



NSCAG STATEMENT AND BRIEFING ON NICARAGUAN CRISIS, JULY 2018

This statement and briefing is an update on the statement and briefing issued on 4 June 2018. A link to this earlier statement can be found at <http://www.nscag.org/news/article/239/nscag-issues-statement-on-nicaraguan-crisis>

Introduction

In Nicaragua, for the past three months, there have been widespread protests, which were originally initiated by university students and other sectors. These protests were both against and in support of proposed reforms to the Social Security system, which had included raising the age of retirement and an increase in both employer and employee contributions.

In response to the protests, the government quickly withdrew the proposed reforms, however in spite of this there has been a continuation of widespread violent acts, led by political groups and organisations opposed to the government and now calling for regime change.

The situation has in some areas escalated into extreme violence resulting in the tragic deaths of over 200 people; hundreds have been injured, including members of the national police, students, trade unionists, government employees, business owners, journalists and citizens who were innocent bystanders. There has also been widespread arson and the deliberate destruction of public buildings, police stations and private property. Opposition organisations, as a means of pressuring the government to meet their demands for the resignation of President Ortega, have constructed thousands of road blocks in towns, cities and on major highways on the Pacific Coast. As with the demonstrations, these largely started peacefully but rapidly descended into opportunities for violence and extortion.

Whilst the Government is being blamed by the Western media and commentators for the ongoing violence, evidence shows that most of the violence is being perpetrated by armed extreme right wing protesters, a fact which is being ignored by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IAHCR) and other international human rights organisations.

This situation has placed the security and stability of the country and the Central American region itself in danger. Above all there is a need to restore peace to the country so that the Nicaraguan people can resolve these issues for themselves.

The following statement and briefing sets out our position and provides background information to the current situation. We hope that this will be shared widely to help clarify the situation for all those interested in supporting the Nicaraguan people at this difficult time.

Statement

The Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign Action Group (NSCAG) is calling on members, affiliates and supporters to:

- support dialogue as the only way to achieve peace and reconciliation
- reject and oppose any foreign intervention in the internal affairs of Nicaragua as a violation of international law and an aggression against the principle of national sovereignty

- support the calls for an immediate cessation of violence, the lifting of roadblocks, and the restoration of peace, security and stability in Nicaragua
- oppose any US sanctions and threats which will not help resolve this situation and will only exacerbate the country's difficulties and encourage further violence
- oppose any attempts to oust the elected government of Nicaragua by undemocratic and violent means
- support the Truth and Justice Commission that has been established to investigate all the cases of violence
- defend the right of the Nicaraguan people to defend their sovereignty and determine their own future free from any external interference and aggression

The Nicaraguan Government

The Nicaraguan government led by President Daniel Ortega was re-elected in November 2016 with over 72% of the popular vote on a turnout of around 65%. Ortega promised to defend the social and economic achievements of the FSLN Government and to continue with Nicaragua's strong economic growth. The elections were observed and monitored by recognised international organisations, and the results were fully accepted and recognised as fair and democratic. Nicaragua's Constitution is recognised by all political parties and groups represented in the National Assembly.

The government has overseen a long period of progress, delivered economic stability and growth, combined with highly successful social programmes that have benefited the vast majority of Nicaraguan citizens over the past 11 years (see Annexe 1). At the time the crisis erupted, predicted GDP growth for the country was 4.5% and tourism was booming; the government had invested extensively in health, education and infrastructure, all of which is now at risk.

The Government proposals to change the social security system had been prompted by demands by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for the Nicaraguan Government to cut its spending. The proposals included a raise in the retirement age to 65 and an increase to more than double the number of weeks that workers would need to pay into the pension fund in order to access benefits. The government proposal increased employers' contributions by 3.5% to pension and health funds and slightly increased workers' contributions by 0.75% and shifting 5% of pensions' cash transfer into their health care fund. It also proposed that the retirement age should be kept at 60.

Wave of violence

While many of the original protesters' demands were aimed specifically against the proposed changes to the social security system a *militant* section of the protesters quickly moved their demands to calling for a change of the FSLN led Government, against the Presidency of Daniel Ortega and in effect demanding 'Regime Change'.

The roadblocks set up by the right wing opposition have affected many towns and cities, thus making daily life for students, citizens and traders, intolerable. There has been an increased effort by community organisations to dismantle these roadblocks so as to re-establish free transit to and from work and school. These efforts have resulted in clashes leading to more deaths and injuries. Despite the efforts and calls to stop the violence, armed demonstrators have continued to attack public institutions as well as other enterprises including banks and radio stations, in particular targeting individuals and organisations which support the Government. This has included hospitals, ambulances and schools.

Many of the roadblocks have been maintained by armed opposition demonstrators. There have been many criminal acts of intimidation, extortion, kidnappings, and the assassination of civilians and police officers, including municipal workers and teachers. There have been acts of sabotage, vandalism and looting, severely affecting the whole economy, but above all causing fear among the population. Examples include the destruction of local municipal offices in district six of Managua, on which thousands of local families depend for basic public services and the burning down of CARUNA, a people's bank that offers support to the most impoverished. Radio Ya, a pro-Sandinista radio station, was also completely gutted.

Police stations have been under siege: in one town police officers were completely surrounded and unable to get food; police officers found in uniform are being stripped naked, beaten up and in some cases, killed and their bodies

burnt. At the roadblocks, mortar-wielding individuals interrogate passers-by and frisk them for evidence of connection with the FSLN; if such 'evidence' is found, they are beaten or killed.

On 15 July, the police moved in to dismantle barricades in Masaya, which has been one of the centres of the anti-government opposition. "Operation Clean-Up" came following a wave of government-backed demonstrations for peace across the country, many of which were attacked by right-wing opposition groups. At all of these barricades, the 'peaceful' protesters were found to have serious weapons such as AK47s. The neighbourhoods of Niquinohomo, Catarina and Monimbo have been liberated, although not without further resistance and violence on the part of the opposition. To the relief of communities around the country, it appears that all of the road blocks in Leon, Matagalpa, Esteli, Managua, Jinotega and Somoto and on the main highways have now been cleared.

The economic consequences

Business closures have left 200,000 people jobless, and unless the crisis ends soon, some 1.3 million of Nicaragua's 6.2 million people "risk falling into poverty", according to a study by the Nicaraguan Foundation for Economic and Social Development (Funides).

The Nicaraguan Central Bank (BCN) has sharply lowered its projection for economic growth this year, from 4.9 per cent to one per cent, while the productive sector — including manufacturing and farming — has accumulated losses of US\$430 million, with more than 85,000 jobs lost.

According to Funides, the situation in the private sector is even "more dramatic". If the crisis continues into August, the foundation predicts the economy will contract by a jolting 5.6 per cent, with losses of US\$1.4 billion in gross domestic product.

What had been a vibrant tourism industry has been devastated, with ripple effects on the broader economy in a country that was already one of the poorest in the Americas. Tourism had been growing for the last decade, with more than a million visitors a year, but now some tourist areas are on the verge of collapse. It is being reported that cancellation rates are exceeding 90 per cent. While the sector had been expecting revenues of US\$924 million, it instead faces losses of US\$231 million, according to the Central Bank. Some 60,000 workers have lost their jobs.

It is clear that those who will be most affected are those who are most impoverished and living a hand to mouth existence on the margins in the barrios of the cities and in the countryside. They are the ones most affected by price rises, potential food shortages and threats to their livelihoods.

The situation is reminiscent of Allende's Chile, where Nixon 'made the economy scream' with a catastrophic decline of the economy through US sanctions, and all-out destabilisation by extreme right wing violent actions before the coup d'état of 11 September 1973.

A history of attempts at regime change

In September 2016, sections of Nicaragua's extreme right wing opposition visited Washington to meet with their US allies, including Congress member Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Cuban-American who has consistently used her position on the House Foreign Affairs Committee to attack the UN and promote policies to destabilise Latin America, particularly Venezuela and Cuba. The reason for the meeting was to call on the US Congress to impose sanctions on Nicaragua by means of the NICA Act (Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act) which was subsequently introduced into Congress and passed in 2017. It has since been introduced into the US Senate. So, with a low popular approval rating and unable to win by democratic means, a section of Nicaragua's opposition decided to resort to US aggression against their own nation as a prelude to 'regime change'.

The NICA Act directs US representatives at multilateral bodies such as the IMF, World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank to veto and/or block international assistance to Nicaragua until the US State Department certifies that the country's political system is restructured so as to satisfy the objectives of the Act. The Act, which has had the vigorous support of Republican extreme right wing senators such as Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz, is a blatant violation of international law since it seeks to impose financial sanctions on a sovereign nation on condition that it fulfils the agenda of the US Republican extreme right.

In their response to the preliminary results of the 2016 elections, Nicaragua's extreme right wing called for new elections to be held, saying that they would not recognise the legitimacy of the vote. They then falsely claimed that the Nicaraguan people had rejected the result of the Nicaraguan elections and that there was growing opposition to Daniel Ortega and his government. At the same time, the US State Department issued a statement expressing 'deep concern' about the 'flawed' Nicaraguan electoral process but to this day has not bothered to provide any evidence for its allegations.

US hostile actions towards Nicaragua have continued and there are clear grounds to believe that there is a strong connection between this and the wave of extreme violence that has engulfed Nicaragua ever since the April 19 protests whose specific aim, coinciding with US policy, is 'regime change'. The speed of the escalation and the simultaneous events throughout the country bear all the hallmarks of a well co-ordinated, politically motivated operation designed to undermine the government and destabilise the country, in other words a soft coup.

On 21 December 2017, President Trump signed an all-encompassing Executive Order declaring a 'state of emergency' due to the 'prevalence and severity of human rights abuses and corruption (...) have reached such scope that they threaten the stability of international political and economic systems'.

On 3 May 2018 US Vice-President Mike Pence said that the U.S. is working for freedom in Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, adding: "*We will stay by the side of those who long for freedom and we will confront their oppressors.*"

On 5 July, the US administration imposed sanctions on three Nicaraguan officials with close ties to President Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo, accusing them of corruption and human rights violations related to the country's political uprising. According to Heather Nauert, a US State Department spokesperson, the penalties seek to 'expose and hold accountable those responsible for the Nicaraguan government's ongoing violence and intimidation campaign against its people'.

Funding 'regime change'

The US's strategy of "regime change" involves a long or medium-term penetration of the society of the 'undesirable' government through generous grants that fund civil society associations of every kind, especially NGOs concerned about freedom of the press (and freedom in general) and human rights. These funds come primarily through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), USAID, but also from private bodies such as the International Republican Institute (NRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), interventionist resource centres of the Republican and Democratic parties respectively, and Freedom House.

Between 2014 and 2017, the NED funded over 50 projects in Nicaragua for a total of US\$4.2 million. The funding went mainly to organisations concerned about governance, private enterprise, strengthening civil society's capacity to defend democracy, targeting especially youth and students aimed at fostering "*a more active role of youth in defending democracy*", and human rights. Though the language of the NED is of support for 'civil society' and 'pro-democracy' groups, it is clear that the focus is specifically to provide a coordinated strategy and media voice for opposition groups and build coordinated opposition to the government.

In an article by Benjamin Waddell, "Laying the groundwork for change: A closer look at the U.S. role in Nicaragua's social unrest" (1 May 2018), in NED funded magazine *Global Americans*, Waddell unashamedly states: "*Looking back at the developments of last several months, it is now quite evident that the U.S. government actively helped build the political space and capacity in Nicaraguan society for the social uprising that is currently unfolding.*"

The biggest recipient of US funding is *Hagamos Democracia* (Let's Make Democracy) with US\$525,000 (2014-17) whose president, Luciano Garcia, against all evidence to the contrary, declared Nicaragua a "failed state" in February 2017 (La Prensa 26 February 2017) and has been calling for President Daniel Ortega to resign. The Institute for Strategic Studies and Public Policy (IEPP) received at least US\$226 (2014-17) and their Executive Director, Felix Maradiaga, has openly called for President Daniel Ortega's resignation by saying "*I cannot imagine a way out at this moment that does not include a transition to democracy without Daniel Ortega.*" (La Prensa 20 May 2018).

Human rights organisations CENIDH and CPDH, both vociferous in their condemnation of supposed human rights violations by the government, have received between them \$US111,000 in 2017.

On 5 June, a delegation of the opposition 19 April Student Movement that sparked the protests leading to the wave of violence travelled to Washington to meet with Ambassador Michael Kozak of the State Department's Bureau of Democracy and Human Rights, Mark Green USAID administrator, Ilena Ros-Lehtinen and Senators Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz. These U.S. politicians are Cuban-Americans closely associated with the Miami exile community and are strongly committed to "regime change" in Cuba, Venezuela and now Nicaragua. They also belong to the far right wing of the Republican Party.

The students' trip and related expenses were paid for by Freedom House, a U.S. government-funded NED partner whose agenda typically aligns with the neoconservative wing of U.S. foreign policy establishment. This was reported in McClatchy DC Bureau, 6 June 2018 with the suggestive title 'Nicaragua's Ortega clashed with students. They want Trump's help in ousting him' (<https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/politics-government/white-house/article212687759.html>)

Following the meeting, Rubio tweeted 'Met with leaders of the Nicaraguan University Coalition... spoke about the atrocities being committed by the Ortega regime. I support their fight for democracy and freedom in Nicaragua'

On 13 July, the Trump administration backed Nicaraguan opposition calls for new leadership in Nicaragua, charging that the government of President Daniel Ortega has 'hollowed out democratic institutions, won't cooperate with international human rights investigators and directed state security forces to violently suppress protests.' Michael Kozak and other administration officials told Congress that the only way to address the ongoing crisis in Nicaragua is with new elections that would allow the Nicaraguan people to pick new leadership. "Nobody is going to be able to reconcile with the regime in power," Kozak testified. "It's really important for them to get out of the way and let the country make a future for itself. It's how do you make that happen mechanically. How do you put enough pressure on the family basically to make that choice and get out of the way."

On 18 July, U.S. Senators led by Marco Rubio, Bob Menendez and Ted Cruz, that is, the political establishment's extreme right, introduced bipartisan legislation proposing fiercer sanctions and further US extraterritorial interference in the internal affairs of Nicaragua. It is surely no coincidence that the legislation was introduced to coincide with the celebration of the 39th anniversary of the Sandinista revolution on 19 July, And just one day later, Mark Green, administrator of USAID, announced an additional \$1.5 million in assistance 'to continue to support freedom and democracy in Nicaragua'. The funding is to be directed towards 'civil society organisations, human rights defenders, emerging leaders and independent media...'.

Role of the media and social media

The extraordinary power of social media has played a major role in what has happened. This is the way in which the opposition have mobilised so quickly, but it means that it is difficult to discern fact from fiction, it acts as an echo chamber whereby people and the media cherry pick whatever information fits their narrative; this serves to intensify conflict and no-one knows where to get reliable information any longer. This has fed into hostile anti-government messages that are replicated in the media nationally and globally and rile people to extreme positions and actions. Images, often manipulated, play a powerful role in fomenting hatred, instilling fear and blaming the government for everything.

This media war is very obvious in international coverage of the crisis: failure to even mention the plentiful evidence of opposition violence resulting in the deaths of government supporters and the police; the widespread destruction of public buildings including hospitals and schools; the kidnapping of long distance lorry drivers; the US funding of opposition organisations aimed at "nurturing" the Nicaraguan uprising and the call by international bodies (the UN, Organisation of American States and the Central American Integration System) for negotiations within the constitutional framework without outside interference. Violent opposition atrocities are misreported as government repression. So-called 'independent' journalists are fanning the flames of polarisation and conflict through their reports and articles favouring the right wing opposition. See link below:

<https://quixote.org/manufacturing-dissent-the-n-e-d-opposition-media-and-the-political-crisis-in-nicaragua/>

The Desire for Peace and the National Dialogue – Measures taken by the government

In an effort to restore peace and stability to the country President Ortega convened a national dialogue, mediated by the Catholic Church, involving all sectors of society, students, civil society, the private sector and the trade unions. The Nicaraguan government's stance in the dialogue was to 'advocate for non-violence wherever it comes from and guarantee the right of all people to work.' However, the dialogue so far is stalled due to the intransigence of the right wing opposition who are insisting that Ortega must resign or that early elections must be called as a precondition for dialogue.

The FSLN government proposed that a Verification and Security Commission be established. This was agreed by all parties in the National Dialogue. The function of the 12-member Commission is to create a climate of peace and reconciliation by ending all acts of violence from whatever source. It will be accompanied by a delegation of representatives from the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, IAHR.

In early May, the government also appointed a Truth and Justice Commission whose mandate is to investigate all deaths that have occurred as a result of the violence and identify those responsible. This Commission will be accompanied by an international panel of experts appointed by the IAHR. Other commissions yet to be established will be responsible for proposals relating to electoral reform.

The Government also agreed not to respond to the violence and keep the police off the streets, confining them to their police stations. The only intervention of the police has been to protect the population, clearing and dismantling the roadblocks and barricades, but this has meant further violence from the right wing opposition, resulting in the deaths of at least a dozen police officers.

The government authorised the visit of the IACHR (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights) and a delegation from the Organisation of American States (OAS), with the objective of seeking a solution to the conflict. On 30 May, the government signed an agreement with the General Secretariat of the OAS and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to support the investigation of the acts of violence that have occurred since 18 April. The IACHR presented a report (22 June 2018) that was rejected by the FSLN government for being subjective, partial and biased. The IACHR report was discussed at the Organisation of American States where 70% of the members of the OAS Permanent Council did not back up the report, thus confirming the Government's misgivings about it. A link to NSCAG's response to the report is shown below:-

<http://www.nscag.org/news/article/246/nicaraguan-government-rejects-biased-iachr-report>

The Nicaraguan Government has continued to advocate for peace, dialogue and reconciliation, with a call for all violence to end, the lifting of roadblocks and a guarantee of the right to work of all people. It has also expressed a willingness to continue to work with the Organisation of American States, OAS, on issues such as electoral reform, a process which has already begun and which was due to be completed early next year. However, the right wing opposition remain intransigent and want nothing less than regime change and the ousting of Nicaragua's democratically elected Government.

A positive step has been the 30 June declaration by the Presidents of the member states of the System of Central American Integration (SICA) calling for peace and respect for sovereignty without foreign interference in Nicaragua. The statement expresses confidence in dialogue and reconciliation as necessary paths towards the construction and preservation of peace.

The SICA member states have also called for "an immediate cessation of violence in all its forms, which has resulted in insecurity, death, and destruction of public and private goods" and goes on to say "we salute the will of the Nicaraguan government and sectors of Nicaraguan society for reaffirming its commitment to peace, directed toward the search of agreements, establishing as a main objective social justice, and the well-being of the people, in the framework of respect for human rights."

The statement expressed its support for the processes of dialogue brokered by various organisations, but also its "deep concern for the situation of human and economic mobility that has affected the region," referring to the blocking of highways and transportation by armed groups aimed at the collapse of Nicaragua's economy.

Political leaders and organisations attending the Sao Paulo Forum in Havana from 15 – 17 July called for support and unity among the Latin American left and progressive movements. Speaking at the event, Ralph Gonsalves, Prime Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, urged support for leaders and governments attacked by right-wing organisations, in countries such as Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba and Bolivia. A declaration issued by the Forum called upon ‘all the progressive and revolutionary forces of the world to strengthen solidarity with the struggle of the brotherly people of Nicaragua for the restoration of peace in the face of the criminal destabilizing attempts of the oligarchy and the pro-imperialist right, adding us all to the slogan #NicaraguaQuierePaz.’ See:

<https://libya360.wordpress.com/2018/07/17/sao-paulo-forum-resolution-on-the-situation-in-nicaragua/>

The Nicaraguan people want peace

Hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans are now marching daily throughout the country calling for a return to peace and stability. See:

<https://www.telesurtv.net/english/opinion/Nicaragua-Defeats-The-Not-So-Soft-Coup-20180717-0019.html>

On 19 July, tens of thousands of Nicaraguans gathered in Managua and other cities to celebrate the 39th anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution. It is to be hoped that at this time, Nicaraguans will be able to celebrate the defeat of the soft coup and a return to peace and stability. It is for the Nicaraguan people, not for Washington, to determine what their future will be.



Nicaraguans celebrate 39th anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution, July 19 2018

Annexe 1 – Indicators of Nicaragua’s social and economic progress since 2007

- second highest economic growth rates and most stable economy in Central America
- only country in the region that produces 90% of the food it consumes
- poverty and extreme poverty have been halved and it is the country with the greatest reduction of extreme poverty (from 17% in 2009 to 6% in 2016)
- reaching the UN Millennium Development Goal of cutting malnutrition by half
- free basic healthcare and education
- more than 90% of the population have access to electricity (55% in 2006)
- illiteracy virtually eliminated (36% in 2006)
- average economic growth of 5.2% for the past five years (according to the IMF and the World Bank). *“The macroeconomic policies implemented by the Government of Nicaragua are positive, and should serve as an example for Latin America”*, said Min Zhu, Deputy Managing Director of the IMF
- safest country in Central America (United Nations Development Programme) with one of the lowest crime rates in Latin America
- one of the very few countries in Latin America and the entire developing world that produces all its textbooks at all levels, from primary school to University and Adult Education
- highest level of gender equality in the Americas ‘World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report 2017.’ - It has reached levels of political participation of women that are only found in developed countries
- second fastest growing tourism destination in the Americas, becoming a world-renowned tourist destination for travellers in search of peace, tranquillity and healthy and environmentally friendly cultural experiences.
- had managed to stop the exodus to the United States