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Pope Francis speaks into a microphone while holding a piece of paper over a clear lecturn

Pope Francis leads the Angelus from the window of his studio overlooking St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Feb. 12, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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Just days after Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Matagalpa, Nicaragua, was sentenced to 26 years in prison, Pope Francis expressed concern over his condition.

After praying the Angelus in St. Peter's Square Feb. 12, the pope said he was "pained" by the news coming out of Nicaragua and recalled "with concern" the situation of Álvarez, who had been arrested in August by the regime of President Daniel Ortega; the bishop was sentenced Feb. 10 and stripped of his Nicaraguan citizenship.

Francis prayed for Mary's intercession to open the hearts of the "responsible politicians and all citizens" to the pursuit of peace, which he said is achieved through the "patient exercise of dialogue."

Álvarez played an important role in mediation efforts between the Nicaraguan government and protesters in 2018 following waves of civil unrest which killed more than 360 people. Ortega, who has been in power since 2007, has since accused the bishop and the church of attempting to overthrow him.

In his comments the pope also noted the 222 political prisoners deported from Nicaragua to the United States Feb. 9, a group which included five priests, a deacon, two seminarians and two media professionals employed by the Diocese of Matagalpa. Álvarez was on the list of deportees to be sent to the United States but refused to leave Nicaragua.

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Those who did go to the United States were stripped of their Nicaraguan citizenship and were given a two-year humanitarian visa by the U.S. government. Spain has offered to give them citizenship.

One day after the deportees reached the United States, Álvarez was convicted of treason and undermining national integrity, among other charges, resulting in the 26-year prison sentence. He had been under house arrest since August.

The bishop's arrest followed other moves by the Ortega regime targeted at the Catholic Church, including expelling Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity and Archbishop Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag, the former papal nuncio to Nicaragua.

In August, Francis publicly called for dialogue to resolve the tensions between the church and the Nicaraguan government but did not specifically address the arrest of Álvarez.

Speaking after a Mass in the Nicaraguan capital Feb. 12, Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes, archbishop of Managua, asked for prayers that the Lord would give Álvarez strength and discernment in all his actions. He also asked his congregation not to be hateful, because Christians "must love and forgive intensely."