News

A light brown skinned man wearing a clerical shirt and a pectoral cross folds his hands in pray

Bishop Rolando José Álvarez Lagos of Matagalpa, Nicaragua, a frequent critic of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, prays at a Catholic church in Managua May 20, 2022. Álvarez was arrested in August and was formally charged during an unannounced Dec. 13 court date. (CNS photo/Maynor Valenzuela, Reuters)



by OSV News

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A court ruled at a Jan. 10 hearing that a Nicaraguan bishop, who has been detained since August, will stand trial on the charges of spreading false information and conspiracy.

Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Matagalpa, who has been accused of "conspiracy to undermine national integrity" and "to spread fake news" appeared wearing a white shirt and looking gaunt, according to a photo shared by the court in Managua. A statement released by the court's press office stated that "the initial hearing of the penal process where Rolando José Álvarez Lagos appeared as the accused took place" on that day.

Álvarez has been a vocal critic of the Nicaraguan government and was forcefully put under house arrest in August, an act widely criticized by human rights defenders worldwide.

The bishop was charged Dec. 13 -- nearly four months after being detained without due process. He was assigned a public defender, told his trial date and was ordered to remain under house arrest.

In a Dec. 16 statement, Bishop David J. Malloy of Rockford, Illinois, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace, decried the charges and called on the U.S. government and the international community "to pursue the immediate release of Bishop Álvarez, the restoration of religious freedom and human rights guarantees, and initiate a process of restoring the democratic order and the rule of law in Nicaragua."

As reported by several outlets, including Catholic News Service, Álvarez came under siege in early August when he was prevented from leaving a building belonging to the Diocese of Matagalpa.

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Soldiers surrounded the building for days, and some laypeople and priests who were inside the building with him were subsequently apprehended and sent to prison.

Álvarez was taken away by police Aug. 19 during a 3 a.m. raid. He was charged with conspiracy in December.

Nicaragua began its most recent political and economic upheaval in 2018. According to an earlier OSV News story, in the four subsequent years, the church suffered 190 attacks, ranging from a Molotov bomb in the cathedral of Managua to bishops having shots fired at their cars.

President Daniel Ortega's government also has arrested other priests, seminarians and laypeople. Its crackdown on the church also included "desecrations of sacred images and even profanations of the Blessed Sacrament," said Malloy, the chairman of the U.S. bishops' international policy committee.

"Since the bloody crackdown on peaceful protesters in 2018 ... the regime and its allies have been implementing a policy of severe, systematic physical, rhetorical, and institutional aggression and intimidation against the Catholic Church in Nicaragua," he said in the December statement.

In 2022, the Nicaraguan government closed Catholic NGOs, including the charitable organization run by the Missionaries of Charity. It also expelled the apostolic nuncio, Archbishop Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag. Additionally, the government shut down 10 Catholic radio stations and three Catholic TV outlets.