



**U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**  
**Crackdown on Religious Freedom in Nicaragua**

**November 15, 2022**  
**2:00 PM to 3:30 PM ET**  
**Virtual**

*Opening Remarks as Prepared for Delivery*

**Nury Turkel, USCIRF Chair**

Good morning and welcome to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing, *Crackdown on Religious Freedom in Nicaragua*. Thank you to our distinguished witnesses for joining us and offering your expertise today.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or 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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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 authoritarian control over all sectors of the government and the electoral process. In the run-up to his 2021 reelection, Ortega arrested or disqualified numerous opposition candidates, imprisoned other critical figures such as journalists and human rights defenders, and raided independent news organizations.

President Ortega's increasing repression of religious freedom began with his lashing out at the Catholic Church after it aided demonstrators and individual Catholic clergy voiced opposition to the government during peaceful protests in April 2018. Since then, government actors and 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, deportations, and violent attacks.

This year, the Nicaraguan government has increased its pattern of harassment against the Catholic Church, with actions that have clearly crossed a 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 spurious charges. In March, the government expelled the papal nuncio, the Vatican's chief diplomat in the country, for unexplained reasons. In August, 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 (NGOs). Officials also needlessly cancelled or significantly reduced the observance of several Catholic masses, processions, and rituals.

I would now like to give the floor over to USCIRF Commissioner Fred Davie to provide more context for today's hearing.