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HRW – Human Rights Watch

## Nicaragua: Cruel Response to Hunger Strikes

(Washington, DC) – The Ortega government’s use of repressive tactics to prevent hunger strikes should prompt increased international efforts to demand accountability for abuses in Nicaragua (<https://www.hrw.org/americas/nicaragua>), Human Rights Watch said today.

On November 14, 2019, mothers of people detained in the context of the 2018 crackdown began a hunger strike inside the San Miguel Arcángel Church in Masaya, Nicaragua, to demand the release of their children and more than 130 other detainees. The National Police surrounded the church later that day, threatening the mothers, blocking the building entrance, and cutting off access to potable drinking water and electricity, local sources reported (<https://confidencial.com.ni/policia-aisla-a-opositores-dentro-de-iglesia-en-masaya/>). The police also arrested and detained 13 activists who local news sources (<https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2019/11/17/nacionales/2611916-fiscalia-presento-acusacion-contra-los-13-miembros-de-la-unab-detenidos-en-masaya>) said handed water to the mothers through the church windows.

“Attacking mothers on hunger strike calling for the release of their detained children, and activists giving them water shows how far President Ortega and his police are willing to go to crack down on opponents,” said José Miguel Vivanco (<https://www.hrw.org/about/people/jose-miguel-vivanco>), Americas director at Human Rights Watch. “Government practices won’t change so long as Nicaraguan authorities feel their abuses go unpunished. It’s crucial for the United States, Canada, and the European Union to promptly expand targeted sanctions to include Daniel Ortega himself and other key members of his inner-circle.”

The 13 activists were charged with crimes (<https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2019/11/18/nacionales/2612093-presos-politicos-de-la-unab-en-espera-de-su-audiencia-preliminar>) related to the illegal possession of firearms, were sent for pretrial detention, and were denied the right to speak with relatives or confer privately with attorneys, the mother of one detainee told Human Rights Watch.

On November 18, a group of mothers and several relatives of other detainees began a second hunger strike at the Managua Cathedral in a show of solidarity with the group in Masaya and to demand the release of all those detained in the context of the protests. Local sources reported that a pro-government mob entered the cathedral and incited

chaos, insulting the strike participants and attacking people with stones (<http://www.oacnudh.org/conferencia-de-prensa-sobre-nicaragua/>). The mothers abandoned the strike on November 19 due to concerns for their safety.

On November 22, another group of activists including two opposition leaders was arrested on their way to deliver water to the strike participants (<https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2019/11/22/nacionales/2613864-familiares-de-presos-politicos-detenidos-por-la-policia-orteguista-masaya>) in Masaya; they were brought back to Managua, and released. The strike in Masaya has continued through November 22, with mounting concerns for the health of those involved in the strike (<https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/video/managua-huelga-hambre-presos-politicos-detenidos-ortega-represion-social-protestas-oposicion-iglesia-masaya-perspectivas-mexico-cnnee/>), who are still without access to medicine or medical supervision, a source told Human Rights Watch.

The Nicaraguan government crackdown on protests in 2018 resulted in at least 328 deaths, with thousands of people injured and hundreds arbitrarily arrested and detained (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/06/19/crackdown-nicaragua/torture-ill-treatment-and-prosecutions-protesters-and>). Many of those detained suffered torture and other ill-treatment – including electric shocks, severe beatings, fingernail removal, asphyxiation, and rape – by the National Police, sometimes operating in coordination with armed pro-government gangs. The Ortega government has also targeted civic leaders and independent journalists.

The US and Canada have adopted targeted sanctions against some top leaders, including the current chief of the National Police, Gen. Francisco Díaz. The EU has not adopted targeted sanctions, although on October 14 it created a sanctions framework (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/22/eu-sanction-nicaraguans-grave-abuses>) that establishes a legal mechanism for sanctions against officials in Nicaragua.

In a report (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/06/19/crackdown-nicaragua/torture-ill-treatment-and-prosecutions-protesters-and>) released in June, Human Rights Watch recommended that foreign governments impose targeted sanctions on seven individuals.

- President Daniel Ortega, supreme chief of the National Police, who holds sweeping powers, including to “command” the police at his will and dismiss police chiefs who disobey his orders;
- Retired Gen. Aminta Granera, former chief of the National Police, who was the head of the force until she was replaced by Gen. Francisco Díaz in September 2018;
- Gen. Francisco Díaz, chief of the National Police, who is believed to have exercised significant control over the force first as deputy director and then in his current position as chief, which began in September 2018;
- Gen. Ramon Avellán, deputy chief of the National Police, who acted as the highest-ranking member of the National Police in Masaya, where police and armed pro-government gangs brutally repressed protesters;

- Gen. Jaime Vanegas, inspector general of the National Police, who is required under Nicaraguan law to investigate alleged rights violations by police officers and sanction those responsible;
- Gen. Luis Pérez Olivas, chief of the Direction of Judicial Assistance (DAJ, also known as El Chipote), which was the “main place” where authorities carried out egregious violations against anti-government demonstrators, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has reported; and
- Gen. Justo Pastor Urbina, chief of the Department of Special Operations (DOEP, its Spanish acronym), a police unit that played a “central role” in the repression throughout the country, the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has reported.

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