News



Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva arrives at the St. Damaso courtyard for a private audience with Pope Francis, at the Vatican, Wednesday, June 21, 2023. (Alessandro Di Meo, Pool via AP)

by Associated Press

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Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva offered June 22 to help try to gain the release of a Roman Catholic bishop imprisoned in Nicaragua.

Lula made the comments after visiting with Pope Francis at the Vatican.

Bishop Rolando Álvarez was jailed by the regime of President Daniel Ortega for supposedly helping anti-government protesters. The bishop was sentenced to 26 years in prison, after he refused to board a plane carrying exiles to the United States in February.

“I want to talk to Daniel Ortega about freeing the bishop,” Lula said, adding, “I am going to try to help, if I can help.”

“The only thing the church wants is for Nicaragua to free the bishop so he can go to Italy," Lula said.

There was no immediate reaction from the Ortega government.

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Nicaragua's court system said Álvarez was convicted of undermining the government, spreading false information, obstruction of functions and disobedience.

Relations between Ortega and the church have frayed to near non-existence since Nicaragua’s government began jailing opponents and clergy and expelling church-related groups.

Since anti-government street protests broke out in 2018, Ortega has banned all opposition demonstrations in Nicaragua and has also restricted Catholic activities. He says Catholic figures sympathetic to the opposition are “terrorists.”

In March, the Vatican closed its embassy in Nicaragua after Ortega’s government proposed suspending diplomatic relations, the latest episode in a years-long crackdown on the church.

Dozens of religious figures have been arrested or fled the country. Two congregations of nuns, including the Missionaries of Charity order founded by Mother Teresa, were expelled last year.