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A priest wearing a face mask and white vestments holds a microphone and stands in front of

A priest celebrates a Mass for parishioners at Santo Domingo de Guzman Church in Managua, Nicaragua, Aug. 2, 2022. Eight priests were transferred Oct. 15, 2023, from a national seminary where they were under house arrest to a prison notorious for torture and deplorable conditions. The action came as the Nicaraguan regime again ramps up its repression of the Catholic Church. (OSV News photo/Maynor Valenzuela, Reuters)



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Eight priests have been transferred to a prison notorious for torture and deplorable conditions as the Nicaraguan regime again ramps up its repression of the Catholic Church.

The churchmen were moved Oct. 15 to El Chipote prison on the outskirts of the nation's capital, Managua, after being held under house arrest in the National Seminary of Our Lady of Fatima, according to sources speaking with independent Nicaraguan news organization La Prensa.

Six of the priests had been abducted by police and paramilitaries from their parishes and parish residences between Oct. 1 and Oct. 9 in the dioceses of Estelí, Jinotega and Bluefields.

Two other churchmen from the Diocese of Estelí, being held in the seminary, also were moved to El Chipote, according to La Prensa. The priests were identified as Fr. Osman Amador Guillén, diocesan Caritas director, who was taken from the cathedral residence Sept. 8, and Fr. Eugenio Rodríguez Benavides.

Rodríguez and another priest from the Diocese of Estelí, Fr. Leonardo Guevara, were detained in May over "administrative matters" in the now-defunct diocesan Caritas chapter.

Guevara was released from custody and returned to his duties at the Estelí cathedral, Spanish news agency EFE reported Oct. 6.

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The Caritas chapter was one of the many church charitable and educational projects -- and the more than 3,500 other nongovernmental organizations -- closed by the regime of President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo.

The ruling couple have branded priests and prelates "terrorists" and severed ties with the Vatican after Pope Francis described the regime as "Hitlerian."

Nicaraguan officials have not publicly commented on the transfers to El Chipote, which lawyers and human rights defenders describe as a "torture chamber" where inmates are held in "semi-darkness" and denied proper food and medical treatment.

Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Matagalpa, who was sentenced to 26 years in prison after a trial rife with irregularities, is being held in the La Modelo prison, which also is notorious for poor conditions. The regime exiled 222 political prisoners -- many held in El Chipote -- in February, but Álvarez refused to leave the country.

The transfer of the priests held at the national seminary to El Chipote followed news of another churchman escaping house arrest. Fr. Harving Padilla, parish priest in the municipality of Masaya, escaped the archdiocesan seminary in Managua after 16 months of detention there. He subsequently fled the country Sept. 28, according to Nicaraguan media outlet Confidencial.

La Prensa reported 13 priests are currently imprisoned in Nicaragua, including Álvarez. Most of the imprisoned priests are from the Diocese of Estelí, where Álvarez is apostolic administrator.