News

A graying white man wearing a suit and tie speaks next to a Rep. Smith name plate

U.S. Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., is seen on Capitol Hill in Washington March 10, 2021. The House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations held a Nov. 30 congressional hearing chaired by Smith calling for the release of Nicaraguan Bishop Rolando Álvarez.(OSV News photo/Ken Cedeno, Pool via Reuters)

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Lawmakers and exiled Nicaraguan nationals at a congressional hearing Nov. 30 called for the release of Bishop Rolando Álvarez, a Catholic prelate imprisoned by Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.

Ortega's regime has persecuted the Catholic Church in Nicaragua, the lawmakers said, targeting church leaders who have criticized his government. Among them, Álvarez of Matagalpa was sentenced in February to 26 years in prison the day after he refused to be deported to the U.S. with more than 200 other Nicaraguan political prisoners. Pope Francis has publicly denounced Álvarez's sentence and the deportation of Nicaraguans from their homeland.

At the hearing of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations chaired by Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., lawmakers said trumped-up charges against Álvarez by Ortega, whom they called a dictator, is part of the regime's crackdown on religious freedom in the country.

"Today, we appeal to President Daniel Ortega: Let imprisoned Catholic Bishop Álvarez go," Smith said. "Release him from prison. Out of an abundance of concern for Bishop Álvarez's welfare and health, let him come to the United States or to the Vatican or somewhere else, or stay right in Nicaragua, where he can again serve the people, preach the good news and the Gospel, and care for the weakest and most vulnerable."

The Nicaraguan government Nov. 28 released a series of photos and videos of Álvarez, purportedly as proof of him receiving medical treatment during his imprisonment and getting preferential treatment. The photos and videos show Álvarez visited by family members, watching TV and receiving medical attention. In a press release, the Ortega government called the photos "contrary to what slanderous campaigns would have us believe."

But the photos released by Nicaragua's interior ministry appeared to show the bishop, 57, emaciated and having lost considerable weight, according to posts by his colleagues on social media.

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"The dictatorship must not believe that with their cynical language and photos and videos of dubious authenticity they are going to justify their crime and silence us," Auxiliary Bishop Silvio José Báez of Managua, who has lived in exiled in Miami since 2019, wrote Nov. 28 on X, formerly Twitter. "Bishop Rolando Álvarez is INNOCENT and we will continue to shout this injustice to the world. He must be released immediately without conditions!"

At the Nov. 30 hearing, individuals were identified as "exiled prisoners of conscience" by lawmakers who withheld their names to protect them, their friends or family members from retaliation by the Ortega regime.

One such individual, who said through a translator that they were among those exiled in February, shared that they were taken out of jail and brought to an airport,

where "it was explained to us that we were leaving for exile in the United States."

"When we were in Washington the next day, we realized that the bishop was not on that plane," the person said, adding, "I hope that this testimony can be used to negotiate the release of my bishop."

Ortega has persecuted other political opponents, arresting seven potential presidential candidates prior to his reelection bid in 2021, an election the U.S. and European countries considered rigged. His regime has also ended the registrations of nongovernmental groups, forced the closure of religious orders, church-affiliated charities and schools and suppressed independent media outlets.

On March 18, the Vatican closed its embassy in Nicaragua after Ortega's government proposed suspending diplomatic relations with the Holy See.