

48th session of the Human Rights Council
Oral Update on the human rights situation in Nicaragua
Remarks by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet
13 September 2021

Excellencies,

In my last oral update to this Council, I warned about the worrying human rights situation in Nicaragua, especially with regard to the exercise of political rights during the elections of 7 November.

Nicaraguans should be able to exercise their right to vote without intimidation, violence, or administrative interference. Those who wish to do so should be able to freely present their candidacies, and voters should be able to engage in election campaigns. It is also essential that the media be able to cover the electoral campaigns of all candidates, free from interference or undue restrictions imposed by the authorities.

None of this is happening in Nicaragua.

Between 22 June and 6 September, my Office documented the arbitrary detention of 16 people, including political leaders, human rights defenders, business people, journalists, and peasant and student leaders, in addition to 20 others detained since 28 May. This group includes six men and one woman who publicly stated that they wanted to run for the presidency, and a vice-presidential candidate has been charged while at liberty.

The vast majority of these people remained deprived of liberty for up to 90 days, incommunicado and some in solitary confinement, without the authorities officially confirming their whereabouts to their families. Only on 31 August did the Public Prosecutor's Office begin to authorize visits. Several of these arbitrary detentions, especially in the case of women, present elements that could be considered torture or ill-treatment.

The Public Prosecutor's Office informed that most of the accusations against these persons were for conspiracy to undermine national integrity or crimes allegedly linked to the implementation of cooperation funds. According to information received, the hearings were not accessible to family members, independent press and, in most cases, to trusted lawyers. Despite the filing of several *habeas corpus* petitions, we have no information about any judicial decision in favour of the detainees.

Moreover, in August, the Supreme Electoral Council arbitrarily cancelled the legal personality of the Citizens for Liberty party, invalidating its candidacies without it being able to present its defence.

This fact, added to the cancellation of two other political parties last May, eliminated all possible options for the candidacies of the main opposition groups.

Excellencies,

Attacks on freedom of expression have intensified. On 12 August, the newspaper *La Prensa* denounced the cessation of its print edition due to the withholding of paper by the customs authority. A day later, the National Police and the Public Prosecutor's Office raided its facilities, seized material goods and subsequently arrested its general manager.

Threats by the Public Prosecutor's Office against several journalists and media workers prompted many of them to leave Nicaragua to seek protection. My Office has documented 12 cases, while civil society sources have registered more than 30.

Similar patterns of repression are being registered against human rights defenders, social and political leaders, lawyers and medical and NGO personnel, among others.

Between 28 July and 26 August, authorities ordered the closure of 45 non-profit organizations. These included six international aid organizations, several medical associations critical of the government's response to the pandemic, and women's organizations, among others.

Official figures indicate that in the months of June and July alone, more Nicaraguans made appointments to request asylum in Costa Rica than in the first five months of 2021.

We also received reports that on 23 August, according to official sources, at least nine indigenous persons were reportedly killed, and two women sexually abused, in an attack related to a land dispute over gold mining in the Sauni As territory of the Northern Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region. Indigenous authorities had reported the threatening situation to the police ten days earlier, requesting their intervention. The police have arrested three people and identified them, along with 11 others, as the alleged perpetrators. I recall that homicides and aggressions related to territorial disputes registered in the same area since January 2020 remain unpunished.

I appreciate the presentation in July by the Government of Nicaragua of its first voluntary national progress report on the Sustainable Development Goals.

However, the absence of accurate official information on infections and deaths related to COVID 19 continues to be of concern, which prevents us from assessing the status of the pandemic in Nicaragua, as noted by the Pan American Health Organization.

Excellencies,

Given this deterioration of the situation in Nicaragua, it is imperative that the Government once again guarantees the full exercise of the civil and political rights of all Nicaraguans; that it ceases the persecution of the opposition, the press and civil society; and that it immediately and

unconditionally releases more than 130 people detained since April 2018, according to civil society sources.

In addition, institutions must ensure that impunity does not persist with respect to the serious human rights violations and abuses that occurred during that period, providing victims with access to justice and full reparation.

The solution to this crisis requires the participation of all sectors of society and must be based on human rights norms and standards. This is the path outlined in the many recommendations I have made over the years.

I urge this Council to consider all measures within its reach to promote and protect human rights in Nicaragua, counting on the full availability of my Office to assist in these efforts.

Thank you.