

**CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH**  
4TH DISTRICT, NEW JERSEY

CONSTITUENT SERVICE CENTERS:

**OCEAN**

Visit: 33 Washington Street  
Toms River, NJ 08754  
Mail: PO Box 728  
Toms River, NJ 08754  
(732) 504-0567

**MONMOUTH**

1715 Highway 35 North  
Suite 303  
Middletown, NJ 07748  
(732) 780-3035



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[www.chrissmith.house.gov](http://www.chrissmith.house.gov)

November 29, 2023

The Honorable Anthony J. Blinken  
Secretary of State  
U. S. Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20451

Dear Secretary Blinken,

I am gravely concerned about the overall state of religious freedom in Nicaragua and write today inquiring about the wellbeing of His Excellency Rolando Álvarez Lagos, Bishop of Matagalpa, a prisoner of conscience who remains wrongfully detained by the brutal - and criminal – Ortega-Murillo regime in Nicaragua.

On [March 22, 2023](#), I chaired a Congressional hearing on [the Ortega-Murillo Regime's War Against the Catholic Church and Civil Society in Nicaragua](#), where Congress heard from expert witnesses how the Ortega-Murillo regime continues to eviscerate basic rights and fundamental freedoms of Nicaraguans, and how once again the regime has turned its focus toward silencing the Catholic Church through many methods of harassment including the unjust imprisonment of Bishop Álvarez for a term of 26 years.

As of this writing, Bishop Álvarez remains in prison – with little to no information available as to his whereabouts, his health situation, or general wellbeing.

As the Administration has taken [little visible action](#) to advocate for the fundamental rights of Bishop Álvarez and his immediate release from prison since the time of my first hearing, [I have organized a second hearing](#) to once again appeal for Bishop Álvarez' – and all prisoners of conscience - immediate release from unjust imprisonment. The hearing will also highlight the plight of other political prisoners held by the Ortega-Murillo regime and the continued, relentless persecution of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua.

On November 28, in recognition that my hearing would draw more attention to the unjust imprisonment and inhumane treatment of Bishop Álvarez, Ortega-Murillo regime launched a [propaganda campaign](#), releasing [staged photographs and curated video](#) of Bishop Álvarez during a family visit in an attempt to deflect inquiries regarding the horrific human rights violations by the Nicaraguan government.

I reiterate - I call upon President Ortega to immediately and unconditionally release Bishop Álvarez from this wrongful detention.

Prior to the announcement of my hearing, no public information about the bishop's wellbeing had been released since March 25. This despite the call from multiple UN experts for an [end to the arbitrary detention of Bishop Álvarez](#) earlier this month. I note that the Nicaraguan government treats Bishop Álvarez – a man of peace – as a violent criminal, presumably subjecting him to the inhuman conditions in one of Latin America's most brutal prisons, *La Modelo*.

The continued unjust imprisonment of Bishop Álvarez follows a pattern of targeted, and repeated harassment on behalf of the Ortega-Murillo regime towards the institutions and members of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua. This pattern of behavior constitutes a systemic violation of basic human rights and freedom of conscience on behalf of the Nicaraguan government.

In February 2023, 222 political prisoners from Nicaragua were exiled to the U.S. while Bishop Álvarez was sentenced to more than 26 years in prison for alleged “conspiracy.” Since then, his health has deteriorated.

In March, Pope Francis commented on [Bishop Álvarez' imprisonment](#), comparing Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas to both Hitler and Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union – murderous regimes who saw the Catholic Church as a threat and proceed to persecute and murder Catholics.

Following these comments, a surge in arbitrary arrests occurred, culminating the October deportation of 12 priests to the Vatican. Eighty-four priests have been exiled since a series of public protests, which the regime blames on the Catholic Church. This figure represents more than 10% of the clergy in Nicaragua.

These priests join a long list of religious orders and congregations that have had their legal status canceled and their assets seized by the Ortega regime, including the Trappist nuns, the Missionaries of Charity, the Franciscans, and the Jesuits.

The regime's attention is focused on silencing the Catholic Church, which is the single most important independent institution remaining in the country.

The Episcopal Secretariat of Central America, which is the voice of Catholic Bishops in the region, stated that “The Catholic Church in Nicaragua is the only voice that [the regime] has not been able to silence, but they intend to silence it and thus leave the Church submerged in silence.”

Given this disturbing trend of oppression, I respectfully request an explanation of what actions the Biden Administration is undertaking to advocate on behalf of Bishop Álvarez - and to compel the Ortega-Murillo regime to immediately release him from prison – including specific responses following, which may contain a classified annex:

1. Does the State Department possess information on the current location and wellbeing of Bishop Álvarez?
2. If so, where is Bishop Álvarez being held?
3. Is Bishop Álvarez being given adequate and sanitary conditions such as hygiene, food, prison visitation (including from the International Committee of the Red Cross), etc.?
4. Has Bishop Álvarez been subjected to torture?
5. Is Bishop Álvarez' right to worship freely in prison guaranteed, especially considering that he is a bishop of the Catholic Church?
6. Has the State Department filled a formal inquiry with the Nicaraguan government concerning the status of Bishop Álvarez?
7. Has the State Department received any formal communication from the Nicaraguan government regarding the imprisonment and status of Bishop Álvarez?

- a. If so, has the Ortega government explained why it is holding Bishop Álvarez and not releasing him from prison when they have exiled other imprisoned priests to the U.S. and the Vatican?
8. Has the Department received reports that Bishop Álvarez desires to remain in prison?
  - a. Has the Department verified these claims?
  - b. Under what circumstances did Bishop Álvarez state this?
9. Has the State Department received any formal request for assistance from the Vatican to petition for the release of Bishop Álvarez?
  - a. If so, has this assistance been provided?
  - b. If not, has this assistance been formally offered nonetheless?
10. What is the Department doing to advocate for the release of Bishop Álvarez?
  - a. What specific actions has the Biden Administration taken to pressure the Ortega regime to release Bishop Álvarez?
11. What specific steps has the State Department taken to address the persecution of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua?
  - a. What are the intended results of these actions?
12. What is the Department doing to increase pressure on the Ortega-Murillo regime to respect internationally recognized human rights?
13. What is the Department doing to fully implement the requirements of the RENACER Act?
14. The United States imported nearly \$6 Billion<sup>1</sup> in goods in FY 2022 from Nicaragua – a country with a GDP of approximately \$15 billion<sup>2</sup>.
  - a. How does the United States remain the top trade partner of Nicaragua<sup>3</sup> - a country run by an authoritarian, criminal regime such as the Ortega-Murillo government?
  - b. Has the interagency reviewed Nicaragua's participation in CAFTA-DR?
15. [As Christians are the largest persecuted religious minority in the world](#), has the State Department developed a plan to address this global phenomenon of persecution?

I will continue to denounce this unjust imprisonment of Bishop Álvarez and I urge you to push for the immediate and unconditional release of the Bishop and all prisoners of conscience.

Please respond to this request no later than December 21, 2023.

Sincerely,



CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH

Chairman

Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations Subcommittee

CC:

Hon. Rashad Hussain, Ambassador at Large for the Office of International Religious Freedom

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/western-hemisphere/nicaragua#:~:text=U.S.%20goods%20imports%20from%20Nicaragua,\(%24586%20million\)%20over%202021.](https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/western-hemisphere/nicaragua#:~:text=U.S.%20goods%20imports%20from%20Nicaragua,(%24586%20million)%20over%202021.)

<sup>2</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=NI>

<sup>3</sup> <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/NIC>