News

A crowd stands around a girl wearing a blue nativity costume riding on a donkey. A boy also c

People from the U.S. and Mexico take part in a "posada," the commemoration of Mary and Joseph's search for shelter in Nogales, Mexico. The Sandinista regime stepped up its crackdown on the Catholic Church over the Christmas season in Nicaragua in 2023, with the government forbidding the enactment of traditional "posadas," the living Nativity scenes created in the streets in the days leading up to Christmas. (OSV News photo/Nancy Wiechec)



OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Buenos Aires — December 26, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Six lay staff members from a now-closed diocesan Cáritas chapter were convicted on money laundering charges in Nicaragua on Christmas Eve as the Sandinista regime stepped up its crackdown on the Catholic Church over the Christmas season. The Nicaraguan government has also forbidden the enactment of traditional "posadas," the living Nativity scenes created in the streets in the days leading up to Christmas.

The six convicted staff members previously worked for Caritas in the Diocese of Estelí -- where imprisoned Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Matagalpa is apostolic administrator -- which was closed in 2022 as part of the regime's repression of church, charitable and non-governmental organizations. Nicaraguan media identified the six Caritas staff as Julio Sevilla, Julio Berríos, Bladimir Pallés, María Verónica Herrera Galeano, Freydell Andino and Mariví Andino.

The regime has revoked the legal status of more than 3,500 non-governmental organizations in recent years, including Caritas chapters and Catholic projects such as universities, arguing the groups often failed to comply with tax laws and governance rules.

Independent Nicaraguan news organization Confidencial reported in June 2023 that the National Police alleged money laundering involving a 2012 donation of $563,207 for a hospital from Catholic Relief Services, the international aid agency of the Catholic Church in the U.S., to Caritas in the Diocese of Estelí. The police also claimed to have found "hundreds of thousands dollars hidden in bags" at various locations, according to Confidencial.

The outlet cited diocesan sources, which confirmed the hospital was not built, but the funds were designated for other projects. A Catholic Relief Services representative was not immediately available for comment.

Frs. Eugenio Rodríguez Benavides and Leonardo Guevara Gutiérrez from the diocesan chapter of Caritas were "requested by the National Police" for its investigation, according to a diocesan statement May 22.

They were held in a seminary in the capital Managua, though Guevara returned to Estelí in October, according to media reports. Rodríguez was exiled to the Vatican on Oct. 18, along with 11 other priests, who had been detained after police and paramilitaries targeted clergy in a wave of detentions.

President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, have turned increasingly tyrannical as they tighten their grip on power in the Central American country and silence all dissenting voices -- including priests and bishops.

Advertisement

Bishop Isidoro Mora of Siuna was arrested Dec. 20, according to independent Nicaraguan media, while traveling to a parish in his diocese to celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation. His arrest followed a Mass celebrated in the Diocese of Matagalpa, where he voiced spiritual support from the Nicaraguan bishops' conference for Álvarez. The government has yet to comment on Mora's whereabouts.

Msgr. Óscar Escoto, diocesan vicar in Matagalpa, was taken by police from his residence at around midnight Dec. 21, according to news outlet Mosaico CSI, which covers Matagalpa. He returned to the diocesan residence the next day, but police remained outside, according to photos posted to X by Martha Patricia Molina, a Nicaraguan lawyer in exile, who has documented Catholic repression in the country.

Shortly before midnight on Dec. 24, the regime released another priest of the diocese, Fr. Jader Guido, second vicar of St. Peter Cathedral in Matagalpa, after almost 12 hours of detention.

"His sin: raising prayers for the bishop of the Diocese, Msgr. Rolando Álvarez," Confidencial reported on Dec. 25.

Álvarez was convicted in February on charges of conspiracy and spreading false information after a trial in which he was not entitled to choose his own defense counsel. He was sentenced to 26 years in prison, but he has rebuffed all attempts at being sent into exile.

The Christmas crackdown has extended to prohibitions on religious celebrations and expressions of popular piety important to many in Nicaragua. Most recently, police visited priests to warn against organizing traditional posadas -- public Nativity scenes with children portraying figures such as Mary and Joseph -- according to Molina.

The police have announced that they will not allow outdoor posadas and that they will only be allowed inside churches.