

Authorities Claim Christians Are 'Enemies of the Regime'; Attack, Detain and Kill Anyone Who Stands in the Way

Nicaragua's president ordered a U.N. Commission to leave the country on Sept. 1, after it criticized the government for human rights abuses committed during its clampdown on anti-government protesters.

In its report, the U.N. Commission for Human Rights "called on the government to stop the persecution of protesters and disarm masked gangs who it alleges are responsible for killings and arbitrary detentions ... It also described the torture and use of excessive force used during interviews with victims and local human-rights groups," during months of anti-government protests, reported the BBC.

The government denied the allegations, saying the report was biased, but following the expulsion of the U.N. team, anti-government protesters took to the streets again on Sunday (Sept. 2). In the clashes with pro-government forces, at least three more people were injured.

The U.N. Security Council discussed the situation in Nicaragua yesterday (Sept. 5).

Protestors have called for President Daniel Ortega, a former Marxist guerrilla—now in his third term in office—to step down and announce an early election.

Half of the population belongs to the Catholic Church, while around 33 percent of Nicaraguans consider themselves evangelical Christians.

Forms of Repression

Since April more than 300 people have been killed and more than 2,000 injured in clashes between police and pro-government militias. "More than 1,200 people were arrested or have disappeared with some charged with serious crimes, including terrorism," reported Aljazeera.

On 23 August, the bodies of three men were found in Mozonte, 171 kilometers north of the capital Managua. Police said the men were all members of a gang and the violence was crime-related, reported national news site 100Noticias.

However, ABC local News identified one of the men as pastor Justo Emilio Rodriguez Moncada (35) of the evangelical Camino de Santidad church in Managua. The men were found with hands and feet tied and bullets in their head, making it look like an execution. Relatives say that the authorities only try to cover up the atrocities of the regime.

Rights groups have highlighted the "excessive use of force by the security forces of the State" and armed third persons and that the government used a "systematic 'shoot-to-kill policy" in its crackdown.

Other forms of repression include arbitrary detentions, assassinations and even the monitoring of religious activities by infiltrators," according to Rossana Ramirez, an analyst with Open Doors' World Watch Research unit.

Economic pressure is applied too, Ramirez said. On 14 August the daily newspaper La Prensa reported that the President Ortega had ordered a 42% cut in funding for Catholic and Protestant church institutions. This reduction in the state budget will affect 173 religious institutions, with the Archdiocese of Managua—one of the main opponents of the regime—the most affected, according to the analyst.

'A week later the legal advisor of the Episcopal Conference of

Nicaragua, Carlos Cárdenas, was forcefully taken from his home on the outskirts of Managua by a group of hooded men while they threatened to kill his 10-year-old daughter, reported Periodistadigital.

he Episcopal Conference has been acting as a mediator in the national dialogue to end the conflict between the government of President Ortega and the opposition. However, talks were suspended in June because of a lack of progress.

Cárdenas was arrested with five other men on charges of “committing acts of terrorism in the context of the protests against the Government”, according to the news site.

‘Coup Plotters’

While church leaders have been trying to broker peace, the church in Nicaragua has also criticized the government, denouncing its totalitarianism, corruption and the crimes it is committing against humanity, said Ramirez.

And “Catholic churches have been playing an important role in the protests, providing shelter and medical help, as well as using church bells to warn of any impending attacks by paramilitary groups and government supporters”, she said.

That is why “the government has labelled Christian leaders ‘coup plotters’ and ‘enemies of the regime’... and why churches, church leaders and even bishops have been targeted as though they were terrorists,” she explained.

In June, the headquarters of the Diocese of Matagalpa in central Nicaragua was attacked by a group armed with machetes.

A few weeks later, three Catholic Church leaders were physically and verbally assaulted at the Basilica of San Sebastian in Diriamba, 41 kilometers west of Managua, when they visited victims of violence suffered at the hands of the police, paramilitary forces and government supporters.

While the Catholic Church tried to resolve the political crisis, evangelicals generally took a different approach, an evangelical pastor from the city of Masaya, 31 kilometers southeast of Managua, told CBN News. "Many evangelical churches were reluctant to take on such a prominent political role and instead prayed and fasted behind the scenes. Churches also distributed food, water and counseled families who were affected by the violence," he said.

But, according to Ramirez, they and other religious minorities have been threatened too. "In fact, no citizen or religious denomination is safe from attack now that paramilitary groups have publicly threatened to 'blow the head off' anyone protesting against the president," she said. {eo}

This article originally appeared on World Watch Monitor.