News



A Caritas logo is pictured in a 2019 photo. Nicaragua has revoked the legal status of the Cáritas chapter in the Diocese of Matagalpa and continued arresting priests and laity there, delivering another blow to a diocese decimated by the detentions and expulsions of clergy and the exile of its bishop to the Vatican. (OSV News/Remo Casilli, Reuters)



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Managua, Nicaragua — August 14, 2024
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Nicaragua has revoked the legal status of the Caritas chapter in the Diocese of Matagalpa and continued arresting priests and laity there, delivering another blow to a diocese decimated by the detentions and expulsions of clergy and the exile of its bishop to the Vatican.

The interior ministry has insisted Cáritas de Matagalpa did not deliver financial reports between 2020 and 2023. It also alleged its board of directors' term had expired in September 2022. Fourteen additional non-governmental groups were also stripped of their legal standing in the Aug. 12 decision — nine of them through voluntary dissolution, according to the official daily La Gaceta, where these decisions are posted — including several groups belonging to protestant denominations.

The decision followed a wave of arrests mostly targeting the Dioceses of Matagalpa and Estelí — where exiled Bishop Rolando Álvarez is bishop and apostolic administrator, respectively — in recent weeks with at least a dozen churchmen detained.

Seven of the detained priests were exiled to the Vatican Aug. 7, while one priest, Father Francisco Tercero, is still incarcerated and the whereabouts of Friars Ramón Morras and Salvador de las Calabazas remain unknown. A deacon and a priest were released, according to independent Nicaraguan media, while another priest voluntarily left the country.

A pair of priests and two laywomen were subsequently arrested after the seven priests were exiled, according to independent Nicaraguan media.

Father Denis Martínez was arrested as he traveled to celebrate Mass in the Diocese of Matagalpa, according to an Aug. 11 post on X, formerly Twitter, by Martha Patricia Molina, an exiled Nicaraguan lawyer, who tracks church persecution in the country. Martínez taught in the interdiocesan Our Lady of Fatima Seminary in Managua, the national capital, and would travel to Matagalpa to celebrate Mass due to a shortage

of priests, according to Mosaico CSI, an online publication focused on Matagalpa.

Father Leonel Balmaceda, priest at the Jesus of Charity Parish in the community of La Trinidad in the Diocese of Estelí, was detained Aug. 10, according to independent Nicaraguan journalists. The priests' whereabouts remain uncertain.

Additionally, two laywomen, Lesbia Gutiérrez and Carmen Sáenz Martínez, were also arrested, according to exiled Nicaraguans, who remain in contact with sources in the Central American country.

Gutiérrez, an administrator at Cáritas de Matagalpa, and Sánez Martínez, a diocesan adviser on matters of canon law, were detained under uncertain circumstances, exiled Nicaraguan lawyer Yadir Morazán posted Aug. 10 on X. Mosaico CSI said Sánez Martínez was detained early Aug. 10 and identified her as a married mother of two sons, having a master's degree in canon law. She supported the diocese in cases of marriage nullification.

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Amid the wave of detentions, an unconfirmed report emerged Aug. 12 of police entering the St. Peter the Apostle Cathedral in Matagalpa and arresting lay administrative staff, according to Haydee Castillo, a Nicaraguan human rights activist. However, a diocesan media outlet, TV Merced, posted on its Facebook account, "There has been no extraordinary police presence" at the cathedral, which it said was operating normally.

The targeting of the Dioceses of Matagalpa and Estelí reflects the deep antipathy shown by the ruling regime toward the Catholic Church and specifically Álvarez, who emerged as a prominent critic who spoke prophetically in denouncing its abuses and crushing of all dissent.

A Catholic source speaking anonymously with OSV News said the arrests had left the Diocese of Matagalpa with a widespread shortage of priests. Molina told OSV News Aug. 3 that the Diocese of Matagalpa only had 22 priests remaining in its territory — down from 70 priests prior to the regime's attacks.

Nicaraguan journalist Emiliano Chamorro said on X that the Diocese of Estelí had 12 parishes without priests due to arrests and exile.

The Nicaraguan government has closed more than 3,000 non-governmental organizations, including Catholic projects ranging from Radio María to Catholic universities to Cáritas chapters. The Missionaries of Charity had its legal status revoked and was forced to abandon the country in 2022.

Six lay employees from the now-closed Cáritas chapter in Estelí were convicted on money laundering charges in December 2023. The Cáritas chapter had its legal status revoked the previous year.