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People with microphones and professional cameras crowd around a brown man

Juan Sebastian Chamorro, one of the more than 200 freed political prisoners from Nicaragua, speaks to reporters after arriving in the United States at Dulles International Airport in Virginia Feb. 9, 2023. (OSV News photo/Kevin Lamarque, Reuters)



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Nicaragua has released more than 200 political prisoners, including Catholic priests, students, and opponents of the regime, who were taken from detention in deplorable conditions and sent to the United States.

Media in the Central American countries reported 222 political prisoners boarded a flight Feb. 9 to the United States, where they would be granted refuge.

The New York Times reported the regime of President Daniel Ortega asked for nothing in exchange for the release of political prisoners but cited a Biden administration official saying Nicaragua hoped to improve relations between the two countries.

"The release of these individuals, one of whom is a U.S. citizen, by the Government of Nicaragua marks a constructive step toward addressing human rights abuses in the country and opens the door to further dialogue between the United States and Nicaragua regarding issues of concern," U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said

in a Feb. 9 statement.

"Today's development is the product of concerted American diplomacy, and we will continue to support the Nicaraguan people."

The plane with released prisoners landed in Washington at noon Eastern time.

In a video statement issued early Feb. 9, Nicaraguan judge Octavio Rothschuh ordered the political prisoners "deported" from Nicaragua.

"The deportees were declared traitors to the homeland, perpetually disqualified from exercising public office in the name of Nicaragua and perpetually disqualified from (holding) any elected position. They are in the United States, and, in this manner, we conclude the deportation sentence," Rothschuh said.

The National Assembly promptly stripped the exiled political prisoners of their Nicaraguan citizenship.

The names of the prisoners were not immediately released, but Nicaraguan media and priests in exile said the list included churchmen convicted in sham trials of conspiracy and spreading false information. The list also included opposition candidates disqualified by Ortega prior to elections in 2021 -- the results of which U.S. and European officials refused to recognize.

Independent Nicaraguan news organization Confidencial reported that six churchmen and a diocesan communicator, sentenced to 10 years in prison on conspiracy charges by a Nicaraguan court Feb. 6, were on the flight to the United States.

The list includes Frs. Ramiro Tijerino, José Luis Díaz and Sadiel Eugarrios; Deacon Raúl Antonio Vega; seminarians Darvin Leiva and Melkin Centeno; and cameraman Sergio Cárdenas -- all from the Diocese of Matagalpa. Another priest, Fr. Óscar Danilo Benavidez, pastor in the community of Mulukuku, who was arrested Aug. 14 and was sentenced Feb. 5 on similar charges of conspiracy and spreading false information, also was reported to be on the flight.

The status of Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Matagalpa is unknown. The bishop, an unrelenting critic of the Ortega regime, has been held under house arrest since August 2021. The bishop has previously refused to flee the country, in spite of increasing persecution.

A Nicaraguan source told Inés San Martín, vice president of communications for the Pontifical Mission Societies USA, that Álvarez did not sign his deportation order. Another source in Nicaragua told OSV News the same.

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The release of the political prisoners offered a rare moment of relief for Catholics in Nicaragua, but some consternation as those being expelled were stripped of their citizenship.

Auxiliary Bishop Silvio José Baez tweeted Feb. 9: "It gives me deep joy that Nicaragua’s political prisoners are out of prison. I have thanks to God for them! They never should have been prisoners. By banishing them, Nicaragua’s dictatorship committed another crime, showing that it's them (the regime) who do not deserve to be Nicaraguans."

Baez serves the Archdiocese of Managua in Nicaragua but now lives in exile in Miami. He fled the country in 2019 after facing down death threats for criticizing the country’s totalitarian government.

The Nicaraguan Catholic Church has drawn the ire of the Ortega regime for its providing shelter to protesters after demonstrations erupted in 2018 and subsequently accompanying the families of political prisoners.

"The church is important because it is still one of the institutions with the greatest trust among the population," Tiziano Breda, researcher at the Italian Institute of International Affairs, told OSV News.

"(Bishop) Álvarez was one of the voices that was outspoken and … had a capacity to convene people. (His imprisonment) disincentivizes any other voices in the Catholic Church from expressing views or rally people and criticize the government," he said.

The persecution of Nicaraguan Catholics has caused international consternation and expressions of solidarity from bishops’ conferences from around the world.

"We follow with sadness and concern the situation in Nicaragua, and the persecution to which our church is being subjected," Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg, president of the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the

European Union (COMECE), said in a Feb. 6 letter to Bishop Carlos Enrique Herrera Gutiérrez of Jinotega, president of the Nicaraguan bishops' conference.

"As bishops of COMECE, we are committed to promote freedom, democracy and justice in Nicaragua through our regular dialogue with the representatives of EU institutions," Hollerich added.

"Do not doubt that as COMECE we will do everything in our power with European institutions for (the bishop's release) and to promote freedom, the rule of law, justice and democracy in your beloved country," he said.

Pope Francis has spoken somewhat tepidly on Nicaragua, where the regime expelled the apostolic nuncio, Archbishop Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag, in March 2022.

The pope has publicly expressed concern for the situation in Nicaragua and called for dialogue. He told reporters in September, "There is dialogue. That doesn't mean we approve of everything the government is doing or disapprove of it."

Breda said the objectives of dialogues involving Nicaraguan officials had diminished from trying to find a solution to the political crisis – including free elections, allowing Ortega to peacefully leave power – "to trying to persuade the government to give the most minimal, humane conditions for political prisoners."

The Catholic Church has previously promoted dialogue in Nicaragua to find a peaceful solution to the protests but broke off talks after the regime showed bad faith. Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, have subsequently branded church leaders "coup mongers" and "terrorists."