

Religious Freedom Conditions in Nicaragua for Indigenous Communities . U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

Chairman and members of the Commission, thank you for this opportunity to testify today on the deteriorating conditions of religious freedom particularly on the indigenous religious communities and the Moravian church. My name is Anexa Alfred, indigenous Miskitu and Moravian Christian, banished by the Nicaraguan government after becoming a UN Expert in 2022.

I would like to start by pointing out some data and historical background. The 13% of the Nicaraguan self-identify as indigenous peoples or Afro-descendants, such as the the *Miskitu*, the *Mayagnas*, the *Rama*, and the *Ulwa* peoples and the Afro-descendant the Creole/Kriol and the *garifuna*. Whose lives in 304 communities on 23 territories and maintains their own forms of cultural, linguistic, identity and relationship with their ancestral land under a regimen of autonomy based on the right of self-determination.

The Caribbean Coast was colonized by the English, influencing the political, social, cultural and religious institutions. In 1894, the *Mosquitia* Coast was forcibly incorporated into the State of Nicaragua. As a result of this process, the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean Coast have sustained a historical struggle for the recognition of their rights as peoples that were crystallized in the Political Constitution of Nicaragua in 1987, after the Peace Agreements do to the armed conflict with the Sandinista regime in the 80s, which left the massacre of “*La Navidad Roja*”, the bloodiest manifestation of genocide of the indigenous people in our history, 8,000 displaced and hundreds of indigenous were massacred which remains in total impunity. Is important to point out that the Moravian church played a key role during this time giving support to the indigenous communities and its victims and for that reason, the church was persecuted by the Sandinista regime.

In terms of religious affiliation, among the Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendant, the predominant religion is Moravian. The presence of Christian religions displacing indigenous and African religious practices and beliefs.

The Moravian church became autonomous in 1974, passing the administration to the native pastors and it is organized in a provincial synod that meets every three years and an executive board presided by a superintendent in charge of executing the decisions of the synod.

I would like to highlight the fundamental role of the MC in the construction of a society of peace, democracy and unity of Nicaraguan families, especially indigenous and afro-descendant families.

Now allow me to refer to the deterioration of the conditions of religious freedom the persecution to the indigenous religious communities and the Moravian church.

Religious freedom in communities of the Caribbean Coast has continued to suffer a serious setback, with the closure of civic spaces since the socio-political crisis of 2018. This responds to a policy of absolute control promoted by the Sandinista government over territorial authorities and indigenous leaders including religious leaders, which responds to economic and ruling political party interests, over the governance, land and natural resources that have resulted in serious violations of human rights that constitute crimes against humanity and has generated deep concern in the international community.

The reprisals against the Marova church in particular are linked to the systematic violence experienced by indigenous and Afro-descendant communities: persecution, criminalization, banishment, massacres and forced displacement due to the invasion of their lands and the dispossession of natural resources. The Marovian church has accompanied the indigenous communities in the search for a state response that guarantees the rights of indigenous peoples and their survival, which became institutionalized by mandate of the synod in 2016, which demands that the government take action to protect life and safety in the face of land invasion.

In the context of the socio-political crisis of 2018, the Moravian church participated in the dialogue table along with other actors, which became a target of control, for this the government promoted the internal division of the Moravian church, with groups related to the ruling political party the FSLN, emerging two executive bodies. This generated a deep crisis in the

structures of the church which remains until now, which transcended to the indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.

The monitoring information of the Platform of Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples of Nicaragua (INANA), documented attacks, intimidation, defamation and disqualification campaigns. These threats are serious because they are aimed at intimidating, dividing the church and maintaining absolute control of the faith in the communities. systematized the aggressions against the Moravian indigenous religious community as follows:

- Permanent surveillance and restriction of freedom of expression, through the prohibition of addressing issues related to the situation of communities in workshops and meetings.
- Usurpation of church property, Political and legal control, over social institutions run by the Moravian Church.
- Aggressions, threats and violence in churches, schools, clinic, offices
- Persecution, criminalization, banishment and forced exile.
- Control over the morivian media applying the cybercrime law.

In conclusion, Nicaragua is a state that progressively and systematically violates human rights without exception or distinction. Repression, persecution, criminalization and exile have reached all levels, forcing 12% of the population into exile. Persecution against indigenous religious communities and the Moravian church has increased alarmingly and silently, particularly indigenous religious leaders who provide support to the communities and the traditional organizations.

The Moravian Church in particular is involved in a silent, systemic violation, led by the regime of terror, applying drastic measures aimed at suppressing the right to religious freedom.

It is urgent that the international community take decisive actions to put an end to the systematic violence experienced by Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples and all Nicaraguans, including the right to religious freedom as a fundamental human right.

I going to conclude by echoing the words of Reverend Cora Antonio Matamoros, first female superintendent of the Moravian Church in Nicaragua *“we want to continue being a Church in Freedom of Christ,*

without the influence of political parties, that the framework of respect be given to the Church, since in our communities the political situation affects the development of the church” and I add the development of the indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.

Thank you very much. Tinki pali