



## **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

### **Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in Nicaragua**

*Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery*

#### **Stephen Schneck, USCIRF Chair**

Good morning, everyone and welcome to today's hearing on *Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in Nicaragua*. Thank you to our distinguished witnesses for taking the time to join us today. My name is Steve Schneck and I am the Chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF.

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 hearing.

Since 2018, the Nicaraguan government, led by President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, has engaged in increasingly repressive actions against religious communities. In April 2018, the government violently cracked down on demonstrators protesting proposed social security reforms. The Catholic Church provided sanctuary for the demonstrators and some clergy spoke out against the government's human rights violations. Since then, the Nicaraguan government has intensely persecuted the Catholic Church. Clergy and laypeople are arbitrarily arrested, imprisoned, and exiled for engaging in peaceful religious activity. Many have experienced medical neglect and torture while in custody. The Nicaraguan government has also arbitrarily canceled the legal status of and seized property from Catholic charitable and educational organizations. These include the Jesuit-run University of Central America and many others. Moreover, uniformed and plain clothes government agents conspicuously monitor Catholic churches, schools, and ceremonies. They often order worshipers not to participate in peaceful religious activities.

The Nicaraguan government's full-scale crackdown on religious freedom has extended beyond the Catholic Church to other faith communities as well. In December 2023, authorities arrested 11 pastors affiliated with the Evangelical Mountain Gateway Ministry on spurious money laundering charges. In March of this year, all 11 were sentenced to either 12- or 15-years' imprisonment, and each was fined 80 million dollars. In addition, religious leaders and parishioners in Indigenous communities, including members of the Moravian Church, face harassment and intimidation for peacefully practicing their faith.

The Nicaraguan government draws on its repressive legal framework to attempt to give its persecution a veil of credibility. The authorities have used legislation such as Law Number 1042 on cybercrimes and Law Number 977 on money laundering to wrongfully imprison religious leaders and parishioners. The Ortega-Murillo regime has also used burdensome registration laws and reporting requirements for non-profit organizations to justify its shuttering of religious organizations or to compel them to close, including the Order of Jesuits.

I will now turn the floor over to my colleague Commissioner Maureen Ferguson to discuss some of USCIRF's policy recommendations related to Nicaragua.

**Maureen Ferguson, USCIRF Commissioner**

Thank you, Chair Schneck. I would like to join in welcoming everyone to today's hearing. And thank you very much to our witnesses for taking the time to join us today and offer your expertise. I'd like to give a brief overview of USCIRF's policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

In USCIRF's 2024 annual report, we recommend that the U.S. Department of State redesignate Nicaragua as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under IRFA. This designation is reserved for the worst religious freedom violators. In December 2023, we were pleased that the State Department did in fact redesignate Nicaragua a CPC and we encourage it to do so again this year.

USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. government support the United Nations group of human rights experts on Nicaragua. These experts are carefully documenting religious freedom violations occurring in the country. In March 2023, the group of experts released a nearly 300-page report. It found reasonable grounds

to believe that the Nicaraguan government has committed crimes against humanity against its civilian population, including members of religious communities. This documentation provides essential evidence that future prosecutors may use in trials against Nicaraguan government officials responsible for particularly severe religious freedom violations.

USCIRF also recommends that the U.S. government support bipartisan legislation, such as the Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights in Nicaragua Act of 2024. This legislation would expand the legal grounds for sanctions against religious freedom violators in Nicaragua. It would be one step toward greater accountability and would signal that the U.S. government continues to be deeply concerned with religious freedom conditions in the country. We look forward to discussing further policy options the U.S. government may consider during this hearing.

Lastly, I would like to highlight that USCIRF welcomes the U.S. government's support for the Organization of American States' June resolution on the Nicaraguan government's continued religious freedom and human rights violations. The OAS General Assembly, its Permanent Council, and its autonomous human rights body, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, have continuously called out the Nicaraguan government's relentless persecution. We encourage the U.S. government to continue engaging with the OAS and its regional partners to highlight the Ortega-Murillo regime's violations.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, and with that I'll turn the floor back over to Chair Schneck.

**Stephen Schneck, USCIRF Chair**

Thank you, Commissioner Ferguson. I would now like to briefly introduce our witnesses.

First, we will hear from Christopher Hernandez-Roy. Mr. Hernandez-Roy is the Deputy Director and Senior Fellow of the Americas program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Then we will hear from Felix Maradiaga. Mr. Maradiaga is a Trustee at Freedom House and an exiled Nicaraguan human rights activist.

Our next witness will be Jon Britton Hancock. Mr. Hancock is the founder of Mountain Gateway Ministry.

Our final witness will be Anexa Alfred. Ms. Alfred is a member of the United Nations expert mechanism on the rights of Indigenous peoples and an exiled Indigenous Nicaraguan human rights defender.

Thank you all for being here. Mr. Hernandez-Roy, please begin with your testimony.