

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 13, 2023

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We are writing to express our deep concern regarding the Nicaraguan government's seizure of the Managua campus of the Jesuit-run *Universidad Centroamericana* (Central American University, known as the UCA), and to suggest actions we believe the Administration should take in response. The university's closure is a grave blow to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in that country.

On August 16 the Nicaraguan government took the final step to transform the UCA into a state institution, after describing it, without foundation, as a "center of terrorism" and accusing administrators and educators of "betraying the trust of the Nicaraguan people" and "transgressing against the constitutional order." Previously, the government had seized the university's buildings, bank account and even its furniture. The government followed up its seizure of the UCA by expelling eight Jesuits from their residence near the university's campus on August 19, and subsequently cancelled the legal status of the Jesuits in Nicaragua. UCA students are being harassed, and several have been arrested and are being held in isolation in prison, adding to the list of at least 89 political prisoners.

The UCA, founded in 1960, had been a hub of resistance to Daniel Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo. UCA students joined protests calling for Mr. Ortega's ouster in April 2018, and the university opened its campus to protesters fleeing police and paramilitaries. The UCA's solidarity with the protests is what led to official hostility toward the university.

The attack on the UCA is part of a larger campaign against the Catholic Church that has included the closing of the Catholic charity Caritas, the banning of more than 1,000 Catholic processions during Lent and Easter, the expulsion from the country of the religious order of nuns founded by Mother Teresa, and the arrest and sentencing of Bishop Rolando Álvarez to 26 years in prison for "anti-government activities." Prior to the seizure of the UCA, the government took control of two other Catholic universities — *Universidad Juan Pablo II* and *Universidad Cristiana Autónoma de Nicaragua* — and rescinded the accreditation of La Purísima Catholic Seminary in Managua.

The campaign against the Church is in turn part of a devastating pattern of government repression of civil society and social institutions in response to the 2018 protests and their

aftermath. Authorities have outlawed or closed more than 3,000 civic groups and non-governmental organizations. In addition to the UCA, at least 26 other Nicaraguan universities have been closed and their assets seized, of which seven were foreign institutions. Last May, the government shut down the Nicaraguan Red Cross, accusing it of “attacks on peace and stability” during the 2018 protests. In June, the government forced 222 political prisoners – including seven presidential hopefuls barred from running in the 2021 election, lawyers, rights activists, journalists and former members of the Sandinista guerrilla movement – into exile and confiscated their property. Thousands more people have fled the country over the last five years.

We appreciate the actions taken by the Biden Administration to date in response to the widespread repression, including all of the work done to support the release of 222 Nicaraguan political prisoners and the [recent imposition of visa sanctions](#) on more than 100 Nicaraguan municipal officials. At the same time, we believe additional action is needed in response to the seizure and closing of the UCA.

First, we are concerned for the future of the several thousand UCA students who are suddenly being denied their education. We are aware of the efforts of the *Asociación de Universidades Confiadas a la Compañía de Jesús en América Latina* (AUSJAL) to enroll at least some of the students in other universities, including UCA’s sister universities in El Salvador and Guatemala. We strongly urge the Administration to make available resources and technical assistance to quickly expand the capacity of institutions of higher learning in the region, at least on a temporary basis, and support the enrollment of UCA’s former students in these institutions.

To the extent that former UCA students have the opportunity to continue their studies in U.S. institutions, we urge the Administration to facilitate the provision of student visas on an expedited basis.

Especially in light of the Nicaraguan government’s imprisonment of Bishop Alvarez, we are deeply concerned about the safety of the Jesuit priests who were expelled from their homes in August. We are also concerned for the safety and livelihoods of teaching and administrative staff who have lost compensation and many of whose accounts have been frozen. We urge you to do all in your power to track their treatment and ensure their well-being.

We encourage the State Department to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the legal basis for the seizure and closing of the UCA, so that the Administration will be prepared to cooperate with and provide technical support to eventual human rights challenges to the Nicaraguan government’s arbitrary actions.

We encourage you to engage the Vatican at the highest diplomatic levels to identify and coordinate additional actions in response to this double attack on the church itself and on academic freedom in Nicaragua.

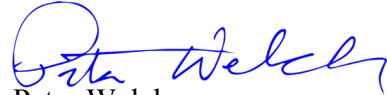
Finally, we encourage you to fully exercise existing sanctions authorities to impose severe costs on those individuals directly responsible for the seizure and closing of the UCA and other Nicaraguan universities.

Thank you for your attention. We are committed to working with you to ensure that a generation of young Nicaraguans is not deprived of its right to higher education due to the arbitrary behavior of a despotic government.

Sincerely,



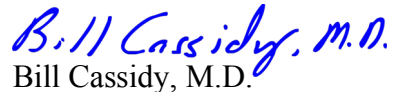
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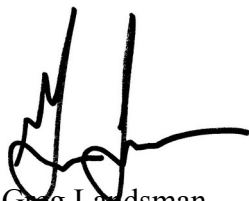
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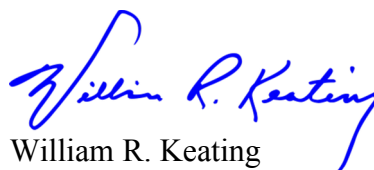
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