

NICARAGUA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua remained abysmal. The government of President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo continued its crackdown on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) by arbitrarily arresting, imprisoning, and exiling religious leaders and adherents, canceling the legal status of religious organizations, and harassing and intimidating worshipers. In February, the United Nations Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (UNGHREN) corroborated this downward trajectory by reporting that these particularly severe violations have “moved the authorities closer to their goal of removing the obstacle of organized Christian voices critical of the government.”

These concerning trends were evident in a series of arrests and deportations during the year. In March, authorities arbitrarily sentenced 11 pastors affiliated with the Mountain Gateway ministry to 12 to 15 years’ imprisonment and fined each of them around three billion cordobas (\$80 million) on spurious money laundering charges. The government then exiled all 11 pastors and additional FoRB prisoners to Guatemala, including former Catholic university students [Adela Tercero](#) and [Gabriela Morales](#) as well as journalist [Victor Ticay](#). Congressional [advocacy](#) and U.S. Department of State [engagement](#) were key to the pastors’ later release. In August, authorities arrested several Catholic clergy members without explanation and exiled them to the Vatican. In November, the government arbitrarily arrested and exiled Bishop Carlos Herrera to Guatemala, and it ordered all nuns remaining in Nicaragua to leave the country by December.

The Ortega-Murillo regime continued to target religious charitable and educational organizations that it viewed as opponents. It arbitrarily canceled the legal status of a variety of Catholic and Evangelical organizations in January and that of Radio Maria, a Catholic broadcasting company, in July. In August, authorities canceled the legal status of 1,500 nongovernmental organizations, many of which were religious in nature. That same month, authorities arbitrarily canceled the legal status of Caritas of Matagalpa, a Catholic charitable organization. The government often seizes and repurposes related property following such cancellations.

The government continued to employ a variety of tactics to intimidate Christian worshipers and impede their peaceful religious practices. It arbitrarily prohibited many religious observances and processions, including deploying approximately 4,000 police officers to Catholic churches around the country in March to prevent public Holy Week processions. In May, police interrogated and searched pilgrims traveling to the National Sanctuary of the Virgin of Cuapa, preventing some from reaching the sanctuary. In November, authorities prohibited congregants in Masatepe from observing All Souls’ Day.

The Ortega-Murillo regime also harassed religious leaders and worshipers through threats, conspicuous monitoring of religious services, and acts of vandalism, including against members of the primarily indigenous [Moravian Church](#). Vice President Murillo has repeatedly mocked and derided religious leaders and worshipers facing imprisonment and exile, calling them “evil,” “servants of Satan,” and “false representatives of God.”

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Nicaragua as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
 - Lead efforts to renew the UNGHREN’s mandate at the UN Human Rights Council and publicly invite the UNGHREN to conduct a delegation to the United States to consult with U.S. policymakers on holding Nicaraguan government officials accountable for repression of FoRB;
 - Impose financial sanctions, pursuant to Executive Order 13851 and Section 203 of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), against Nicaraguan officials responsible for exiling religious adherents, and investigate whether any Nicaraguan government entities associated with religious freedom violations maintain property in the United States, including in association with the Instituto de Previsión Social Militar; and
 - Work with like-minded Organization of American States (OAS) member states to provide humanitarian protection to victims of FoRB violations, including those who were exiled to third countries and stripped of their Nicaraguan citizenship.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Hold hearings through the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere and/or the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere on the Nicaraguan government’s religious freedom violations against specific communities, including against the primarily indigenous Moravian Church;
 - Reintroduce and pass legislation to advance religious freedom in Nicaragua, such as the [Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights in Nicaragua Act of 2024](#), which expands the legal grounds for sanctions against religious freedom violators and mandates that the U.S. government oppose international financial institutions’ assistance to Nicaragua except under limited conditions; and
 - Release statements on religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua through a revitalized, bipartisan International Religious Freedom Caucus, including calling for investigations into whether any Nicaraguan government entities associated with religious freedom violations maintain property in the United States and recognizing the anniversary of the September 5 exile of Nicaraguan FoRB prisoners to Guatemala.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Nicaragua’s Full-Scale Crackdown on Catholic and Protestant Communities](#)
- **Hearing:** [Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in Nicaragua](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

President Daniel Ortega is the head of state and government of Nicaragua, while his wife, Rosario Murillo, serves as vice president; they and their party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, exercise authoritarian control over the government. As part of its effort to maintain a stranglehold on power, the Ortega-Murillo regime has used repressive laws on cybercrime, money laundering, registration requirements for not-for-profit organizations, and sovereignty to provide legal pretext for the government's particularly severe religious freedom violations.

Roman Catholics [account](#) for about 43 percent of the population; Evangelical Protestants comprise 41 percent; religious believers without any affiliation comprise 14 percent; and Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Muslims, nonbelievers, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Moravian Lutherans together comprise two percent.

Denationalization and Entry Denial

The Ortega-Murillo regime stripped Nicaraguan citizenship from many religious leaders and religious adherents to punish them for engaging in peaceful religious activities and to eradicate potential sources of opposition. In January, the government exiled Bishop [Rolando Álvarez](#) to the Vatican after wrongfully imprisoning him since 2022 and stripping him of citizenship for criticizing its actions. In September, authorities exiled 135 political prisoners to Guatemala, seized their property, and stripped them of their citizenship. Among them were many FoRB prisoners, including [Carlos Alberto Bojorge Martínez](#), a layman whom the government had imprisoned for peacefully voicing opposition to its crackdown on the Catholic Church; [Freddy Quezada](#), a professor imprisoned for criticizing the government's treatment of Bishop Álvarez; and the 11 Mountain Gateway Ministry pastors. In addition, the government arbitrarily prohibited many religious leaders and religious adherents from entering the country, including by prohibiting a Catholic priest and member of the indigenous Miskito community from returning to the country in July.

The government's denationalization of and entry denials against perceived opponents left many religious leaders and adherents stateless, cut off from support networks and resources, and deprived of essential legal documentation, including birth records. As part of this abusive process, authorities permanently deleted from the civil register many of those victims' legal records.

International Accountability

International organizations condemned Nicaragua's religious freedom violations throughout the year, calling for accountability for violators. In February, the UNGHREN released a [report](#) reiterating that the Ortega-Murillo regime's widespread violations amount to crimes against humanity. In September, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights released a [report](#) noting that human rights and religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua "continued to seriously deteriorate." In November, the UNGHREN released another [report](#) condemning the Nicaraguan government's violations against academic freedom, including against religious educational institutions and their students.

The OAS and its autonomous human rights body, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), closely monitored religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua. In January, the IACHR [welcomed](#) the release of Bishop [Álvarez](#) from prison but deplored his arbitrary expulsion from Nicaragua. In April, the IACHR [granted](#) precautionary measures to the 11 pastors affiliated with the Mountain Gateway ministry following their wrongful imprisonment. In June, the OAS General Assembly adopted a resolution expressing deep concern about the violations occurring in Nicaragua and mandating that the IACHR continue monitoring the human rights situation in the country. In July, the IACHR's Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression [noted](#) concern regarding the arbitrary closure of media outlets, including a Catholic radio station. In August, the IACHR [urged](#) the Nicaraguan government to "immediately cease the widespread repression and religious persecution in the country."

Key U.S. Policy

In February, the State Department [imposed](#) visa sanctions on over 100 Nicaraguan municipal officials responsible for human rights violations, while the U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva [welcomed](#) the UNGHREN's related report that same month. In March, the State Department [imposed](#) restrictions on the import and export of U.S.-origin defense articles and services destined for or originating in Nicaragua, while the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) Nicaragua's attorney general for her complicity in the regime's oppressive actions. In May, the State Department [imposed](#) visa restrictions on 250 members of the Nicaraguan government for supporting human rights violations in the country, and the Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) a Nicaragua-based subdivision of the Russian Federation's Ministry of Internal Affairs that trains Nicaraguan authorities on techniques of repression. In September, the State Department [secured](#) the release of 135 political prisoners, including many FoRB prisoners. In November, the State Department [imposed](#) visa restrictions on over 350 members of the Nicaraguan National Police. Also in November, then President Joseph R. Biden extended for one year [Executive Order 13851](#), which declares a national emergency with respect to the human rights conditions in Nicaragua. The declaration grants the president the authority to impose financial sanctions against and investigate the property interests of Nicaragua government officials and entities. In December, the State Department [imposed](#) visa sanctions on Nicaraguan government officials responsible for canceling the legal status of and seizing property from the Jesuit-run University of Central America, among other independent educational institutions.

Throughout 2024, then Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL), Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA), and Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA) maintained their co-sponsorship of the [Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights in Nicaragua Act of 2024](#). The legislation would provide for sanctions against religious freedom violators by reauthorizing and amending the Nicaraguan Investment Conditionality Act of 2018 and the Reinforcing Nicaragua's Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform Act of 2021.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) Nicaragua as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.