News



Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega attends the Alba summit in Caracas, Venezuela, April 24, 2024. At least 11 churchmen were detained in early August by police and paramilitaries over a weeklong assault in northern Nicaragua, depleting the already demoralized Diocese of Matagalpa, whose leader, Bishop Rolando Álvarez, lives in exile. (OSV News/Leonardo Fernandez Viloria, Reuters)



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At least 11 churchmen have been detained by police and paramilitaries over a weeklong assault in northern Nicaragua, depleting the already demoralized Diocese of Matagalpa — whose leader, Bishop Rolando Álvarez, lives in exile.

Nine priests and a deacon were detained Aug. 1 and 2 — with some taken from parishes and parish residences — according to independent Nicaragua media. An octogenarian priest was also detained July 27 in the Diocese of Estelí, where Álvarez is apostolic administrator.

"The Diocese of Matagalpa practically no longer has any clergy. We've been expelled, pressured and forced to flee. Parishes are on their own," an exiled priest, familiar with the diocese, told OSV News.

"(The church) has been attacked from all sides. They've removed clergy, they've frozen its accounts. The church has survived," he added. But of the ruling Sandinista regime, he said, "Their ultimate goal is to exterminate the diocesean church where Monsignor Rolando (Álvarez) is still bishop."

The arrests reflected the deepening repression of the Catholic Church in the Central American country, which has careened toward totalitarianism. President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosarillo Murillo, continue to crack down on dissent, close spaces for civil society and infringe on freedom of worship — with priests being spied upon and forced to watch their words during Mass.

The repression "stems from the deep insecurities of regime leaders who desire absolute control and seek to abolish independent institutions to do so," Eric Farnsworth, vice president of the Americas Society/Council of the Americas, told OSV News. "The church is among the last of these in Nicaragua and this helps explain efforts to bring it to heel."

Signs of infighting have appeared recently with the regime "willing to go after its own" and "becoming more isolated and family-based," Ryan Berg, director of the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, told OSV News.

Church observers lack a cogent explanation for the latest attack on the Catholic Church, which followed a period of constant, low-level hostilities. It came amid turmoil in Venezuela — an ally of Nicaragua — where opposition supporters have flooded the streets to protest election fraud and President Nicolás Maduro has repressed them with police and government-controlled goon squads.

Bishop José Antonio Canales Motiño of Danlí, Honduras, accused the Nicaraguan regime of "taking advantage of the distraction of what's happening in Venezuela" to persecute priests in Nicaragua without international media attention, according to independent news outlet Despacho 505.

Sources interviewed by OSV News pointed to the regime's lingering disdain for Álvarez, who had become the face of the Nicaraguan resistance to rising tyranny, as motive for the ongoing attacks.

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The most recent assault on the Matagalpa church coincided with the second anniversary of the August 2022 detention of Álvarez, who was taken during a raid on the diocesan curia where he had been holed up with 11 colleagues for nearly two weeks as they protested the seizure of Catholic media outlets.

The bishop was convicted on sham charges in January 2023 and sent into exile a year later — along with 18 other churchmen, including Bishop Isidoro Mora of Siuna. Mora was detained after publicly offering prayers for Álvarez at a celebration of the Eucharist in the Matagalpa Cathedral. Álvarez has not spoken publicly since being

exiled.

"The Ortega-Murillo dictatorship hates him and sees him as a dangerous man," Martha Patricia Molina, a Nicaraguan lawyer in exile who tracks persecution of the Catholic Church, said in comments to OSV News. "The dictatorship, with its illegal, arbitrary and unconstitutional actions against the religious of the Diocese of Matagalpa, the only thing it shows is that it is pursuing a scorched earth policy."

The removal of Álvarez from Matagalpa and the ongoing government attacks have left the diocese with a skeleton staff.

Molina shared figures with OSV News showing 70 priests were serving the diocese — 57 Nicaraguans and 13 foreigners — prior to the regime's attacks on the church. Just 22 priests remain to cover a diocese of 615,858 Catholics and 29 parishes. Four of the priests died; two have retired, but continue to celebrate the sacraments; five were "kidnapped," while three are missing. Thirty of the priests were forced into exile.

"The majority of the kidnapped priests were taken violently," Molina said.

The latest wave of arrests started July 27 with the detention of Father Frutos Valle, age 80, who is serving as "ad omnia" executor in the Diócesis de Estelí, allowing him to administer ordinary functions of pastoral governance, except functions reserved to the bishop.

Fathers Ulises René Vega Matamoros and Edgar Sacasa, identified as the judicial and pastoral vicars, respectively, in the Diocese of Matagalpa, were arrested Aug. 1.

Six more priests from the Diocese of Matagalpa were arrested Aug. 2, according to Nicaraguan independent media outlet 100% Noticias. They were identified as Fathers Jairo Pravia, Víctor Godoy, Marlon Velásquez, Antonio López, Raúl Villegas — a Mexican priest — and Francisco Tercero. Father Silvio Romero was also arrested in the Diocese of Juigalpa.

They were taken to the national capital Managua, where all but one are reportedly being held in a seminary-turned-detention facility for clergy, according to independent Nicaraguan media outlet 100% Noticias. Tercero was put in the Modelo prison — where Álvarez was held — on supposed accusations of a sexual offense, according to 100% Noticias. Deacon Erwin Aguirre was also arrested, but

subsequently released. Father Bayardo Alfaro, a priest in the Diocese of Estelí, voluntarily left the country, according to 100% Noticias.

Molina previously told OSV News that 2023 was unfolding as the most difficult year yet for the Nicaraguan church. She said in April that at least 131 churchmen and 91 women religious have fled or been forced to leave Nicaragua since 2018.

The priests remaining in Nicaragua continue working with limited resources.

"The church in the midst of everything has tried to continue with the normality of the mission with the few priests who remain. They have tripled their work," said the exiled priest.

Nicaragua remains a fervently Catholic country. But signs have emerged of the regime removing Catholic symbols and changing streets with religiously inspired names.

"They have started with this idea of disappearing religious, Christian symbols in public places," Arturo McFields, a former Nicaraguan ambassador to the Organization of American States, told OSV News. "I'm not saying it's massive, but it is starting and it's noticeable."

The Vatican worked quietly to obtain Álvarez's release. Some Nicaraguans express hope that Pope Francis will instead speak out more forcefully on Nicaragua.

"Pope Francis can affect the situation in Nicaragua," said Álvaro Leiva, president of the Central American Association for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights. He described the pope's posture toward Nicaragua as "non-confrontational, which "does not represent a greater chance of seeing that this dictatorship could be weakening."