abuses, we have consistently maintained open channels of bilateral communication repeatedly through a variety of channels made clear to the regime that we remain willing to engage in diplomatic negotiation and diplomatic dialogue with the regime about our concerns directly.

And so that remains the case, and obviously at this point, they have not indicated in any serious way that they are willing to do so, but I think the Biden administration has been quite

clear through a variety of different channels that we remain open to diplomatic dialogue, that there is a time and a place, which includes right now, for sustained pressure, but that we remain willing to discuss our positions directly with the regime.

Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

Now I'd like to recognize commissioners for any comments and questions that they might have.

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: I'd like to, if I can, Commissioner Turkel.

CHAIR TURKEL: Sure.

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: Thank you. So, first of all, let me just say from a personal point of view, I visited Nicaragua many decades ago and remain profoundly disappointed with how the country has evolved over those decades since I visited there.

I also had the opportunity to, many decades ago, at the request of an NGO, show then President Ortega and his wife public housing, I'm

sorry, affordable housing in Brooklyn, again, many decades ago and remain profoundly disappointed with how they have comported themselves and governed over those decades.

But I remain really with strong feelings for the people of Nicaragua and what they're going through.

Now, as a commissioner, the question I would have is how can multilateral organizations, such as the Organization of American States and its independent Inter-America Commission on Human Rights, put pressure on Nicaragua?

How can member states persuade the Ortega regime to reverse its withdrawal from the block?

MR. VENTRELL: Thank you so much, commissioner, and I appreciate that, and we are also profoundly concerned for the well-being of the Nicaraguan people.

In terms of multilateral organizations and multilateral either dialogue or pressure, I would just state that the OAS in particular has been quite unified on this subject, and, in fact, while

I myself don't represent us at the Organization of American States, my colleagues who do have remarked to me repeatedly how on the issue of Nicaragua, there has been almost more consensus than on any issue.

And that is because it's a common concern that the regime is so far outside of the Inter-American charter and the expectations, the obligations really that they have to the inter-American system.

They themselves made this, you know, declaration that they would start the two-year process to withdraw, and they're not showing up at the OAS, but I think what we have to continue to do is use the inter-American system and its various mechanisms to stay united, to be consistent about where there should be pressure and condemnation for their abuses, but continue to leave doors open for dialogue as appropriate.

As I mentioned in my previous answer, the regime has not shown a seriousness of purpose yet to engage in that, but I think there are a number

of hemisphere partners and others who share our concerns, who share our outrage, and particularly on this issue about abuse of the Catholic Church and others who want to express their religion, and would be willing to engage dialogue if the regime would change course.

Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Commissioners Wolf, Ueland and Curry. You're muted, Commissioner Wolf.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Can you hear me, now?

CHAIR TURKEL: Yes.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: I want to thank the witness very, very much, for the testimony.

I've been down in Nicaragua a number of times several years ago. I have two questions. Why is Daniel Ortega doing this?

MR. VENTRELL: So that's a great question, and, of course, only Daniel Ortega himself could speak for his own motivations, but I think you speak to a fundamental issue that even in the past year or two since he led the most recent wave of this crackdown and sort of the pantomime of an

election process that he had, why go that far? Why do that?

And there are a number of potential possibilities. I don't want to speak or speculate. One thing that I will highlight as a strong U.S. concern has been the really intensified relationship with Russia and the really almost consistent copying of Russian techniques and legislation and other tactics to try to put in place the repression that they're doing.

And so that's one of our strongest concerns and something that certainly motivates some of our specific sanctions and reactions.

So I think that's something to highlight, not that the Russian relationship with Daniel Ortega is new, that goes back decades, but the particular intensification of that relationship and the copycat of their tactics is something that concerns us greatly.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: The other question is what—and maybe you partially answered it—what

countries are helping the Ortega administration?
Can you say three?

Russia? Does Russia have aid workers down there? Is China involved? What other countries are helping Ortega?

MR. VENTRELL: Well, the Ortegas don't have many friends in the world, but clearly the relationship with Russia is a key partnership for them.

They also made a change in ties from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China last year, and I think they have strong hopes and desires for that particular relationship. We'll see if that's reciprocated on both sides, but that is a newer partnership.

But beyond that, in terms of real partnerships or, you know, there's not a lot of sympathy for Daniel Ortega, even from almost anybody else in the hemisphere quite frankly.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Are there Russians there in the country aiding them and are there Chinese in the country aiding them?

MR. VENTRELL: There is a large not only Russian embassy but facility where they claim to do police training or counternarcotics training is at least the explanation. But there is a relatively large Russian embassy official presence in Nicaragua.

The Chinese are now opening their mission, and so there will be an increasing presence of Chinese in Managua as well.

We continue, by the way, to maintain our embassy and our diplomatic facility in Managua.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Is the Russian embassy larger than ours?

MR. VENTRELL: You know I don't have the numbers right in front of me. We both have fairly large embassies in Managua, but I don't have the exact numbers in front of me to compare one to the other, but they are both large presences.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: The last question—and thank you very much—where is Ortega getting his economic support then to continue to operate as a country if he's losing all these other friends and

supporters around, where is he getting the economic support to continue?

MR. VENTRELL: Right. Well, I would just point to some of our most recent sanctions where we identified the gold sector in particular as one of concern, and so our ongoing sanctions activity is really meant to target the wealth of the regime, in particular.

There is the unique circumstance of Nicaragua being a member of the CAFTA-DR Free Trade Agreement, and so they do have significant exports to the United States that are important to their economy.

We're focused in our sanctions on having the greatest impact on the regime's bottom line and where they're illicitly often enriching themselves.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Thank you very much.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

Commissioner Curry, do you have any questions or comments?

COMMISSIONER CURRY: I notice—thank you, Chair Turkel. And thank you, Mr. Ventrell, for

your comments.

I notice the comments have largely been focused on the attacks on the Catholic Church. Does it seem like there's an intentional strategy to divide the larger Christian community there by attacking one segment of it and rewarding another, and have there been any outspoken advocates for these Catholic leaders who have been targeted from the evangelical or protestant communities?

MR. VENTRELL: That's a great question. I don't know in terms of the statements from the evangelical community in support of the Catholic community, but we'll check on that, and that's something we can get back to you on, but it's a great question.

In terms of the targeting, right now, the regime's fury and intensity of their efforts of oppression have been focused specifically on the Catholic Church.

But I will say about the regime's behavior, particularly over the past recent months, is they have shifted their targets and intensified

them over time.

So I wouldn't rule them out pursuing other targets at some point, and so we think it's important for there to be solidarity amongst all different faiths because of this very targeted action against one of those faiths.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Mr. Ventrell. Thank you very much for joining us and sharing your perspective and the administration's position on this important issue.

Now we will move on to the second panel. First, we will hear from Manuel Orozco, the Director of Migration, Remittances, and Development Program at the Inter-American Dialogue.

Then we will hear testimony from Irela Guevara, who is the Program Director at Outreach Aid to the Americas.

Then we will hear from Christopher Ljungquist, who is the Adviser for the Latin America Office at the International Justice and Peace of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

And then, finally, we will hear from Ryan

Berg, who is the Director of Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Manuel, the floor is yours. You may begin your testimony.

MR. OROZCO: Thank you very much, Mr. Turkel, and thank you to the Commission for inviting me to share some issues regarding the situation in Nicaragua.

Certainly, the Americans are now sharing the geography with a rogue state. It is a state that rules on fear, hatred, violence, and clientelism.

It has caused people to be afraid, to migrate, to go to prison, or to even die. Daniel Ortega turned Nicaragua today into the totalitarian state that he desired to establish in the 1980s and couldn't.

He is a dictator that believes in one-party rule, under his command, with a philosophy that goes against religious beliefs, freedoms, pluralism, and he strongly believes in the use of force to exercise political order and to promote

extortion, physical violence or fear.

This is not the first time that Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo have gone against the Catholic Church and religious authorities. I myself, Nicaraguan born, experienced religious persecution in the 1980s.

I went to a Catholic school and experienced the attacks on Catholics, on religious authorities, on priests, in a regular basis. It's a situation that has not been interrupted since Daniel Ortega has been involved in politics in Nicaragua.

What has changed today is that there remains a obsession for power on the side of Daniel Ortega to stay in control of the country as long as he can.

Nicaragua basically now, it's a country that has been not only turned into a totalitarian society, but in practical terms has been Talibanized.

Just to give you some, some of the characteristics, and, Mr. Turkel, you mentioned

some of them, but this is a country where basically a six-and-a-half million population, it has, the country has increased the police force from 2018 to today from 10,000 to 20,000 police members.

There is one policeman in every 100 homes in the country. Just to put some perspective, a country, a neighbor country like Honduras has as many policemen as Nicaragua, yet is a country that is 30 percent more populated, with a larger population than Nicaragua.

It's also a country that faces far more formidable challenges in transnational organized crime networks, for example.

Yet it has increased the police budget from three to ten percent of the total national budget in a matter of four years. It's a country that has gone through 300 assassinations that have gone into impunity. There are over 200 political prisoners who have been charged on false accusations, and also it's a country where there have been nearly half a million people who have migrated within the past two years, 2021 and 2022.

Just this year, nearly 200,000 Nicaraguans have come to the United States seeking refuge from the political persecution that was started basically and intensified since 2018.

It's a country that it has been internationally isolated. It's a pariah state with a relationship with Russia that is not only a pathological country, but also it has altered the military balance in the region.

Nicaragua has purchased in the past 15 years as many weapons from Russia than the three countries of Central America combined. Nicaragua has also established—has a Russian intelligence gathering center with a satellite, a Russian satellite, operating in the country.

It also authorized the presence of military advisors from Russia coming to the country next year. So it's not only an issue of ideological exercise of totalitarian nature but also an effort to establish a military entanglement with Russia, Cuba, and Venezuela.

In addition to that, there is the

persecution of religious authorities, of academics, the denial of entry of Nicaraguan citizens into the country after they return from travel from abroad, so a country where the regime has banned books of important academics and novelists.

It's also public gatherings are basically denied. There is a complete criminalization of the democracy in Nicaragua, In that context, it is very important to consider a proportional response to the extent to which we are dealing with a country like Nicaragua.

In this era of complex global and regional cooperation, Nicaragua is a non-cooperative, aggressive and conflictive state. It insults international authority. It makes verbal attacks to diplomats, declares them persona non grata.

The international community, in this sense, needs to step up and change the status quo in Nicaragua to counterbalance the repression and impunity that prevails in this country.

There are different things that can be done. Some of them have already been implemented

by the United States, but we need to do more.

One of them is to increase sanctions, sanctions against those who facilitate repression and corruption in the country.

Contrary to some assumptions that sanctions affect the entire nation, that's not the case. Sanctions are basically a signal of accountability when the rule of law is nonexistent.

They have gone specifically to individuals who have performed human rights violations, who have participated in the imprisonment of the 200 political prisoners.

So it's important to ensure international financial institutions are held accountable for the lending of Nicaragua.

Mr. Wolf asked where does Nicaragua sustain itself economically? Well, it sustains itself through borrowing from the international community, from international financial institutions. It does so to invest in public works, to maintain a clientelistic base in order to ensure loyalty from a small group of Nicaraguans,

but in addition to that, it shuffles the budget from the state for public works into the security apparatus.

Not only it has increased the budget of the police basically from three percent to 11 percent or more of the entire budget, there are very few countries in the world whose budget on the police is one out of \$10, but also it has increased the budget of the military at the same time.

It's also the fact that the international financial institutions are lending money to Nicaragua to activities that are not corresponding with the national development plans.

It has cancelled more than 2,000 nonprofit organizations, their legal status, and as a result of that, the country has lost more than \$100 million a year in assistance that goes into social development programs.

These programs are substantively important for a country as poor as Nicaragua. Just to put some perspective, the budget on the education of Nicaragua for more than two-and-a-half million

students, it's no more than \$500 million.

The loss of these philanthropic assistance that ascends to more than \$100 million, most of it went into education so it's a significant loss as a result of this ideology to eliminate pluralism in a society like Nicaragua.

In addition to that, it's important to recognize and promote the role of the Nicaraguan diaspora. You know there were less than 300,000 Nicaraguans in the United States prior to 2018.

Now, there are nearly 600,000 or more who have escaped Nicaragua for political reasons. Their voice, their presence is important to recognize by giving them some space for civic engagement with regards to the struggle for democracy in Nicaragua.

And, finally, it's also important to continue the multilateral engagement with organizations like the Organization for American States, the United Nations, and other international entities where it's important to visualize the nature and extent of human rights violations in

Nicaragua.

It's not just about persecution. It's the fact that there is a totalitarian state in the Americas operating at full length.

Finally, the role of RENACER Act. It's something of the utmost importance. RENACER Act has been, contain nine important components that can put more pressure on the regime to address the human rights violations.

And it has yet to be implemented in full. There are very important elements that deal with Russian interference in the Americas, that deal with corruption within the regime, that deal with human rights violations, that deal with international financing for the regime.

All of these elements are really important to be put into implementation in order to hold Nicaragua accountable for the human rights violations and do more than banging the table.

The conditions in Nicaragua are really in a terrible state. Political prisoners have not been visited by their relatives for more than 100

days. There is no access to visits to political prisoners, and the relatives of political prisoners now have been persecuted by the police and the state.

So conditions in Nicaragua are really far beyond dramatic at this point, and international mobilization for democracy is most needed today.

Thank you very much.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Mr. Orozco.

Now we will move to our second witness, Irela Guevara, for her testimony. You may begin your testimony, Ms. Guevara.

MS. GUEVARA: Thank you.

It is an honor for me to participate in this panel. As an exiled Nicaraguan, I feel the moral obligation to tell as many people as possible what my country is going through, what Nicaraguans suffer on a civil and religious level, so thank you for the Commission for giving me this opportunity.

I left my country in a state of war in September 2018. Four years have passed since the

crisis broke out and nothing seems to have improved, but, on the contrary, violations of human and religious rights have become institutionalized in Nicaragua.

The Ortega-Murillo regime has created a state of fear based on terror. From the action of the regime, various repressive measures can be identified, backed by, quote-unquote, "legal system" that is illegitimate and applied arbitrarily to anyone who questions the authoritarian regime of Ortega and Murillo.

In this scenario, religious leaders and faith-based organizations that consistently denounce the regime for human rights violations become targets of politically motivated religious freedom violations.

Therefore, any religious leader known or associated as opposition is harassed and pressured to a point of violence. None of those affected have a legitimate institution in which such illegal actions can be denounced or guarantee of their rights is demanded.

In a country like Nicaragua, there is no access of information as we have it here in the U.S. The last population census was performed in 2005. For this reason, it is very difficult to have a sense of how the Nicaraguan population is violated in terms of religion.

But we can say that presumably 90 percent of the Nicaraguan population is considered Christian, including 46 percent Catholics and 44 percent evangelicals.

In 2018, the Catholic Church, representing a minority of the population, they opened their temples to protect the lives of citizens who were initially protesting for social reform, and due to violent response of the government, the protests quickly became a massive social outburst demanding freedom.

Since then, the Catholic Church has become a voice for the demands of the Nicaraguan people, exposing illegality, abuses of power, and violations of human rights and religious rights of Nicaraguans.

As of today, the Catholic Church has been the target of at least 190 attacks, including the burning of the Managua Cathedral in 2020.

Around 60 individuals of the Catholic Church have left the country or have been expelled from Nicaragua. These individuals have been stripped of their passports, nationality, residence, and in some cases, they have been denied entry to Nicaragua, or some have decided to go into exile as they fear of their lives.

Among the religious individuals that have left Nicaragua is the former apostolic nuncio Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag, who was expelled by the government of Nicaragua.

There are currently ten religious prisoners, all priests of the Catholic Church, that this list includes not only Bishop Rolando Alvarez, who is under house arrest, but also Manuel Salvador Garcia, Leonardo Urbina Rodriguez, Oscar Benavidez, Jose Luis Diaz, Sadiel Eugarrrios, Raul Gonzalez, Darwin Leyva, Melkin Centeno, Enrique Martinez Gamboa.

The Ortega-Rosario regime has canceled at least eight Catholic radio stations and the Episcopal Conference television channel.

The regime's attack on the Catholic Church is systematic. It ranges from verbal attacks in public speeches by the regime, accusing the bishops and priests of being terrorists and attempting a coup against Ortega.

In daily life, Catholics must deal with permanent surveillance. The Ortega's police is permanently monitoring the parishes and recording on video the entrances and exits of ordinary citizens who only attend church in their religious exercise and mainly looking for a word of hope and peace.

The parishioners are afraid to attend the temples because their faces are recorded on video that are in the hands of murderous police officers.

They fear that these images will be used against them, to accuse them of being involved in the alleged terrorist activities by Catholic bishops and priests.

Catholics are afraid to contribute financially to the churches, thinking that they may be accused of financing the coup that, according to Ortega and Murillo, the Catholic Church is coordinating.

For many of you, this might sound illogical or even absurd, but believe me when I tell you, in my country, the unimaginable occurs on a daily basis.

The regime in these four years has clearly demonstrated that even the most minimal actions, such as attending mass, supporting the social work of the church, can represent if they consider it an act of terrorism and an attack against the peace and stability of the country.

Nearly 2,700 civil society organizations have been closed in Nicaragua over the course of this four years. It is difficult to count how many of these are of religious origin, but without a doubt, many organizations, both Catholic and evangelical, have been canceled.

The government's excuse for this

cancelation is alleged noncompliance with regulations of the Ministry of the Interior, MinGob, and the General Directorate of Taxes.

The Superintendency of Banks in Nicaragua controls the incomes and expenses of the parishes, and any movement of money is subject to investigation.

If myself as a Christian want to give a contribution to my church, I must know that this act can result in an investigation for alleged terrorism.

Undoubtedly, the attack and violation of religious freedom have been mainly against the Catholic Church. However, there is a record that the evangelical church has also been a victim.

Evangelical churches operate in the country as NGOs. The moment a pastor or an evangelical leader expresses himself in public outside of religious matters, these churches are canceled.

The fear of losing their legal status has kept evangelicals in silence in the face of the

crisis.

So we see that the government's tactics of repression have shifted from accusing the Catholic leaders of terrorists, harassment, incarceration, fire, and bombs to fiscal control and permanent surveillance.

At the beginning of the crisis, the government set a precedent that being against the regime results in death, prison and exile.

For this reason, it is imperative to continue to closely monitor and document violations of religious freedom as USCIRF is doing with support organizations like us.

Not only Nicaragua but also in Cuba, OAA is monitoring violations of freedom of religion and supporting the faith-based community in their roles as active actors of social civic society in the efforts of finding a way out of the crisis.

So just to summarize the two questions that I was given in order to provide a speech, the first question was in what ways are the tactics of the Ortega regime and its supporters changing vis-

à-vis repression of the Catholic Church?

I must say, just to summarize, that the biggest change is that the government has developed a legal mechanism to act against the Church under the false statement that the Church is terrorists.

And the second question: do religious leaders and lay people of their faiths, of other faiths, experience similar repression?

I can say that any group in Nicaragua can experience repression. Any group that expresses itself against the government or reflects influence in the people is an enemy of the regime.

As a Nicaraguan, I thank you, all of you, for your special attention that you're giving to my country, and I also encourage the Commission and the U.S. government, in general, to continue to support the work that we do. We really need this.

So thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: I forgot to unmute myself.

Thank you very much for your compelling testimony, Ms. Guevara.

It is a common practice that governments

who don't like religious groups use counterterrorism or terrorism as a justification to advance its political objectives or secure their insecurities.

Thank you. I look forward to our Q&A with you in a little bit.

But let's move on to our next witness, Christopher Ljungquist. Mr. Ljungquist, the floor is yours.

MR. LJUNGQUIST: Thank you.

I would begin by affirming the importance of this Commission's work for the people of Nicaragua. Your extensive reporting has amplified the voice of the Nicaraguan people and for that we thank you.

My testimony will concentrate on three major points.

Number one: the brutal and systematic persecution against the Catholic Church being conducted by the Ortega-Murillo government.

Two: I will counter the fallacious contention that the chronic repression in Nicaragua

is political and not religious.

And three: without being excessively prescriptive, we can note the direction that U.S. policy should and largely is taking in the current context.

So we begin with a panoramic overview of the religious persecution. From 2018 to the present, the Nicaraguan government has been implementing a policy of severe, systematic, physical, rhetorical and institutional aggression and intimidation against the Catholic Church in Nicaragua.

In 2018, Archbishop Timothy Broglio and I traveled to Nicaragua to express the U.S. bishops' solidarity with the Nicaraguan bishops.

Priests showed us pictures of blood-stained churches, desecrated statues, and bullet holes on church walls, testament to the ferocity of the government's violence against the Church and civil society.

In 2019, Bishop Silvio Baez was called to Rome by Pope Francis as the bishop's life was

threatened by government partisans.

In 2020, as you know, a regime partisan, really a terrorist, detonated an incendiary device in the Managua Cathedral.

But these are only major headlines. The number of attacks is now around 200 since 2018. This year, the Sisters of Charity, as we already mentioned, were expelled from the country and scores of priests have been either exiled or have fled, and many more face major obstacles in entering and leaving Nicaragua.

Catholic radio stations have been forcibly closed because of their criticism of the government's human rights abuses.

In the last six months, the government has kidnapped—and I say “kidnapped” because arbitrary detention without due process likens any government to a criminal entity—has kidnapped 11 priests on spurious charges.

In August, Bishop Rolando Alvarez and his collaborators, after weeks trapped in their diocesan buildings, were taken by the regime.

The world saw in horror the images of the peaceful bishop kneeling on the street, with his hands raised, in front of armed regime forces.

The bishop remains under house arrest and forcibly cut off from the rest of the world by the government. It's a particularly brutal type of house arrest that he's under.

Six of the bishops collaborators will be put on a sham trial in early December.

El Chipote, the prison where the persecutors take the political and religious prisoners, is, make no mistake, a horrific place of torture and disappearance.

Egregiously, government partisans have even broken into sacred spaces and committed acts of sacrilege on the Eucharist, thus striking at the very heart of the people's Catholic faith.

The intent behind these attacks is clear, and it serves a perverse rationality: the regime intends to terrorize the Church, which now is the last independent civil society institution in the country, into silence through violence, terror, and

institutional harassment.

So on the second point: on classifying the Orteguista repression. My office has actually continued to encounter skeptics that claim that the repression is entirely political and not religious.

This betrays a profound conceptual misunderstanding of religious freedom. The parameters encompassed by religious freedom extend well beyond worship.

The Catholic Church, like many other religious traditions, has a systematic corpus of social teaching that applies theological principles to social and political realities.

When the Church preaches about social or political morality, she's preaching the Gospel in a dimension of its incarnate reality.

The contention then that the Nicaraguan bishops "got political" and are now facing the consequences is simply reductive and, ultimately, fallacious.

The roots of Nicaragua's religious persecution, however, lie deep in the fabric of

Orteguismo itself. Since the 1970s, the movement has vested itself in a mantle of political messianism that usurps the rhetoric and symbols of the Catholic Church for its own political ends.

When we hear Rosario Murillo accusing Bishop Alvarez of "crimes against spirituality," she means to accuse him of objecting to the spiritualization and thus the consolidation of her own power.

This political messianism has reduced the political space in Nicaragua into a rigid us versus them dynamic, labeling anyone who opposes the regime as "evil" and, quote, "offspring of the devil," unquote.

Finally, where do we go from here? The expulsion of the nuncio, Archbishop Waldemar Sommertag, in March, signaled, disturbingly, that the regime is now less interested in dialogue.

The Holy See and the local Church in Nicaragua, however, remain committed to finding a peaceful resolution to the crisis. More than that, however, the Nicaraguan bishops, as pastors of all

Nicaraguans, want reconciliation and restoration of the rule of law.

President Biden's trade-related Executive Order last month, which expands the U.S. sanctions program with sectoral sanctions powers is a step in the right direction.

The United States must continue to demand that the Nicaraguan government ends its persecution of the Church. The government must be made to realize that the Church is open to dialogue and to jointly building up and restoring Nicaragua to peace and the rule of law.

Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Mr. Ljungquist.

Now, we will have our final witness, Ryan Berg, to testify. You may begin your testimony.

MR. BERG: Chairman Turkel, and esteemed members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, thank you so much for the opportunity to testify on this immensely important topic, the Crackdown on Religious Freedom in

Nicaragua.

And thank you to my esteemed panelists as well. It's good to see so many friends working toward the same noble cause.

The only religious institution permitted in Nicaragua, and let's be clear about this, is the church of Ortega-Murillo.

I want to begin my testimony with a very powerful vignette. A bishop, already holed up under house arrest, is led out of the Episcopal rectory in Matagalpa at gunpoint by Nicaragua's National Police.

He is forced onto his knees, a position he is accustomed to assuming, albeit usually to genuflect before the almighty, and never with a Kalashnikov at his back. This time he begs for his life at the altar of Ortega-Murillo, the dictatorial couple who rule Nicaragua with an iron fist.

And so it was several months ago that Bishop Rolando Alvarez unwillingly created one of the most searing images of Nicaragua's struggle to

regain its democracy.

In the latest phase of their crackdown, the Ortega-Murillo regime has found new depths of depravity with an assault on the country's Catholic Church, arresting dozens, accusing them of crimes against spirituality and destabilizing Nicaragua, and shuttering church-run media outlets.

The Church has detained members of the clergy, imposing strict limits on the practice of religion, and in some cases it has brutalized priests, bishops and congregations.

In late September, in a moment of pot meeting the kettle, Ortega even called the Catholic Church a dictatorship, describing the priests as killers and coup plotters, and accusing them of working on behalf of American imperialism. It's rhetoric he's been using since the 1970s.

This is not the first time the regime has repressed members of the Catholic Church. Recalling the infamous case of the regime-led assassination plot against Bishop Silvio Baez, who served as intermediary between anti-government

protesters and the Ortega regime in 2018, and now lives in exile.

But as Bishop Alvarez valiantly took Baez' place as one of the regime's top critics, he too became a principal target of Ortega and his backers, this time without the possibility of escape.

Ortega's regime was not always at odds with the church. In 2006, shortly before his return to power, Ortega, previously a devoted atheist, tried to reinvent himself as an observant Catholic.

His subsequent reelection campaigns, as Father Ljungquist mentioned, invoked religious symbolism, propaganda, and the fabrication of Catholic back stories for Ortega and his wife to establish a façade before the Nicaraguan people.

Nevertheless, following mass protests and all throughout the subsequent crackdown, churches open their doors to provide medical assistance and shelter those fleeing from brutal crackdowns, even as regime security forces threaten to detain clergy

members for providing assistance.

For years, the church has decried blatant human rights abuses and risked the lives of its members and clergy to defend the Nicaraguan people against the regime.

As one of the last bastions of free expression and liberal thought in the country, these assaults on the Catholic Church are very serious and demand a robust international response.

Leveraging tools from existing legislation like the NICA Act and the RENACER Act to executive orders, the Biden administration and the international community should urgently increase pressure on the regime to slow and reverse the consolidation of its dynastic dictatorship.

I have a couple policy recommendations I'd like to present to the Commission.

First, and this gets to the heart of one of the key questions that was asked by Chairman Wolf, we need to cut off Ortega's sources of finance. Last year's passage of the RENACER Act, albeit delayed, was an important move against the

regime.

It tightened the interpretation of the earlier NICA Act, which mandated that U.S. representatives at international financial institutions vote against loans to Nicaragua. This is critical to cutting off Ortega's ability to access funds at international financial institutions, and without greater action, the U.S. response to Nicaragua could be interpreted by other regional leaders as acquiescence.

While much progress has been made with some international financial institutions, I do want to highlight the role of CABEI, and especially its dictator-friendly Executive President Dante Mossi, who remains an outlier in the region, lending billions in recent years to Ortega.

The United States, unfortunately, is not a shareholder in the bank which makes meaningful action against CABEI more difficult.

But we're not without options. We can request that our partners and allies who are shareholders, Taiwan, South Korea, and even the

European Union, to enforce a democracy clause on loans to Nicaragua.

The U.S. should also consider pulling visas for high-level officials at CABEI and study the impact of preventing the bank from raising capital on U.S. markets.

Second, I'd like to encourage all of us to encourage Pope Francis to speak out more forcefully. Pope Francis has not been the vocal presence many expected him to be on Nicaraguan issues, especially in the wake of the Ortega-Murillo regime's dramatic escalation of repression.

We have a first Catholic President of the United States since John F. Kennedy and many Catholic members of Congress, and I think we should all encourage Pope Francis personally to consider a greater voice in protecting his flock internationally.

Third, advocate for political prisoners. The U.S. must push incessantly for the release of political prisoners in Nicaragua. The U.S. should insist that Nicaragua permit family visits to

prisoners, demonstrate signs of life for those disappeared, force Nicaragua to allow NGOs and human rights defenders to visit prisons, and push for better conditions and legal representation.

Fourth, I think we need to support the appointment of a U.S. Special Envoy. I understand the concerns about special envoys that many have voiced, but the Biden administration ought to appoint one, and the Congress ought to fund one as a time-limited special envoy.

With Russia's war on Ukraine, Xi Jinping's menacing of Taiwan, and North Korea's incessant missile launches, to name just a few, there are too many distractions in the global sphere at the moment to sustain the requisite focus on Nicaragua, and a special envoy would direct interagency coordination and develop the necessary international coalition to pressure the regime in an ongoing and sustained fashion.

And, lastly, I would like to make one quick note on sanctions targeting. More sanctions alone will be insufficient to turn the tide. As

sanctions increase, I think we need to be very, very cognizant of the targeting, which must become much more strategic.

Namely, they should aim at entire entities and possibly even at sectors. Simply put, I think the dramatic events on the ground in Nicaragua mean that the moment of individual sanctions has likely ended.

The U.S. should sanction the Nicaraguan Army under the same rationale used to sanction the National Police. The army has been involved in some of the greatest and gravest human rights abuses and stands accused of arming paramilitary groups in the country.

Additionally, the U.S. should also target the Nicaraguan Army's Instituto de Prevision Social Militar, or IPSM, its lucrative investment fund that is not only exposed to U.S. markets but helps Ortega to maintain the loyalty of the top brass.

While the United States has sanctioned the head of the army and IPSM as individuals, it could increase pressure by targeting both institutions as

entities, and it could also target mayors who coordinate repression on the ground in Nicaragua and all of whom belong now to the Sandinista political coalition following recent sham municipal elections.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to your questions.

CHAIR TURKEL: Mr. Berg, thank you so much for your testimony and thoughtful policy recommendations.

Let's move on to Q&A session of today's hearing. If I may, I'd like to ask Mr. Orozco on Nicaragua's growing client's relationship with Russia, Iran and China.

Based on various reports, Nicaragua has allowed Russian military forces to operate in the country, signed MOUs on oil and agricultural sector, trade with Iran, and renewed diplomatic relationships with ties with the PRC, Communist China.

How will the growing relationship between Nicaragua and these three countries complicate

efforts by the United States and its regional allies in the effort to improve human rights and governance issues in Nicaragua?

MR. OROZCO: I think it makes, it raises the importance of increasing pressure on Nicaragua, given the role that Nicaragua was trying to raise the stakes. The reality is that the Nicaraguan regime believes, strongly believes, that an international proportional response to the atrocities they are committing and the alliances they are engaging with Russia, Iran, Venezuela, Cuba would not be responded. So they keep pushing the envelope as far as they can.

And the Central American countries, in particular, which are actually the ones that should be worried, have been reluctant to do so, partly because they're afraid that there will be political repercussions on their side, whether by criticizing Ortega, for example, Honduras will become more unpopular in the country by the current government among other things.

But there is definitely a shift, a needed

shift in U.S. policy on how to engage Nicaragua given the growing threat that it represents, not only in terms of the ideological totalitarian nature, but also in terms of how it is destabilizing the region, especially on matters relating to intelligence gathering, but also the weapons that it has amassed with more than 200 tanks, you know, in a small country in a region that is not definitely a region under fire.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

Any other panelists wanted to comment on that question?

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: I have a question, if I may, Mr. Chair, for Mr. Orozco.

CHAIR TURKEL: Of course.

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: So recent municipal elections, as we understand it, again show that the regime, Ortega regime, is not interested in free or fair elections.

With the Sandinista Party obviously in full control of the government, what hope is there for a reversal of this dictatorial, this

dictatorial and radicalization that is occurring in the country? And I know, you know, you just spoke of some steps that could be taken perhaps to, you and others, apply pressure, but what's the real hope there?

And then if you had to think about a post-Ortega-Murillo Nicaragua, what would that look like for you and your fellow country people?

MR. OROZCO: Your second question is the most important one. But it's related to the first one. You see, there is no hope in Nicaragua right now. Among Nicaraguans, they feel helpless.

They feel that there is so much, there is some, the perception of the international community is a mixed one that there is no disproportional response to what's going on.

But, second, they feel that the extent of coercion that exists from the regime is so overwhelming that the only opportunity they have is to migrate. One in ten Nicaraguans have left the country in the past two years.

I mean this is a humanitarian crisis as

large as Venezuela. It's just that this is a small country of six-and-a-half million people.

But that hopelessness requires restoring confidence and self-esteem of Nicaraguans.

One of those sources of confidence is actually religious beliefs, faith. And the only way to address this is by providing from the international community, from the United States, a robust fight against this information, against censorship, so that Nicaraguans at least know what's truly happening, the extent of corruption that exists in the country, the extent of human rights violations.

Let me give you one example. The latest poll that was conducted in September of this year shows that the most popular figures in the country are the political prisoners.

I mean this is a society that in the midst of the lack of hope, it still is hanging to the few things they are aware of.

They're aware that there is unjust human rights violations in the country. So they express

the opinions that way, but for the most part, I think some of the steps involve predominantly returning some self-esteem to Nicaraguans and doing so requires building stronger ties with media outlets in alternative ways, and we need to, I agree with Ryan about the Special Envoy.

It may be a bureaucratic hurdle, but we do need to bang the table much more robustly. The extent of abuses in Nicaragua go beyond what any other state in the history of the Americas have gone through in the past 40 or 50 years.

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

Commissioner Wolf. I think you are muted.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: I thank you very much, Chairman Turkel.

I want to thank the panelists. This has been a very, very good, good hearing.

Secondly, the media in the United States, and I don't know about in the West overall, in Europe, it really is not covering this. I mean I follow what takes place in the community, and much

of what was said today, I was not really aware of to the degree.

I'm going to come with a thought, my own personal thought. I'm not speaking for the Commission. I'm speaking for myself.

But the word "hopeless," hopeless, and this is not a new thing. For those who follow what Ortega did to, I think it was Bishop Romero, in the past and other things, the hopelessness of it, you almost, if everything you're saying is accurate, you're almost talking about another potential Cuba. In fact, in some respects, you almost have a Cuba.

The conditions on the Catholic Church, the conditions, the prisons, I think then all the panelists, and I know some of the groups, but not all of them, you should really ask the Congress, both—this is not a Republican issue or a Democratic issue—this is a bipartisan issue in the truest sense of the word—to put together a legislative package that covers all of these different things, you'd really not think, that really make a difference, a legislative package early in January,

early in January, that will be introduced perhaps by the two members that spoke earlier to really send a message to Ortega and to the Nicaraguan government if dramatic change does not take place, this package will pass. This package.

And in fairness to the Biden administration, I mean they got Taiwan, they got, they got Afghanistan, they got China, they've got all these other things, but in our own hemisphere to be able to say that the Catholic Church is being abused the way they are, and we're not going to do something about it.

So I think you need a legislative package. All of you, CSIS has tremendous credibility up on Capitol Hill and Washington, but all the groups should come together and put together a legislative package and have it introduced early in the Congress and move it and pass it so that you'll send a message to them.

But hopelessness just rang out to me another potential Cuba, and I really feel for the Catholic Church, and I feel for the people that

must live in fear, who must live in fear.

So I think you need a legislative package, and not one that passes in a year-and-a-half or two years, but one that passes within the first six months of the Congress, and again, in closing, I appreciate USCIRF having this hearing and I appreciate the witnesses.

Thank you very, very much.

CHAIR TURKEL: Mr. Berg, I see you raising your hand.

MR. BERG: Sorry, Mr. Turkel. Was that--

CHAIR TURKEL: Yeah, I was--

MR. BERG: Is that for me?

CHAIR TURKEL: Yes, yes.

MR. BERG: All of us raised our hands, but Commissioner Wolf, I appreciate the enthusiasm and would stand ready to work with the esteemed colleagues here on this panel. I'm sure the four of us together could help craft a very effective piece of legislation.

I would also argue that significant pieces of legislation have been passed in the past several

years. The RENACER Act has been mentioned several times throughout this hearing, as well as the earlier NICA Act.

And as Manuel rightly points out in his testimony, there are elements of some of the existing legislation that we have on the books that hasn't been implemented to the fullest extent.

So there are tools. There's runway left, and we haven't yet reached the end of the runway where we would need to build more of it, for example.

So I'm kind of all-hands on deck. I'm happy to help craft new legislation, but I also want to point out that we do have existing mechanisms that haven't been leveraged to their fullest extent.

CHAIR TURKEL: Mr. Ljungquist.

MR. LJUNGQUIST: Yes. Thank you.

I'd just like to affirm everything Ryan just said, but also I'd like to very briefly address something that David Curry mentioned at the beginning, concerning evangelicals in Nicaragua.

There is a lingering myth out there that Ortega has the support of the evangelicals. That is completely false. If there was a silver lining in the entire crisis, when Archbishop Broglio and I went to Nicaragua in 2018, it was actually the pan-Christian unity in this crisis between the bishops of Nicaragua and their evangelical brothers and sisters.

You had evangelicals joining Catholic Eucharistic processions, and actually USCIRF's report on Nicaragua this year did an outstanding job, actually mentioning some of the abuses against the evangelicals.

Ortega has literally something like ten evangelical churches that support him. The rest oppose him just like the vast majority of civil society and the Nicaraguan bishops.

So I just wanted to address that lingering myth out there that somehow the evangelicals are behind Ortega. They are not.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

Ms. Guevara.

MS. GUEVARA: Thank you.

Just a couple of comments. Comparing Nicaragua with Cuba, as Commissioner Wolf was saying, is pretty accurate. The only difference between Nicaragua and Cuba at this point is that Nicaragua still has an open economy, and people are still able to go to work and go to the grocery store, go to a pharmacy and get medicine.

But in terms of politics, in terms of repression, they're equal; they are the same. So I just wanted to make that comment and say that the comparison that you're doing is fair.

And if we don't stop right now and do something about it, as you were saying, we cannot go hopeless. We need to continue to push the change.

And I think, my personal opinion is that the change in Nicaragua has to come from inside. It has to erupt from inside of the system, and as we wait for that to happen, we have to continue to advocate for those because we have a voice outside of Nicaragua, and we need to continue to support

the people who are still in the country.

And one of the things that I think is crucial for us to continue to do, and I speak now as an officer of OAA, is that we need to continue to monitor what's happening in the country and speak out for those who can't.

And we need to continue to provide support to the church because in this hopeless moment, the spiritual work that we can do with the church is crucial to keep the population in a constant need of holding on to something and the constant need of saying, hey, we have to do something as citizens.

So I think handling that balance between our religious commandments and our civil commandments, it's here. Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

Mr. Orozco.

MR. OROZCO: Thank you.

Just a couple of points. The first one is that, yes, there is legislation already in place. I don't think there is need to implement your legislation, but actually for the Commission to

inquire to the U.S. government and the U.S. Congress the status of the implementation of RENACER Act, in particular.

There is also the NICA Act, the Nicaraguan Investment Conditionality Act. But they're practically the same. One is an improvement of the other.

And it has nine components that would really make a lot of impact on the conditions in Nicaragua, specifically nudging the government to reform, to release the political prisoners, in particular.

And, you know, this issue of, when you have a totalitarian state, you don't need to compare one with the other. Totalitarianism has its practices the same way whether you are in Cuba or in Nicaragua or in other places in the world.

So, you know, I hate, personally, I don't, as an academic, I don't compare if Cuba is worse off or Nicaragua is worse off than the other, but they're both killing people, totalizing views, eliminating pluralism, eliminating freedom of

movement, among other things.

And it includes under religious persecution, you know better than I do that evangelical churches do not have a huge hierarchy like the Catholic Church so it's very hard to see the extent of persecution, but at the local level, you actually can see, and there are a lot of religious authorities from the evangelical church who have left the country because they have been persecuted on the basis of their beliefs and their work as church workers, as evangelical workers.

So the reality is there along the board whether you're Catholic or not.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

Commissioner Curry, do you have any comments, questions?

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Yeah. I sure do. Thank you so much.

This was, as Congressman Wolf mentioned, very interesting, and I am deeply troubled by what I'm hearing here. But I'm thankful for the presenters.

Mr. Ljungquist, you mentioned something that I think is sort of almost slipped under the radar here, which is that there has been not just attacking of the priests and an assignation of them as political actors, but in the attacks on the Catholic Church, to some degree, there's been an interference of religious practice as in, I think you used the term "desecration" of the Eucharist.

I would like you to describe to me what you mean by that because I think any government interfering with the religious practice of the sacredness of that is particularly grievous because it goes, well, anything that could be characterized as a political thing and gets right to the heart of practicing of their faith.

So could you describe what you meant by that comment?

MR. LJUNGQUIST: Sure. It's really, Mr. Curry, it's a form of spiritual terrorism, and this is what I mean. For a Catholic, the most sacred thing or object in the universe is the Eucharist, and you have had, "turbas," essentially armed mobs

enter churches and literally do unthinkable things to the Eucharist that is held in reserve in the tabernacle.

I don't know if you yourself are Catholic, but the priest when he celebrates mass, he reserves the Eucharistic bread in what we call the tabernacle.

And Orteguista turbas have actually committed desecrations on the Eucharist. And this is, I mentioned in my presentation, the concept of a "political messianism" that the Ortega regime has been guilty of since the 1970s. In many ways, they have continually rhetorically, as well as in the marshalling of symbolism, they have tried to create a parallel religious system in which using the symbols of the Catholic Church, they try to sanctify their own political movement.

But when I say "desecration of the Eucharist," really I mean the most heinous acts of spiritual terrorism that you can imagine to a Catholic because it is, in Catholic theology, to desecrate the host, the consecrated host, is to

desecrate the very sacramental body of Jesus Christ.

And so there is a political logic to that, and that's why I mentioned it. The logic is, as I said in my presentation, it's to terrorize the Church into submission by spiritually terrorizing them, and this is something that, and with this, I'll conclude, but the desecration of the Eucharist, Mr. Curry, is a, it's a heinous crime that only a believer would commit in the sense of—and that may sound contradictory. It's very likely that these turbas are themselves Catholic but of the Orteguista brand and they, and they're trying to persecute the bishops who the regime has labeled "offspring of the devil."

So you do have, again, almost like a recapitulation of the 1970s, 1980s, tendency of Orteguista to create a parallel church.

I don't know if I addressed your question.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: You certainly did.

Thank you.

I don't know that it has to be something

done by a believer. It certainly has to be done by somebody who understands the offense to which they're committing.

So I would just want to make a comment to bookmark that for my fellow commissioners, as deeply offensive, and I think that story needs to be told. Whether it is the practice of Christian faith or Islamic faith or Jewish faith, that what happens in these sacred settings is important, and it's important that any whether a dictator or a dictatorial systems or whatever, that we call that sort of offense out.

So thank you, sir. Mr. Chair, that's my only question or comment.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

Does anyone else have a comment, questions from our team, commissioners? Commissioner Wolf, do you have any questions or should we move on to the next question and then wrap it up?

I have a question for Ms. Guevara. What programming does your organization do in Nicaragua in relation to religious freedom? And what are the

areas that you engage in?

Also, I have a question for Mr. Berg, on the special envoy position. Oftentimes you recognize the administrative hurdle. What would be the compelling argument against something along the lines that we have assistant secretary, we have ambassador, we have so-and-so. We have IRFA Ambassador who can work it. What is the need for special envoy?

We get this kind of pushback often from the administration. What would be the compelling argument, counterargument to that? If I can start with Ms. Guevara.

MS. GUEVARA: Thank you.

To answer your question, we as OAA, we have a program that supports the religious community in different areas, starting with monitoring, documenting and reporting of freedom religion violations, and we have been in collaboration with part of your team as being one of the sources of-

We also have international advocacy

component as we try, as we try to engage with the U.N., especially with the Rapporteur for Human Rights and Freedom of Religion.

And we're trying to compel information that could be at use for the Rapporteur.

We also support internally the faith community in providing trainings for leaders, just as an effort to protect a space of dialogue and a space of trust especially because in this regime, you have to act with people that you can trust.

So we are trying to protect a little space and we have open with Catholic and evangelicals in supporting the youth.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

Mr. Berg.

MR. BERG: Well, thank you, Chairman Turkel, for the question, and I realize that the onus is sort of on me or on the Commission to explain the reason for more positions at the State Department, and, in this case, I do think it is warranted, first, because of the dramatic nature of the crackdown, which we've heard about today.

Even if we want to resist sort of comparing it to Cuba, in and of itself, the dramatic nature of the crackdown and the unprecedented nature of it, I think, in itself warrants a special envoy in a largely democratic hemisphere. That would be the first reason.

The second reason is that there is precedence for this kind of envoy within the Americas. The last administration indeed had a special envoy for Venezuela for similar reasons, to monitor the crackdown, to serve basically as a full-time hand at the State Department working with opposition groups and so forth to be able to coordinate policy.

But I think most importantly, what we've seen is several instances where policy hasn't been coordinated in the inter-agency process, and I'll give you one quick example of that.

In 2021, we had, and it was weeks before an important congressional hearing at the House Foreign Affairs Committee, at which I testified, the U.S. Commercial Service and the U.S.—the U.S.

Commercial Service basically sending out emails to U.S. entrepreneurs promoting a trip down to Managua to say how great it was for the U.S. to do business in Ortega's Nicaragua, as well as the U.S.

extending the sugar quota for sugar exporters in Nicaragua, at the same time as the State Department and others were saying we need to bring pressure.

And so clearly there is a sense in which the agency, the inter-agency process is not effectively being carried out. Someone needs to be in charge of working all of those different organizations to make sure that policy is on the same page.

I am happy to say that the Commercial Services is no longer sending folks down to Nicaragua to say how great it is to do business in Daniel Ortega's regime, but that was the case up until last year, and I think we could still benefit from having that, that constant focus on Nicaragua with a special envoy.

Thanks.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you. Thank you very

much. Thank you. Very helpful.

If I could ask, Mr. Ljungquist, quickly address something that has been on my mind often on the question of Vatican not speaking up on the persecution of Catholics, whether it be in China, Hong Kong, and now we're learning in Nicaragua.

What can we do to make them to be vocal? In the case of China, we've been calling or urging the Vatican, the Church, Catholic leadership to speak out. We have 90-year-old cardinal in Hong Kong being persecuted.

So what can we do reasonably to have the Vatican to be a bit more vocal?

MR. LJUNGQUIST: That's, a, it's a very good question, and I would say, I would have to admit it's a question that we get very often.

I would say that in the Nicaragua context, one of the reasons that the expulsion of the apostolic nuncio was so bad, it was really, it was really a game changing moment, was because the nuncio himself was the last dialogical bridge between the government and the church and civil

society.

And so by the removal of the nuncio, essentially that dialogical bridge between the regime and civil society was broken.

The Holy See has a very unenviable task of actually keeping at least the possibility of a dialogue, of a dialogical bridge open between the regime and the local church and civil society.

So, in that sense, it's, the Vatican called the expulsion of the nuncio incomprehensible because he was serving such a crucial mission there. But, in that sense, the Vatican has a very, very difficult task in trying to maintain at least an ongoing dialogue possible.

On the question of China, I simply, that is a great question as well, and we can, you know, we can respond to, but I would actually want to defer to the person who deals with Asia in our department.

But that is something that actually, you know, I'm in constant communication with Zach Unan [ph], and that question I can certainly get it to

the policy advisor in charge of Asia and helping out the Holy See and its relationships with China.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

Commissioner Wolf, do you have any final thoughts or comments?

COMMISSIONER WOLF: No, thank you. Thank you. Again, thank the panelists too. I appreciate them.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

This has been extraordinarily educational hearing for me as somebody who is learning about various countries. I had been primarily focused in China in my human rights and religious freedom work in the past.

I appreciate all of you taking the time and sharing your knowledge, expertise, and Anne Applebaum wrote a very thoughtful piece early this year that bad guys are winning. We should add Daniel Ortega in that list of bad guys.

And we should also continue to speak out. Religious freedom around the globe is under threat and religious freedom concerns should not be in the

back burner. This is exactly what we do as the commissioners here through our legislative mandate.

And we will continue to speak up. We will continue to cover research and monitor, and thank you, again, and I'd like to conclude today's hearing by thanking our amazing team, professional staff team, for organizing this timely hearing, all the time and effort that they invested and going through these technical questions, issues, in the virtual world that we are living today. Thank you very much.

I look forward to continuing to learn from you and staying in touch with you in my professional work advocating for religious freedom.

Thank you again.

This hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:40 p.m.ET, the hearing was adjourned.]