



Bianca Jagger on Behalf of The Bianca Jagger Human Rights Foundation (BJHRF)

I Condemn and Repudiate the Unlawful Sentencing of Bishop Rolando Jose Álvarez Lagos

Edited document 8th March 2023 – 11:20am

On Thursday 9th February, 222 political prisoners were expelled from Nicaragua to the United States by the dictatorial regime of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo. Among those who boarded the chartered plane were top opposition leaders: 6 presidential pre-candidates, students, ‘campesinos’ and business leaders, journalists and priests. But the most eminent prisoner, who Ortega and Murillo were eager to get rid of, Bishop Rolando Jose Álvarez Lagos, the Bishop of the Diocese of Matagalpa, refused to leave the country and accept expulsion. The bishop had repeatedly stated that he would not leave the country and abandon the people of Nicaragua, despite the government’s threat of ‘exile or jail’. It is reported that he said “let them go free, I will pay their sentences,” he was offering himself as a sacrifice for the good of others. Bishop Álvarez Lagos, following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, is “the good shepherd who will lay down his life for his sheep”. He is the symbol of resistance in Nicaragua, never faltering in his struggle against tyranny and repression.

Ortega and Murillo made a major miscalculation by failing to recognise Bishop Álvarez Lagos’ courage and conviction.

On 7th of February, the regime brought forward the bishop's trial from 28th March to 15th February. I suspect that they hoped that the prospect of being sentenced to a lengthy prison term would frighten the bishop into accepting to leave the country. How little they know the bishop.

For those who left, the results were freedom and an end to the torture, and the cruel and inhuman treatment they endured in the dungeons of Nicaragua. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that the prisoners had been jailed "for exercising their fundamental freedoms and have endured lengthy unjust detentions." A judge in Nicaragua said that the regime had decided to "deport" the prisoners to "protect peace and national security." He said that they had been declared "traitors." On that same day, the Nicaraguan National Assembly held an extraordinary session to amend the Constitution to strip the deported prisoners of their Nicaraguan citizenship, making them apatride, which is unconstitutional and in violation of Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

On 9th February, as a retaliation for his refusal to board the plane, Bishop Álvarez Lagos was transferred to the infamous Jorge Navarro prison, known as La Modelo, regarded as one of the most brutal in Latin America. The bishop is one of the 39 political prisoners that remain in Nicaragua.

On Friday 10th February, the day after Bishop Álvarez Lagos refused to board the flight to the U.S., he was

sentenced to 26 years and 4 months in prison by Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo's Appeals Court of Managua. The sentence read by Judge Héctor Ernesto Ochoa Andino, President of The Criminal Chamber 1 of the Managua Court of Appeals, stated: "The defendant Rolando José Álvarez Lagos is held to be a "traitor to the country, guilty of being the author of crimes to undermine the national security and sovereignty, spreading fake news through information technology, obstructing an official in the performance of his duties, aggravated disobedience or contempt of authority, all committed concurrently and to the detriment of society and the State of the Republic of Nicaragua." In addition, they stripped Bishop Álvarez Lagos of his Nicaraguan citizenship, disqualified him for life from exercising public office at the service of the State of Nicaragua and decreed the perpetual loss of his citizen rights.

That evening, Daniel Ortega held a rambling televised press conference to give his official version of the largest deportation in Latin American history. He was outraged at the bishop's refusal to leave the country, accusing him of being a "terrorist", "deranged", "unhinged" and "arrogant".

Ortega confirmed that he sent Bishop Álvarez Lagos to La Modelo prison, because "he is an ordinary man." "What we have is an arrogant individual who considers himself the head of the Church in Nicaragua, the leader of the Latin American Church, and must think that he is in line to be the Pope." "He is unhinged," he said. "When he arrived

at La Modelo he was a madman, incapable of having the courage of Christ, who endured flagellations and the crucifixion. He refused to accept being put in a cell where there are hundreds of prisoners. He is irritated because now he is in prison.”

Bishop Rolando Jose Álvarez Lagos, turned 56 last November whilst being held captive by the Ortega-Murillo regime. He was born in Managua to a Catholic family, and in his youth, during the 1980s, he refused to be drafted by the Sandinista army and had to flee to Guatemala to avoid arrest and lived there as a refugee. Looking back at this period in his life, the bishop told *La Prensa* "I think we belong to a generation of young people who had to conquer our freedom at the price of persecution and pain." His vocation to the priesthood was evident from an early age and at 28 he was ordained as a priest. He was consecrated as a bishop on 2 April 2011, when he assumed the leadership of the Diocese of Matagalpa. The respect and affection his community has for him is immense. *La Prensa's* chronicle reported that jubilant crowds lined the streets to watch his ordination rite.

During Nicaragua's civil unrest in 2018, Bishop Álvarez Lagos was part of the Episcopal team who mediated the first 'national dialogue' between the Ortega regime and the opposition. The bishop gave explicit instructions before the parties sat down at the negotiating table. "The national dialogue has only one goal: change. Change is inevitable, there is no other way, there is no other purpose. Change is coming and with it the democratisation

of the Republic of Nicaragua.” Ortega used the dialogue to launch a deadly crackdown on the population with weapons of war, the police, riot police, military, and paramilitary forces to crush the rebellion. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) estimated that 355 people were killed in those violent days. In March of the following year, his regime vetoed Bishop Álvarez Lagos from witnessing or mediating the negotiation. Cardinal Brenes ended up being the sole representative of the Catholic Church, accompanied by the Apostolic Nuncio Stanislaw Sommertag.

Bishop Álvarez Lagos’ sermons and homilies have frequently decried Ortega and Murillo’s systematic and grave human rights violations, religious persecutions, and abuses of power. I admire his integrity, his prophetic voice, and his courage to speak truth to power. In one of his memorable sermons, he said "Jesus does not want a church interested in rubbing shoulders with those in power, by placing itself to their left or their right, a church that is not capable of thoroughly criticising the injustices that are being committed, that turns its back on the problems of the people, a church fearful of assuming its commitments. Jesus Christ does not want a subjugated church, but one that accompanies the people in their demands. Jesus Christ does not want a church that approaches power, seeking to negotiate or agree to obtain quotas and have influence; a church capable of keeping quiet in order not to lose the favours of the powerful, abandoning the weak; complicit in exploitation, oppression, discrimination, sugar-coating the words that

people in power want to hear; a church that does not want to be a sign of contradiction when necessary; that does not dare to swim against the current, a corrupt church that does not raise its voice in the face of arbitrariness, that is not the church that Jesus Christ wants.”

On 4th August 2022, Bishop Álvarez Lagos was held hostage in the clergy house of the Diocese of Matagalpa and was prevented from officiating mass in the cathedral. The regime’s security forces also prohibited his religious companions - five priests, two seminarians, two lay persons and one photographer - from leaving the house, while simultaneously preventing anyone from entering the premises to bring food, drinks, and vital medicines. Police encircled and blockaded the house for 15 days. Abruptly, in the early hours of 19th August 2022, special forces of the regime violently broke the doors and forced their way in to kidnap Monsignor Álvarez Lagos and his companions. He was taken to an undisclosed location in Managua, whilst the priests, seminarians, laypersons, and the photographer were sent to El Chipote prison.

I would like to convey my gratitude to bishops throughout the world, who have issued statements calling for Bishop Álvarez Lagos’ release, condemning the Ortega-Murillo regime’s persecution of the Catholic Church and the repression of the people of Nicaragua. Their unwavering support has given comfort to members of the Catholic Church and will ensure that the bishop is not forgotten.

Bishop Lang, Chair of the Bishops' Conference Department for International Affairs, issued one of the most powerful statements, "Over recent years the people of Nicaragua have endured deepening repression and violations of human dignity. Many have been unjustly imprisoned, subjected to violence, or killed for defending their basic rights. Others have been forced to flee the country in search of safety. We are united in prayer with all those who, confronted with these atrocities, continue to struggle for justice and peace. Among them, bishops, priests, seminarians, members of religious orders, and laypeople are facing persecution because of their work upholding the gospel." The bishops in Spain asked "the Nicaraguan authorities to listen to the voice of the people they serve, make their decisions in a spirit of service for the good of all and release prisoners incarcerated for political reasons." One of the strongest statements issued came from the Honduran Bishop Jose Antonio Canales who said "Monsignor Rolando Alvarez is a thorn in the side [of the regime] precisely because he is so loved by his people." He added "In Nicaragua they can fabricate any crime against you because there is control of all branches of government by the Executive". In contrast, the Episcopal Conference of Bishops of Nicaragua (CEN) has never issued a statement condemning the Ortega-Murillo regime's relentless persecution of the Catholic Church, or called for the release of Bishop Álvarez Lagos.

I was very happy to hear Pope Francis' comments, made on 12th February during his weekly blessing of the Angelus to pilgrims in Saint Peter's Square, about Bishop Álvarez

Lagos. “I have been much saddened by the news that comes from Nicaragua, and I cannot but remember with concern the bishop of Matagalpa, Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, whom I love so much, and who was condemned to 26 years in prison, and also the people who were deported to the United States,” “I pray for them and for all those who are suffering in that dear country,” he went on to say.. “We ask the Lord, through the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, to open the hearts of those who have political responsibility and of all the citizens to a sincere search for peace, that is born from truth, justice, freedom, and love, and which is achieved through the patient exercise of dialogue”.

Many Nicaraguans wonder why it has taken Pope Francis more than six months to issue a statement about the bishop and the dire situation people are facing in the country.

As a human rights defender who has tirelessly campaigned for the release of all the Nicaraguan political prisoners, I am overjoyed and relieved that **finally** they are now free from the yoke of the criminal Ortega-Murillo regime. This is the result of a combined effort of countless individuals throughout the world, NGOs, the international community, the Nicaraguan people who demanded their release and above all, the courage and resilience of the political prisoners and their families who never gave up. We must be thankful that our prayers were answered.

We must not be deceived by the release of the political prisoners, which is the first good news we have had in a long time. Let's celebrate but not forget that everything else remains the same for the people inside Nicaragua. They continue to be imprisoned by the brutal Ortega-Murillo regime: repression continues unabated on all fronts - no real opposition is permitted. Anyone who opposes the regime is either murdered, imprisoned, has to flee the country, or will be deported. There is no freedom of the press; more than 3,000 NGOs have been disbanded and the Catholic Church continues to be under relentless attack. Most people are still suffering in a country without hope for the future. This is evidenced by the nearly 600,000 Nicaraguans (8.7% of the population) who voted with their feet and left the country in the last 4 years. Migrating is becoming the only escape valve for many people in Nicaragua.

On 15th February, Ortega and Murillo intensified their crackdown on dissidents to maintain their grip on power, putting into practice Murillo's infamous phrase "let's go at them with everything." The regime stripped another 94 political dissidents of their citizenship, accusing them of being "traitors to the fatherland," committing "criminal acts to the detriment of peace, sovereignty, independence and self-determination of the Nicaraguan people, being "fugitives from justice." They also announced their properties would be confiscated. Among those targeted are prominent exiled Bishop Silvio Baez, distinguished human rights defender Vilma Núñez, award winning

authors Sergio Ramirez and Gioconda Belli and influential journalist Carlos Fernando Chamorro.

In addition, Ortega and Murillo continue to be closely aligned with Russia and other authoritarian regimes. On the 1st of February, the Iranian Foreign Minister visited Nicaragua and Ortega offered the country as a platform for Iran in Central America. This should be of serious concern to the international community.

Further sanctions are needed. This is not the time to make concessions. The U.S., European Union, Canada, Latin America, and other nations should coordinate efforts. Any dialogue with the regime should be to agree on a short-term road to reach democracy. Ortega and Murillo only respond to pressure.

I am deeply concerned for Bishop Rolando Jose Álvarez Lagos' safety, who is now held in a maximum-security cell in La Modelo prison, one of the toughest in Latin America. Several cases of aggression have been registered against political prisoners by common criminals who entered their cells, robbed, beat, and injured them. This is where the bishop is serving his sentence. A couple of days ago I learned that Bishop Alvarez's sister has been desperately trying to find out where he is, as she is deeply concerned for him and would like to bring him water and food. But no-one will tell her his location. To this day, no-one has been able to see him. I appeal to the international community to condemn the Ortega-Murillo regime's cruel, illegal and unjust sentencing of the bishop **and the 39**

other political prisoners and to do everything in their power to obtain his release. **His life is at stake.**

Bianca Jagger

Founder, President and Chief Executive, Bianca Jagger Human Rights Foundation

Council of Europe Goodwill Ambassador

IUCN, Bonn Challenge Ambassador

Member of the Executive Director's Leadership Council of Amnesty International USA

-