

**USCIRF Testimony
Nicaragua Hearing 7/24/24
Britt Hancock
Final**

I want to thank Chairman Schneck, for this opportunity to testify today.

I want to thank Ambassador-at-large Hussain for calling for the release of our Pastors.

I want to thank Director Joe Salazar at the State Department, and Keving O'Reilly, the US Charge de Affairs in Nicaragua, for their access, responsiveness and help.

I want to thank the United States Congress.

- **Rep Jerry Carl wrote a letter to Sectary Blinken.**
- **Rep Robert Aderholt led a bipartisan letter to the Nicaraguan Ambassador, with 58 Congressional signatures.**
- **Rep Barry Moore sponsored a bi-partisan resolution, -Resolution 1019-, on our behalf.**
- **Senator Rick Scott sponsored the companion, Senate Resolution 607.**
- **Senator Rick Scott also led a letter to President Biden, signed by senators Ted Cruz, Tommy Tuberville, and Katie Britt, asking for increased targeted sanctions. 7 days later, the President ordered the US Treasury to sanction the Attorney General of Nicaragua; Thank you President Biden.**
- **Representatives Bruce Westerman, Barry Moore, Robert Aderholdt, Gary Palmer, Harriett Hageman, and Senator Katie Britt all gave floor speeches speaking on behalf of our Pastors.**

These and others, have spoken with their colleagues, posted on social media, and given news interviews.

In two branches, and multiple agencies of the US Government, I have met with many concerned people who have responded to help us.

We are deeply grateful.

I lead Mountain Gateway, a church-planting, discipleship and disaster relief ministry. We were legally registered in Nicaragua as “Puerta de la Montaña” in 2015. We have served Nicaraguans since then.

In 2023, with the Government’s permission, we led 6,000 churches to hold eight mass evangelism events called “Buenas Nuevas Nicaragua”.

About ONE MILLION people attended.

Our last campaign was in the capitol city of Managua on November 11th .

December 17th, the Nicaraguan Police arrested 11 of our Nicaraguan Pastors on bogus money laundering charges. They accused my son, his wife, and me of the same.

In reality, they were arrested for organizing multitudes of people to gather in community in public, to worship together for religious purposes only.

The Pastors have been in maximum-security prisons for 7 months. One of the leaders is female and has been illegally separated from her children; one was 2 months old at the time of her arrest. Since their arrest 7 months ago, they have been deprived of contact with any visitors including family members and their attorney.

- Our lawyer did not have access to court files to prepare a defense.
- They were tried in March 2024.
- No defense evidence was allowed.
- The defendants were not in the courtroom in person.
- The PROSECUTION had no direct witnesses.

All 11 leaders were convicted and sentenced to 12 and 15 years in prison, and fined *EIGHTY MILLION DOLLARS per person.*

We lost our appeal to the Nicaraguan Supreme Court.

Mountain Gateway's registration in Nicaragua was cancelled without notice and all assets seized – over 5 million dollars worth.

Nicaragua announced, via press release, that criminal proceedings are outstanding against Jacob Hancock, Cassie Hancock, and me.

Nicaragua utilized Interpol's Red Diffusion Notice to request multiple countries in Latin America to arrest and extradite, my son, my daughter-in-law, and me to Nicaragua. 6 countries agreed: Mexico, Honduras, Cuba, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Brazil.

We were never officially notified there was a problem. They used press releases to state we were involved in organized crime and money laundering.

Sadly, our situation is the latest example of religious persecution by the Ortega-Murillo regime – they target anyone they perceive as a threat to their grip upon Nicaragua.

In the Buenas Nuevas Nicaragua Campaigns, we had virtually every evangelical church working together.

Throughout 2023, we had multiple meetings with thousands of pastors and leaders of these churches.

I spoke with many leaders who made references to what is common knowledge in Nicaragua:

That in every church, there are government informants who monitor and report what they say; what they pray; and what they preach.

On occasion, they would lower their voices as they talked to me about this oppression.

As long as they only preach the Bible, there is no problem, and there seems to be freedom of religion.

But when someone speaks Biblical truth directly to the Government concerning its conduct, that is a problem -- that and speaking out in solidarity with someone whom the Government views is against the Sandinista movement.

The consequences for this vary:

- **visible surveillance by Police or plain clothes persons**
- **harassment and pressure on their family members**
- **arrest and imprisonment**

I have spoken with family members that have had someone they know experience these consequences.

This is the norm among the entire population of Nicaragua. Everyone knows not to criticize the current regime.

In our own case, two things led to the arrest of our 11 Pastors, two lawyers, and the transnational targeting of my family:

1. **The unification of virtually all evangelical Churches to work on Buenas Nuevas Nicaragua, and the massive attendance of the events.**

2. On November 10th and 11th, 325,000 people gathered in the Plaza de Fe in Managua for the last campaign of 2023.

We had approval for 13 more events in 2024.

No series of events has ever happened in Nicaragua like these.

It has been extensively documented in the news, the US Government, the OAS, and the UN, that since 2018, the current Nicaraguan Government has reacted brutally to anything they think could be used to create change in the Government of Nicaragua.

The Ortega / Murillo regime viewed us as a threat, even though we meticulously avoided engaging in any political speech or purpose.

They did to us what they did to the Catholics and what they have done to over 3,500 organizations - they reacted abruptly, severely, and unjustly.

Mountain Gateway's solitary purpose in Nicaragua was to help the Nicaraguan people both spiritually and physically.

Since arriving in Nicaragua, we focused on rural, marginalized populations, planting churches and training local leaders.

We purchased a fair-trade coffee farm, expanded into disaster relief and saved 4,000 families from natural disasters, and conducted mass open air worship and evangelism events that reached hundreds of thousands of people.

We obtained property, built facilities, and purchased vehicles to carry out our growing ability to help Nicaragua – investing over 10 million dollars into the Economy.

The Government of Nicaragua responded with their paranoid tyranny and brutal disregard for anything beyond their grip on power.

We request the IRF Office, and the USCIRF to highlight these convictions and renew the demand for the immediate release of the religious leaders of Puerta de la Montaña.

To gather for religious purposes in community is protected by the *international human right to religious freedom*.

Nicaragua MUST be held to its international human rights obligations.

Thank you.