

An urgent appeal to let Bishop Alvarez go

Excerpts of opening remarks by Chairman Chris Smith (R-NJ)

Rayburn House Office Building, Washington DC

November 30, 2023 202 225-3765

This hearing of the Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations will come to order.

Today we appeal to President Daniel Ortega—let imprisoned Catholic Bishop Rolando Álvarez go. Release him from prison.

Out of an abundance of concern for Bishop Álvarez’s welfare and health, let him come to the United States or to the Vatican or somewhere else where he can again serve the people, preach the Good News of the Gospel, and care for the weakest and most vulnerable.

Bishop Álvarez’s life and ministry has been an inspiring example of compassion, kindness, integrity, and selfless service.

In his homilies he speaks of an enduring gratitude and “serenity in our hearts” that “can only come from God”.

He encourages us to “be convinced that everything is happening for our good, because God loves us and because we love him”.

He preaches love and forgiveness and “that Christ calls his disciples not to harbor resentment and to always forgive.”

He conveys hope, holiness, and humility to the people of Nicaragua—and the world.

Bishop Álvarez is an innocent man enduring unspeakable suffering.

Today we appeal to President Daniel Ortega— release him from prison. Let Bishop Álvarez go.

We will hear testimony today from members of the church who have experienced the Ortega-Murillo regime's oppression firsthand.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here to share their stories—thank you for your bravery, tenacity and faithfulness in the pursuit of peace and reconciliation and for inspiring us with your indomitable faith in God.

It is crucial that the world hears your voices and learns the truth about what is happening in Nicaragua including the truth about the prison conditions and treatment of Bishop Alvarez.

The international community can no longer turn a blind eye to what is happening to the people of Nicaragua—including and especially people of faith.

The regime has closed Catholic radio stations and universities, obstructed access to places of worship, banned public Way of the Cross processions, and frozen the bank accounts of hundreds of Catholic institutions. Prisoners' requests for Bibles have been denied. Bishops and priests, as well as worshippers, have been harassed and detained, and the religious order of sisters founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta—Missionaries of Charity—has been expelled.

Bishop Álvarez is now the only known cleric to remain imprisoned by the regime and it's time to let him go.

Just last month twelve priests were sent from imprisonment in Nicaragua to exile in the Vatican—but Bishop Álvarez was not among them—why?

Bishop Álvarez has consistently encouraged Nicaraguans not to fall into the temptation of despair and instead be “inundated with the hope of Christ”, who defeated death. Does this sound like a man who is guilty of treason?

I would like to share some additional words from the Bishop, spoken in a homily after he was placed under house arrest in August of 2022.

He said that “painful experiences do not happen in vain; they don’t fall into a void. These experiences are offered to the Lord and God returns them in blessings for us.”

Bishop Álvarez encouraged the faithful saying, “Evil is defeated by the power of good. Good is always more powerful. Good is eternally powerful. Evil is tremendously limited, even though it makes more noise.”

He also encouraged people to be long suffering and to die unto oneself for “it is the hope of the grain of wheat that dies and that is the only way it can produce much fruit”.

Bishop Álvarez admonishes all people of goodwill to have hearts “full of forgiveness” that mirror the “mercy of God”.

I am in awe of his courage, faithfulness and kindness and by his extraordinary strength.

Instead of lashing out in bitterness at his captors—including President Ortega—Bishop Álvarez has called for forgiveness, renewal and hope.

Bishop Álvarez deserves to be respected and revered—not persecuted and incarcerated.

We again appeal to President Daniel Ortega—let Bishop Álvarez go. Release him from prison.

The video of Bishop Álvarez released this week by the government of Nicaragua raise serious questions and concerns about his wellbeing. He has lost weight—is he ill? Is he being provided proper nutrition and basic medical care?

The conspicuous array of food and drink on the two tables in the government video is eerily reminiscent of a [trip Congressman Frank Wolf and I made in 1989 to Perm Camp 35](#)—the infamous Soviet political prison in the Ural Mountains. After meeting and videotaping two dozen undernourished political prisoners, the camp warden took us to the cafeteria. Every table had an abundance of food on it and every garbage can was filled to overflowing with excess food—a Potemkin village.

There are many questions that demand answers and I suspect that the answers will only paint a more dire picture of the Bishop’s imprisonment in La Modelo – one of Latin America’s most notorious prisons. (I have repeatedly requested to be able to visit Bishop Álvarez at the prison.)

I ask the United States Government, as I did at this [Subcommittee’s hearing in March](#)—is the United States doing enough? Delay is denial. The United States needs to act quickly and use every tool at our disposal.

We have passed the Nicaragua Human Rights and Anti-Corruption Act of 2018, the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act (NICA Act), and the Reinforcing Nicaragua’s Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform Act (RENACER). Despite the regime’s egregious human rights abuses, Nicaragua, remains a member of the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR). Congress needs to seriously re-examine Nicaragua’s membership in CAFTA-DR in light of the current situation and consider the full scope of economic tools at our disposal.

So again, we appeal to President Daniel Ortega—let Bishop Álvarez go.

