News



Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Matagalpa poses for a photo at a Catholic church where he had been taking refuge, alleging he had been targeted by the police, in Managua, Nicaragua, in this May 20, 2022, file photo. Álvarez, who has been critical of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, was arrested by police Aug. 19 and his whereabouts are unknown. (Maynor Valenzuela, CNS/Reuters)



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Nicaraguan police burst into Matagalpa diocesan headquarters and removed an outspoken bishop who had been under house arrest for more than two weeks.

Police raided the curia in the predawn hours of Aug. 19 and took Bishop Rolando Álvarez, according to a social media statement from the Diocese of Matagalpa. It said Álvarez's whereabouts are unknown.

The bishop had been holed up in the diocesan office for 16 days with 11 others as police maintained a constant presence outside.

His arrest marked another escalation in the repression against the Catholic Church in the Central American country.

Nicaragua's National Police said in an Aug. 5 statement that the bishop was under investigation for "trying to organize violent groups, inciting them to execute acts of hate against the population, provoking an environment of chaos and disorder, disturbing the peace and harmony in the community with the objective of destabilizing the Nicaraguan state and attacking the constitutional authorities."

The investigation was revealed after Bishop Álvarez vociferously objected to regulators ordering the closure of Catholic radio stations in the Diocese of Matagalpa; parishioners had tried to impede police confiscating equipment.

During his house arrest, the bishop and companions had released a series of social media videos.

"We have to respond to hate with love, despair with hope, and fear with the strength and courage given to us by the glorious and resurrected Christ," the 55-year-old prelate said in one video posted on various social media platforms.

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Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega -- who has treated the Catholic Church as a political enemy -- has arrested priests, expelled the Missionaries of Charity and apostolic nuncio from the country and closed Catholic media outlets and educational and charitable projects.

A priest, Fr. Oscar Benavides, was detained in the Diocese of Siuna while traveling to celebrate Mass Aug. 14 and has been imprisoned in the notorious El Chipote political prison, according to a source. Multiple news reports have documented the repressive conditions inside the prison.

The same day Benavides was arrested, two other priests were prevented by police from attending a Marian celebration at the Matagalpa Cathedral.

The Ortega regime started cracking down on critics in 2018 after protests erupted and the people took to the streets demanding Ortega's ouster.

The Nicaraguan bishops' conference attempted to mediate a dialogue between the protesters and the government, but the process broke down due to a "lack of consensus," according to the bishops. Some parishes and priests, along with the Jesuit-run Central American University, provided refuge for student protesters being violently suppressed by police and paramilitaries.

Auxiliary Bishop Silvio José Baez of Managua left the country in 2019 after the Vatican expressed concerns for his safety.