



SHOOT TO KILL

NICARAGUA'S STRATEGY TO REPRESS PROTEST

AMNISTÍA
INTERNACIONAL



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1. INTRODUCTION

President Daniel Ortega has governed Nicaragua for three consecutive terms. His wife, Rosario Murillo, has held the post of vice-president since January 2017.

In recent years, the signs of a deterioration in the human rights situation have been increasingly visible. On the eve of the 2016 presidential elections, Amnesty International expressed concern that Nicaragua was "very quickly and dangerously slipping back into some of the darkest times the country has seen in decades".¹

Amnesty International has documented the repeated violations of the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful protest by the government of President Daniel Ortega prior to the events described in this report. The continuing violent repression of demonstrations and the harassment of representatives and leaders of campesino (peasant farmer) communities opposed to the Interoceanic Grand Canal mega-project have been repeatedly condemned by both Nicaraguan organizations and Amnesty International.²

In response to social protests during April and May 2018, the Nicaraguan government adopted a strategy of violent repression not seen in the country for years. More than 70 people were reportedly killed by the state and hundreds were seriously injured. It is in this context, and with acts of repression continuing to take place in the country at the time of writing, that Amnesty International is publishing this report.

In order to produce this report, Amnesty International undertook a mission in Nicaragua from 4 to 13 May 2018 to research allegations of serious human rights violations. During the mission, a team of experts from the organization visited the cities of Managua, León, Ciudad Sandino and Estelí. This report is based on more than 30 face-to-face interviews; analysis and documentation of 16 cases, including nine fatalities; review of audiovisual material; and analysis of the context in which the repression took place. A team of experts in video and photo analysis and in arms and ammunition were involved in the research. The images that are referred to in this report as potential evidence had previously been analysed and verified by these teams.³

In order to document the cases cited in this report, interviews were conducted with direct victims of the violence, with victims' relatives and their legal representatives and, in several cases, with medical staff and eyewitnesses. Amnesty International has been given access to the medical records of people who sustained serious injuries, as well as the death certificates⁴ and causes of death of all those who died, of the cases detailed in this report. In addition, the organization obtained a copy of the "notifications of withdrawal of complaint" mentioned, as well as of the official complaints lodged with the Attorney General. The organization was able to access audiovisual material relating to all of the people who died whose cases are detailed in this report.

¹ Amnesty International, Four things you should know about the other election this week, 4 November 2015.

² Amnesty International, Danger: Rights for sale – The Interoceanic Grand Canal project in Nicaragua and the erosion of human rights, August 2017, p. 44.

³ All the photographic and audiovisual material cited as evidence in this report has been analysed by an Amnesty International team specializing in weapons, ammunition and digital imagery to confirm its authenticity, the place and time it was recorded, as well as to identify those who appear and to ascertain whether they were armed, the type of weapon and the ammunition deployed.

⁴ Except in the case of Cristhiam Cadenas. At the time of Amnesty International's interview with his brother, Alexander Sarria Cadenas, on 8 May 2018, the death certificate had yet to be issued.

2. TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

On 16 April 2018, the Board of Directors of the Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security (Instituto Nicaragüense de Seguridad Social, INSS) approved reforms of the social security system, which were confirmed the following day by President Daniel Ortega in Presidential Decree 03-2018, published in the Official Gazette of 18 April 2018.⁵

Among other changes, the reform increased social security contributions by both employers and employees and imposed an additional 5% contribution on pensioners. Those affected saw these measures as an affront to their rights. The lack of consultation and transparency during the negotiation of the amendments to the social security system exacerbated discontent. As a result, thousands of people took to the streets in protest in Managua and other cities around the country, including Bluefields, León, Estelí, Ciudad Sandino and Masaya.

From the first day of demonstrations, 18 April 2018, the repression of the mainly student protesters by the state security forces and the violent actions of groups linked to the government or *parapoliciales*⁶ (pro-government armed groups), were highlighted on social media, in the media and by human rights organizations. That day pro-government armed groups attacked students at the Central American University (Universidad Centroamericana, UCA). In addition, images of the attack by the same type of group on Nicolás Palacios, a 64-year-old pensioner, in the city of León intensified discontent, which sparked a continued wave of protests.⁷ As this report shows, this wave of demonstrations was suppressed by the government in a manner that was disproportionate and violated human rights.

On 19 April 2018, students from various other universities joined the protests. By the end of the day at least three people had been killed, among them a student and a police officer, and dozens more injured. There were more demonstrations in other departments around the country and there were reports that the authorities had taken at least four media outlets off air.⁸ Universities such as the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua (UPOLI), the National University of Engineering (UNI) and the Agrarian University (UNA) became defensive strongholds where hundreds of young people sought protection from attacks by government forces and pro-government armed groups.

On 21 April 2018, reports came to light of the killing of reporter Ángel Gahona in Bluefields and the wounding of nine other journalists.⁹ The next day there were reports of attacks by the National Police on

⁵ La Gaceta, Diario Oficial – No. 72, 18 April 2018 (The Official Gazette, No. 72), available at <https://www.lagaceta.gob.ni/2018/04/072/> (in Spanish), last visited 7 May 2018.

⁶ Academics and human rights defenders define these pro-government armed groups (commonly referred to as “*turbas sandinistas*”, “Sandinista mobs”) as groups of supporters of the governing party made up of various elements, including members of “*Juventud Sandinista*” (“Sandinista Youth”) and the so-called “*motorizados*” (motorcyclists). These groups are sometimes identified by shirts or other clothing linking them to the government. Amnesty International believes that these groups are used by the government to carry out attacks against protesters, thereby increasing its capacity for repression and hindering the identification of the perpetrators. (See section 3.2).

⁷ Amnesty International interview with Nicolás Palacios, 8 May 2018, the city of León.

⁸ Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights, Statement No.2, 20 April 2018, available at: <https://www.cenidh.org/noticias/1052/> (in Spanish), last visited, 17 May 2018. See also: *La Prensa*, “Así te contamos el segundo día de protestas contra las reformas al INSS”, (Our account of the second day of protest against the social security reforms) 19 April 2018, available at: <https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2018/04/19/politica/2406201-en-vivo-protestas-contra-reformas-inss> (in Spanish), last visited 13 May 2018

⁹ Amnesty International, Nicaragua: State must stop repressing demonstrators after 10 are killed, 21 April 2018.

students who had taken refuge in the UPOLI which left six people injured and one dead.¹⁰ The same day, President Daniel Ortega announced the withdrawal of the reforms to the social security system, but made no mention of the deaths of the protesters.

The seriousness of the situation led several international human rights organizations to speak out. On 24 April, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) reported that at least 25 people had died in the context of suppression of the protests and asked Nicaragua for permission to visit the country. In addition, the IACHR called on the authorities to investigate police actions during the protests and to impose appropriate penalties.¹¹

On 27 April 2018, four UN Special Rapporteurs expressed their dismay at the violent response of the security forces to the protests and called on the authorities to ensure the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly were respected. According to the Rapporteurs, at the time of their statement they had received reports that at least 30 people had been killed and dozens injured.¹²

"We are appalled by the security forces' response. Violence can never be the answer to people's social and political demands, it can only pave the way for further violence, leading to social and political unrest."

Press release by UN Special Rapporteurs, 27 April 2018.¹³

After more than three weeks of protests, at least 76 people were reported to have been killed in the context of the violent repression of protesters. More than 860 people were reported to have been injured in addition to the arrests of more than 400 people including students, journalists and human rights defenders.¹⁴

¹⁰ Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights, CENIDH denuncia violaciones sistemáticas a los derechos humanos de los nicaragüenses por el régimen dictatorial de Daniel Ortega y Rosario Murillo, (CENIDH condemns the systematic violation of human rights by the dictatorial regime of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo) May 2018, p.8 (in Spanish only).

¹¹ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Press Release: IACHR Expresses Concern over Deaths in the Context of Nicaraguan Protests, 24 April 2018.

¹² UN, Press Release: Nicaragua: Experts say appalled by Government's violent response to peaceful protests, 27 April 2018.

¹³ OHCHR, Press Release: *Nicaragua: Experts say appalled by Government's violent response to peaceful protests*, available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23005&LangID=E>, last visited, 17 May 2018.

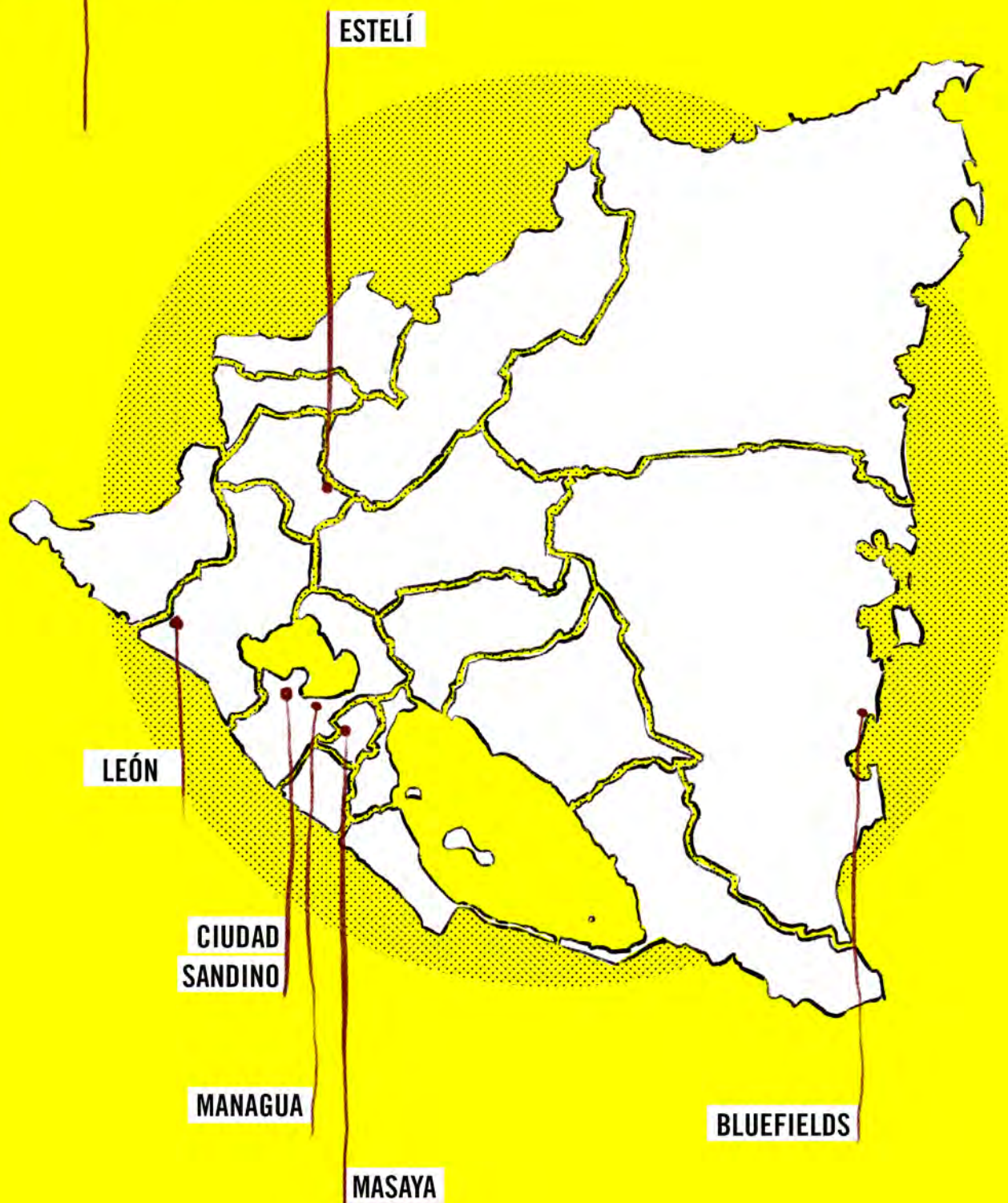
¹⁴ IACHR, Press release: 113/18. Preliminary observations of the working visit to Nicaragua, 21 May 2018. Available at: http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/press_releases.asp

NICARAGUA: 51 PEOPLE DEAD. 24 DAYS. 6 CITIES.¹



49 PEOPLE IN THE CONTEXT OF PROTESTS²

2 POLICE OFFICERS



1. Numbers from 19 April to 12 May, 2018.

2. The 49 include 2 people who set fire to an independent radio station.

3. A STRATEGY OF REPRESSION AND ATTACKS

Protest and peaceful demonstration are an accepted part of the right to freedom of expression and assembly.¹⁵ However, Amnesty International has concluded, in the light of its documentation of individual cases and analysis of the context, that there are reasons to believe the Nicaraguan authorities, including at the highest level, implemented and maintained a strategy of repression, sometimes intentionally involving loss of life, throughout the weeks of protest.

Amnesty International considers this strategy of repression included the following elements: official statements that denied and sought to conceal the repression and its consequences, as well as the vilification, by those at the highest levels of government, of those who took part in public protests; the use of pro-government armed groups to carry out attacks, increase the capacity for repression and operate more easily outside the law; the excessive use of force by the National Police and riot police; possible extrajudicial executions, both by the police and pro-government armed groups; possible acts of concealment and obstruction in investigations by failing to ensure that basic initial steps that are crucial for a successful investigation were taken; the denial of medical care in public hospitals; and attempts to control the press in order to conceal the reality of the situation and limit freedom of expression.

3.1 OFFICIAL DENIALS

On 19 April 2018, after the first three killings at the hands of the state forces had been reported,¹⁶ Vice-President Rosario Murillo told the media the demonstrators were "tiny" groups of people with their own interests and a toxic and self-centred political agenda, full of hate" who threatened "peace and development" and that they had made up the reports of fatalities that day as part of an anti-government strategy. She also said that "these sick, corrupt individuals, who are full of hate, cannot be allowed to

¹⁵ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, General Assembly resolution 2200^a (XXI) of 16 December 1966, entry into force 23 March 1976, the right to freedom of expression, and Article 21, right of peaceful assembly.

¹⁶ Agencia EFE, Al menos cuatro muertos en una protesta por la reforma de la Seguridad Social en Nicaragua (At least four dead in a demonstration against the social security reforms in Nicaragua), 19 April 2018, Available at: <https://www.efe.com/efe/america/sociedad/al-menos-cuatro-muertos-en-una-protesta-por-la-reforma-de-seguridad-social-nicaragua/20000013-3590051> (in Spanish), last visited, 17 May 2018.

wreak havoc and deny all Nicaraguan families the peace that, thank God, we have".¹⁷ She also criticized media handling of events, stating that members of the media were "instigating the violence while, in a cowardly and premeditated way, they hid their identities behind their cameras while pointing them at others", and warned that the government would not permit acts of provocation.¹⁸

"Imagine how low they can stoop ... inventing deaths! That's like making up illnesses, inventing suffering [...] they are like vampires, demanding blood to feed their political agendas, to feed themselves, because vampires feed on blood and believe that with it they can advance their political agendas.

[...] And we also condemn the false stories of deaths [...] inventing deaths. Unbelievable! It is also a sin, lying is a sin, committing fraud and playing with lives, it's a sin [...] False news, false people, false beings, false consciences, false propositions... False, false, false, that's what these tiny groups fanning the flames of hate are."

Excerpts from speeches by Vice-President Rosario Murillo, 19 April 2018.¹⁹

A day later, the Vice-President blamed demonstrators for the death of one of the two police officers killed during the protests, praised the police action and omitted to mention the young people who had died by that point.²⁰

On 21 April 2018, President Ortega publicly referred to the protests for the first time stating that: "these murderers, who walk carrying weapons of war, when they fall during conflicts with the army or the police, then, poor things, they have to turn to Human Rights to plead for them". He condemned the protests as manipulated by "tiny political groups who will exploit any pretext for their own political ends".²¹

Despite the fact that police repression was leading to more deaths each day, neither President Ortega nor Vice-President Murillo expressed regret at the deaths of those taking part in the protests. It was not until 30 April 2018 that the Head of State expressed solidarity with people who had lost a loved one in the violence, and called for "a minute's silence to remember the dead... but above all to commit ourselves to ensuring that violence does not take root in our country".²²

Nevertheless, the repression continued and on 12 May (the cut-off date for this report) the Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights (CENIDH) reported the number of people killed in the context of the protests at at least 51.²³ As stated earlier, by 21 May 2018, that figure had risen to 76.

¹⁷ La Voz del Sandinismo, *Declaraciones de la Compañera Rosario Murillo, Vicepresidenta de Nicaragua, 19 April 2018 (Statements by Rosario Murillo, Vice-President of Nicaragua)*, available at: <http://www.lavozdelsandinismo.com/nicaragua/2018-04-19/declaraciones-de-la-companera-rosario-murillo-vicepresidenta-de-nicaragua-19-4-2018-texto-integro/> (in Spanish), last visited 17 May 2018.

¹⁸ "And let the real instigators of the violence come forward, because we haven't seen them. We have seen the response of a people that has lived through decades of conflict, and if they provoke us, if they attack us... Why would we allow them to carry on provoking us in Nicaragua and let them continue stirring thing up, fishing in troubled waters to achieve their petty goals, stirring up the river which, thank God, flows with Living Water? And they are stirring things up precisely for the benefit of a few people whose selfishness knows no limits." Excerpt from Rosario Murillo's speech on 19 April 2018. La Voz del Sandinismo, *Declaraciones de la Compañera Rosario Murillo, Vicepresidenta de Nicaragua*. 19 April 2018, available at: <http://www.lavozdelsandinismo.com/nicaragua/2018-04-19/declaraciones-de-la-companera-rosario-murillo-vicepresidenta-de-nicaragua-19-4-2018-texto-integro/> (in Spanish), last visited 17 May 2018.

¹⁹ "Imaginense hasta qué extremo llega la maldad... ¡Fabricar muertos! Eso es como inventar enfermedades, eso es como inventar sufrimientos. [...] Parecen vampiros, reclamando sangre, para nutrir sus agendas políticas, para alimentarse, porque el vampiro se alimenta de sangre y cree que con eso logra avances en sus agendas políticas.

[...] Y estamos condenando también los muertos falsos [...] fabricar muertos. ¡Es increíble! También es un pecado, mentir es un pecado, cometer fraudes jugando con la vida, es un pecado. [...] Noticias falsas, y también falsas personas, falsos seres, falsas conciencias, falsas propuestas... Falsos, falsos, falsos, así son estos minúsculos grupos alentadores de odio".

La Voz del Sandinismo, *Declaraciones de la Compañera Rosario Murillo, Vicepresidenta de Nicaragua, 20 April 2018*, available at: <http://www.lavozdelsandinismo.com/nicaragua/2018-04-20/declaraciones-de-la-companera-rosario-murillo-vicepresidenta-de-nicaragua-en-edicion-especial-de-la-noche-19-04-2018-texto-integro/> last visited 17 May 2018

²⁰ La Voz del Sandinismo, *Declaraciones de la Compañera Rosario Murillo, Vicepresidenta de Nicaragua, 20 April 2018*, available at: <http://www.lavozdelsandinismo.com/nicaragua/2018-04-20/declaraciones-de-la-companera-rosario-murillo-vicepresidenta-de-nicaragua-20-4-2018-texto-integro/>, last visited 17 May 2018.

²¹ La Voz del Sandinismo, *Declaraciones del Presidente-Comandante Daniel al Pueblo Nicaragüense*, (Statement of President-Commander Daniel to the Nicaraguan People), 21 April 2018, available at: <http://www.lavozdelsandinismo.com/nicaragua/2018-04-21/mensaje-del-presidente-comandante-daniel-al-pueblo-nicaraguense-21-4-2018-texto-integro/> (in Spanish), last visited, 17 May 2018. See also: Europe Press, *Daniel Ortega denuncia una conspiración y relaciona las protestas con el narcotráfico* (Daniel Ortega condemns the protests as a conspiracy and links them to drug smuggling), 21 April 2018, available at: <http://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-daniel-ortega-denuncia-conspiracion-relaciona-protestas-narcotrafico-20180421211539.html> (in Spanish), last visited 19 May 2018.

²² La Voz del Sandinismo, *Declaraciones de la Compañera Rosario Murillo, Vicepresidenta de Nicaragua, 30 April 2018*, available at: <http://www.lavozdelsandinismo.com/nicaragua/2018-04-30/la-patria-esta-de-duelo-un-minuto-de-silencio-por-los-fallecidos-en-las-protestas/>, last visited 17 May 2018.

²³ Amnesty International interview with Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights, CENIDH on 12 May 2018. The cut-off date used in the production of this report is 12 May 2018.

3.2. THE USE OF PRO-GOVERNMENT ARMED GROUPS

Amnesty International has received reliable information indicating that the Nicaraguan government has used armed individuals or pro-government armed groups that act with in collusion with state officials, in particular the National Police, or with their acquiescence or tolerance. According to this information, the government would appear to be using this "shock" tactic of attacks carried out by private individuals as part of a strategy in order to make the subsequent identification of those responsible for human rights violations more difficult and to increase its capacity for repression.

Academics and human rights defenders²⁴ define these pro-government armed groups (commonly referred to as "turbas sandinistas", "sandinista mobs") as groups of supporters of the governing party²⁵ made up of various elements, including members of "Juventud Sandinista" ("Sandinista Youth") and the so-called "motorizados" (motorcyclists). These groups are sometimes identifiable by shirts or other clothing they wear linking them to the government.

By analysing images and videos, collecting more than 30 testimonies from witnesses and victims of the violence and documenting cases, Amnesty International was able to ascertain that these pro-government armed groups were apparently used by the government to generate disorder, make threats and carry out attacks, including some that may have proved fatal, and operate outside the law governing the behaviour of state forces policing demonstrations.

These groups appear to be acting with the acquiescence of the state, as is demonstrated firstly by the fact that most of the attacks were committed by private individuals in the presence of or in coordination with the security forces and, secondly, by the fact that the police did not pursue the perpetrators after the crimes were committed, but rather allowed them to flee the scene and disperse.

One of the first attacks of this type reported took place on 18 April 2018 around the Central American University (Universidad Centroamericana, UCA), where a crowd had gathered to protest. Amnesty International has photographs and a copy of the security camera footage from the entrance to the university. The images confirm that from the start of the protests pro-government armed groups were used by the police to attack dozens of demonstrators gathered there.

According to the information analysed, two trucks loaded with stones arrived that day in the vicinity of UCA and riot police would appear to have distributed them to members of the pro-government armed groups. The security cameras recorded how these groups subsequently used stones and sticks to attack the demonstrators, who fled to seek refuge inside the UCA buildings. Several members of these groups were seen wearing shirts linking them to the government at the time the attack was carried out.

²⁴ Amnesty International interviews with Jorge Huete, Member of the Nicaraguan Academy of Sciences, on 4 May 2018; with Margarita Quintanilla, Women's Mesoamerican Initiative (Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Mujeres) 5 May 2018; with Ana Quirós, Director of the Centre for Health Information and Counselling Services (Centro de Información y Servicios de Asesoría en Salud, CISAS) on 5 May 2018; with Vilma Núñez, Director of CENIDH, on 11 May 2018; and with Denis Darçe of the Permanent Human Rights Commission, on 11 May 2018.

²⁵ The denomination of the ruling party is FSLN, Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (National Sandinist Liberation Front)



Pro-government armed groups, some identifiable in white t-shirts, attack the Central American University (UCA) in Managua. Images of the day of the attack. 18 April 2018.

The attacks continued in the days that followed, but now with the introduction of the use of firearms. Another video with images dated 20 April 2018 shows the attacks involved not only stones and less lethal weapons, but also the use of firearms carried by people wearing civilian clothing. Amnesty International's analysis of the images revealed that at least one person in the group that carried out the attack against demonstrators was carrying a firearm. The presence in the same group of members of the National Police force was also confirmed.



Armed individual from pro-government armed group (parapoliciales) captured on a security camera at the Central American University (UCA). Image 1: "parapolicial" in blue with white collar runs carrying a weapon; image 2: "parapolicial" in blue with white collar runs carrying a weapon while passing in front of the police; image 3: in another location he is identified with a weapon in his hand. 20 April 2018.

Similarly, through testimonies and audiovisual images, Amnesty International was able to confirm that on 19 April 2018, a person dressed in civilian clothes fired a semi-automatic weapon at people demonstrating in the central park in the city of Estelí. The images show how, immediately afterwards, riot police appeared just a few metres from the shooter as he left the park apparently unhindered. The testimonies collected noted that the shooter belonged to a pro-government armed group.



Armed man (dressed in black) shoots in the city of Estelí. 19 April 2018.

According to the information obtained, such attacks and the same modus operandi continued during the following weeks.²⁶

A video published on 21 April 2018²⁷ captured a group of riot police arresting several people in the city of Masaya. The footage shows how the officers beat several young people and grab them by their necks, while an alleged "motorizado" from the pro-government armed groups beats them.



Riot police arresting several young people and allowing alleged "motorizados" to beat them. 21 April 2018.

²⁶ The cut-off date for the inclusion of information in this report is 12 May 2018. However, it is important to note that attacks and fatalities were reported after that date.

²⁷ According to the video analysis carried out by Amnesty International, the event would have taken place the same day, 21 April 2018, in a street near the market in the city of Masaya.

In addition, on 12 May 2018, a pro-government armed group was spotted in one of the streets of Masaya city carrying at least one lethal weapon while police looked on. In the images analysed, an individual is seen firing an AK assault rifle next to an alleged "motorizado" and another person wearing a balaclava is seen carrying a mortar. A few metres away, a riot police officer can be seen watching the attack.



Armed groups operating with an assault rifle in the presence of police in Masaya. 12 May 2018.

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (Inter-American Court) has stated that the creation and use of self-defence or paramilitary groups by the state constitutes a grave risk for the population, for which the state is responsible in cases of arbitrary deprivation of the rights to life, liberty and personal integrity.²⁸

ANA QUIRÓS: VICTIM OF AN ATTACK BY PRO-GOVERNMENT ARMED GROUPS



Ana Quirós is a well-known human rights defender in Nicaragua. © Private photo

Ana Quirós, Director of the Centre for Health Information and Counselling Services (Centro de Información y Servicios de Asesoría en Salud, CISAS), was assaulted by a pro-government armed group while taking part in the protests on 18 April 2018 in Managua. In an interview with Amnesty International, she described how she sought help from the police when a group of men on motorcycles wearing helmets with dark visors began to attack the demonstrators and journalists with sticks and iron bars. When the police failed to act, she tried to help a woman student who was being assaulted by a group of "motorizados" because she had been recording the scene on her phone. At that moment, another person – who appears to have recognized Ana as a well-known human rights defender in the country – attacked her with a metal bar. Ana Quirós

²⁸ Inter-American Court, Case of the Pueblo Bello Massacre v. Colombia, Judgment of January 31, 2006, Series C No. 140, para. 151.

sustained injuries to her head and one of her hands. Along with others who had been attacked, she had to wait hidden for more than an hour before she could make her way to the hospital. She subsequently underwent surgery on her hand and needed several stitches for her head wound. Ana Quirós stated that these groups unquestionably act under the orders of and in coordination with the National Police.

3.3. EXCESSIVE USE OF FORCE

“The high number of deaths of protesters is a clear indication that excessive force was used in violation of the principles of necessity and proportionality as required by international law and standards to make the use of force legal [...] If confirmed, this will qualify the deaths as unlawful killings with the Government incurring international responsibility.”

Press release by UN Special Rapporteurs, 27 April 2018.²⁹

The use of force by the authorities must be based on the criteria of proportionality and necessity in relation to the threat that is being countered³⁰, seeking at all times to minimize harm and protect life.³¹

International instruments on the use of firearms indicate that "less lethal" weapons, such as rubber bullets, should be used in a way that does not cause serious injury and that respects people's life and physical integrity.³² Because these types of projectiles can cause serious injuries, they should only be fired towards the lower part of the body, from a distance and in situations where it is feasible to hit the intended target.

The use of firearms has potentially lethal consequences, which is why the use of such weapons in the context of policing demonstrations is limited to exceptional situations.³³ For this reason the security forces are authorized to use firearms only in extreme situations, when other means are ineffective and their use is unavoidable.³⁴

The Inter-American Court has established that when a state uses excessive force, any resulting deprivation of life is arbitrary.³⁵

The fact that some groups or individuals used violence at a demonstration (as in this case where it was reported that some demonstrators threw stones or fired mortars), does not render the whole protest itself violent, nor does it justify the use of force, much less lethal force, by the security forces to disperse the demonstration.³⁶

According to the information available to Amnesty International, as of 12 May 2018, 51 people had died as a result of the events described. Of those 51 dead, 47 were people involved in peaceful protest, two were police officers and the remaining two people died while allegedly setting fire to a radio station in León.

In the first five days of protest alone, the Nicaraguan Red Cross treated more than 400 people for their injuries, 235 of whom needed further treatment in health facilities. A total of 311 of those treated were

²⁹ UN, Press Release: Nicaragua: Experts say appalled by Government's violent response to peaceful protests, 27 April 2018.

³⁰ Inter-American Court, Case of Zambrano Vélez et al. v. Ecuador, Judgment of July 4, 2007, (Merits, Reparations and Costs), Series C No. 166, para. 84.

³¹ Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, Adopted by the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, 7 September 1990, Principle 5 (a) and (b).

³² Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, Adopted by the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, 7 September 1990, Principle 5 (b).

³³ The Inter-American Court has called on states to ensure that the use of force "is in keeping with the principles of legality, absolute necessity and proportionality". (Inter-American Court, Case of Nadege Dorzema et al. v. Dominican Republic, Judgment of October 24, 2012 (Merits, reparations and costs), paras 85 to 90). See also: Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, Adopted by the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, 7 September 1990.

³⁴ Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, Adopted by the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, 7 September 1990, Principle 4.

³⁵ Inter-American Court, Case of Zambrano Vélez et al. v. Ecuador Judgment of July 4, 2007, (Merits, Reparations and Costs), Series C No. 166, para. 84. Ecuador I 2007; Inter-American Court, Case of the Barrios Family v. Venezuela, Judgment of November 24, 2011, (Merits, reparations and costs) Series C No. 237, para. 49, Venezuela I 2011.

³⁶ IACHR, Press Release: "IACHR Expresses Concern over Deaths in the Context of Nicaraguan Protests", available at: http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2018/090.asp. Last visited 17 May 2018.

in Managua, mainly at the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua (Universidad Politécnica de Nicaragua, UPOLI), one of the areas where the highest numbers of attacks on protesters in the country were reported.³⁷

CÉSAR NOÉ CASTILLO: DIED AS A RESULT OF A BULLET WOUND TO THE SPINE



César Noé Castillo, 42 years old, months before he died. © Photo provided by family

Amnesty International interviewed 42-year-old César Noé Castillo in the San Juan de Dios Hospital in the city of Estelí, a few days before his death as a result of a bullet wound in his spinal cord. He described how on 19 April 2018, he was returning home when he was caught up in the protests taking place in the city's central park. When he saw the violence was escalating, he tried to get away but was hit in the spine by a bullet and immediately fell to the ground unable to move. According to the doctors at the hospital where he was treated for seven days, César Noé was shot with a 9mm gun. Doctors operated on him to stop the internal bleeding, but were unable to remove the bullet. César Noé said indignantly that he saw a police officer at his side when he fell to the ground paralysed, but that the officer did not come to his aid.

Although doctors told him that he would not walk again, a private doctor assured him that there was a chance he would recover. During an interview with Amnesty International, César Noé said he still had high hopes that one day he would be able to walk again. On 12 May 2018, César Noé died as a result of injuries sustained when he was shot with live ammunition in the context of a protest in which he did not even take part.

Amnesty International has obtained information through interviews, images and videos suggesting the authorities used unwarranted force, through the misuse of firearms.

For example, Amnesty International verified and analysed images of the protest on 20 April 2018 in the city of Estelí. These show how riot police start firing, without any justification, what appear to be less lethal weapons at demonstrators standing peacefully just a few metres in front of them.³⁸

Similarly, images taken on 20 April in the area near the university sector in the city of Managua were verified and analysed. A member of the National Police can be seen firing indiscriminately from a moving motorcycle driven by another officer. The weapon was a pump-action shotgun but the organization has been unable to confirm whether it is firing live or less lethal ammunition.

³⁷ Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights, CENIDH denuncia violaciones sistemáticas a los derechos humanos de los nicaragüenses por el régimen dictatorial de Daniel Ortega y Rosario Murillo, May 2018, p.16.

³⁸ Footage analysed and corroborated by Amnesty International. *Protesta Estelí 20-04-2018*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEtX9YBE3xl&feature=youtu.be>



Police shooting from a moving motorcycle towards university campus in Managua. 20 April 2018.

Audiovisual footage also confirms that the police used firearms during the first days of protest in the vicinity of UPOLI.³⁹ The images show a group of policemen (riot police and National Police) with shotguns and two firearms. On at least one occasion the police fired live ammunition, although there appears to be no threat to them. This appears to have occurred during the night.⁴⁰



Police officers using lethal weapons in the grounds of the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua (UPOLI). April 2018.

Amnesty International received information and testimonies from several people, including minors, who suffered serious injuries caused by rubber bullets and pellets. They had been were shot in the head or chest, causing permanent injury and, on some occasions, resulting in the arbitrary deprivation of life.

The organization documented the case of Axel Blanco, a minor, who lost the sight in his left eye completely as a result of a shot reportedly fired by a riot police officer from a distance of 10m. On 19 April 2018, Axel was in the National University of Engineering (Universidad Nacional de Ingeniería, UNI) building a barricade to protect himself from shots fired by the authorities, when he saw a police officer crouch down and deliberately take aim and shoot him. According to the medical report, to which Amnesty International

³⁹ Amnesty International was able to verify the geolocation, the individuals involved and the type of weapon and ammunition. However, it was not possible to verify the exact date of the events shown. The video was posted on the internet for the first time on 22 April 2018. It is believed that the events depicted took place between 18 and 22 April 2018.

⁴⁰ Amnesty International interview with four students from universities in Managua (names have been withheld for security reasons) who all stated that the National Police and anti-riot police waited until nightfall to attack the universities where protesters had gathered.

has access, Axel suffered trauma to his eye when his eyeball was hit and burst causing damage to the palpebral fissure.⁴¹

During the first days of protest, at least nine young people were reported to have been injured or have lost an eye, most as a result of a direct hit by a rubber bullet.⁴²

AXEL BLANCO: A STUDENT, BLINDED IN ONE EYE AS A RESULT OF A DIRECT HIT WITH A RUBBER BULLET



Axel Blanco, 17-year-old student, following interview with Amnesty International. © Amnesty International

On 18 April 2018, Axel Blanco, a 17-year-old student at the UNI, was outraged and disgusted when he heard about the social security reforms and reports of the violent repression meted out to those protesting against those reforms. The next day, he decided to join in the protest activities at his university. He told Amnesty International that when police started to fire tear gas and rubber bullets at the students, he started to build a barricade with a few tables. At that moment, a riot police officer shot him in the head at a distance of approximately 10m and hit him in the left eye.

According to the medical report, to which Amnesty International has access, Axel sustained a burst eyeball, damage to the palpebral fissure and blunt trauma to his left eye. These deep injuries to his eyeball have resulted in a total loss of vision and his chances of recovering his sight in future are slim. As a result of the injuries, Axel spent six days in hospital and underwent surgery twice, once to restore his eyelid and another to reconstruct his eye. His cornea suffered irreversible damage and doctors recommended a third operation to treat other areas that were damaged. Although there is little chance of Axel regaining his sight, he is still hopeful that one day he will.

3.4. EXTRAJUDICIAL EXECUTIONS

"The police started by shooting rubber bullets. But the violence escalated the next day. On 19 April several people died. Daniel (Ortega) could have stopped the repression that day. But he didn't. The next day police fired live ammunition. The order was shoot to kill".

Vilma Núñez, President of the Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights

The right not to be arbitrarily deprived of life is a fundamental norm of international law. It is set out in international treaties which are binding on Nicaragua, such as the American Convention on Human Rights⁴³ and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.⁴⁴ Consequently, Nicaragua has an obligation to prevent its agents from violating this right, and to prevent and punish those responsible for the arbitrary deprivation of life.

⁴¹ Amnesty International interview with Axel Blanco and his mother, Katheleen García, on 5 May 2018.

⁴² Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights, CENIDH denuncia violaciones sistemáticas a los derechos humanos de los nicaragüenses por el régimen dictatorial de Daniel Ortega y Rosario Murillo, May 2018, pp. 14 and 15.

⁴³ Organization of American States, American Convention on Human Rights, 22 November 1969, ratified by Nicaragua on 25 September 1979.

⁴⁴ UN General Assembly, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 16 December 1966, ratified by Nicaragua on 8 January 1980.

Based on the information gathered during its fact-finding mission, Amnesty International considers that between 19 April and 12 May 2018 people were arbitrarily deprived of life in the context of the protests and the excessive use of the force. Further, it considers that based on the pattern identified, a considerable number of the casualties could be considered extrajudicial executions.

This serious violation of human rights, which is also a crime under international law, refers to deaths caused intentionally by state security forces or by paramilitary groups, death squads or other forces composed of individuals who cooperate with the state or act with the state's acquiescence or consent.⁴⁵

The Inter-American Court has emphasized that the absolute prohibition of extrajudicial executions and the duty to investigate them and to try and punish those responsible constitute a peremptory norm of international law (*jus cogens*).⁴⁶

International law also establishes the responsibility of a civilian or military superior for acts committed by forces under their command and effective control, if the superior knew, or should have known, that the forces were committing human rights violations or crimes under international law, and failed to take all necessary, reasonable measures within their power to prevent or limit the violations or to bring them to the attention of the competent authorities for the purposes of investigation and prosecution. In other words, the superior officer is obliged to adopt "to adopt reasonable, specific and effective measures to end the human rights violations committed by their subordinates".⁴⁷

After analysing the available information and evidence, Amnesty International considers that a pattern emerges suggesting that pro-government armed groups, the National Police and the riot police intentionally killed people in a significant number of cases.

Given the context in which these deaths occurred, and taking into account the institutional infrastructure governing the security forces in the country, Amnesty International considers that there are reasons to believe that these deaths occurred with the knowledge of those at the highest level of the Nicaraguan state, including the President.⁴⁸ In addition, Amnesty International has been able to document acts of obstruction and concealment by some government officials, carried out with the intention of preventing a thorough investigation of the facts.

The nine fatalities detailed in this report illustrate the pattern observed by Amnesty International regarding possible extrajudicial executions carried out by state forces in conjunction with pro-government armed groups.⁴⁹ The elements that make up this pattern are set out below.

LETHAL USE OF FORCE

The intentional lethal use of firearms may only be authorized in the most extreme situations where there is a threat to life and it is the only means of preventing the loss of the life of another individual who is in imminent danger.⁵⁰

The CENIDH reported that between 19 April and 2 May 2018, it recorded at least 45 people who were fatally injured, at least 36 of whom were shot.

Also, medical staff at the Bautista Hospital in Managua told Amnesty International between 20 and 24 April 2018 alone they treated 50 people injured in the context of the protests of whom 34 had bullet wounds. Seven of them were young people aged between 14 and 17. Among them was 15-year-old Álvaro Conrado, who died on 20 April.

⁴⁵ Inter-American Court, Case of La Rochela Massacre v. Colombia, Judgment of 11 May 2007, Series C No. 163, para. 103.

⁴⁶ Inter-American Court, Case of Barrios Altos v. Peru, Judgment of 30 November 2001, (Reparations and Costs), Series C No. 87, para. 26. Perú I 2001.

⁴⁷ Inter-American Court, Manuel Cepeda Vargas v. Colombia, Judgment of 26 May 2010 (Preliminary objections, merits, reparations and Costs), Series C No. 213, para. 105.

⁴⁸ According to the law amending the Nicaraguan Constitution (Law 854 of 2014), the National Police "will be subject to the civil authority that will be exercised by the President of the Republic in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief of the National Police". The National Head of Police (Jefatura Nacional), via the director general, under the direction of the commander-in-chief, is responsible for the leadership, administration and unified command of the National Police. Law on National Police organization, functions, career progression and special social security provisions (Law No. 872), approved on 26 June and published in Official Gazette No. 125 of 7 July 2014

⁴⁹ Amnesty International based this analysis on the cases of Álvaro Conrado, Ángel Gahona, Nelson Téllez, Juan Carlos López, Franco Valdivia, Orlando Pérez, Cristhiam Cadenas, Moroni López and César Noé Castillo.

⁵⁰ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Report on Terrorism and Human Rights, 22 October 2002, paras 87 and 88. See also: Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, Article 9.

Of the nine cases of people killed in the context of the protests documented by the organization, eight had been shot with live ammunition.

In at least two cases, the presence of a National Police officer was identified at the time the crime was committed⁵¹. In the other cases (with the exception of one case where it was not possible to obtain more information on possible perpetrators)⁵² the testimonies of eyewitnesses as well as an analysis of the context point to the state forces acting in collusion with pro-government armed groups who appear to be the perpetrators..

WHERE PEOPLE WERE HIT AND THE TRAJECTORY OF THE BULLETS



Franco Valdivia's death certificate, which reads "severe trauma to the cranium caused by frontal firearm wound".

four of whom had gunshot injuries to head, neck or chest. One died in the hospital from a bullet wound to the chest.⁵⁷ In the opinion of the medical personnel interviewed, the bullets had been aimed to cause maximum harm.⁵⁸

"Most of the deaths that occurred in the country [...] are the same, these are carefully aimed shots, a single shot fired with precision at the head or jugular or chest. They are shots that aim to kill and they are fired by professionals, not ordinary people; ordinary people don't have weapons. These are not stray bullets, they are targeted, the shots were fired directly at specific people." [...] And people were hit where the bullet is likely to prove fatal: in the head, the neck, the jugular and the chest. These were murders. And the pattern was the same all over the country."

Ileana Lacayo, Nicaraguan journalist.⁵³

Of the 36 people reported by CENIDH to have died of gunshot injuries between 19 April and 2 May 2018, at least 22 were hit in the head, neck or chest.

Of the eight cases of people with gunshot injuries documented by Amnesty International, all had been hit in parts of the body likely to result in death: one was hit in the neck,⁵⁴ two were hit in the head,⁵⁵ and five were hit in the upper thorax.⁵⁶

In an interview with medical staff at the Vivian Pellas Hospital in Managua, Amnesty International was informed that on 11 May 2018, they received most of those with serious injuries. During the early hours of the morning, the hospital treated seven young people who had been injured in an attack on the UPOLI,

⁵¹ Nelson Téllez, who was fatally injured during a protest, said a few days before his death that he had been able to identify the person who shot him and Orlando Pérez, who also died. Nelson told his wife that it was a local National Police officer in Ciudad Sandino who was not in uniform on that day, 20 April 2018.
⁵² Case of César Noé Castillo Castillo.
⁵³ Amnesty International interview with Ileana Lacayo, 22 April 2018.
⁵⁴ Case of Álvaro Conrado.
⁵⁵ Cases of Franco Valdivia and Ángel Gahona.
⁵⁶ Cases of Orlando Pérez, Moroni López, Nelson Téllez, Juan Carlos López, and César Noé Castillo.
⁵⁷ La Prensa, Dan último adiós a Jimmy Parajón (Final farewells for Jimmy Parajón), available at: <https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2018/05/13/nacionales/2418908-dan-ultimo-adios-jimmy-parajon> (in Spanish).
⁵⁸ Amnesty International interview with medical personnel at the Vivian Pellas Hospital in Managua, 11 May 2018.

In at least four of the cases documented⁵⁹, there was evidence that the bullets had a significant downward trajectory, which suggests that they were fired by someone occupying a vantage point high up above the protests. This would indicate that those hit were in a vulnerable position in relation to the state authorities, as the Inter-American Court has previously described.⁶⁰

IRREGULARITIES IN THE INVESTIGATION

The Inter-American Court has established that investigations into possible extrajudicial executions or arbitrary killings should be initiated ex officio, carried out with due diligence and without delay, and should be thorough, effective, impartial and independent and using all available legal means.⁶¹

However, Amnesty International found a failure to take initial steps that are crucial to a successful investigation that could constitute concealment and obstruction. These are detailed below.

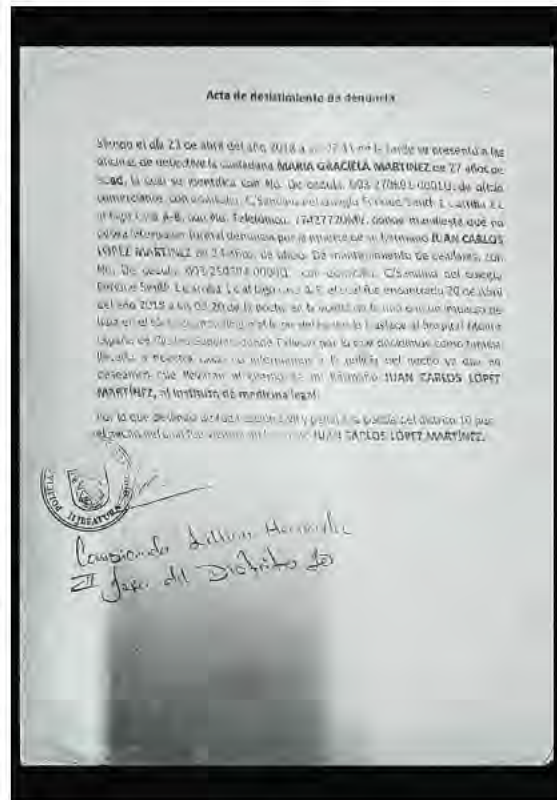
A) FAILURE TO ENSURE FORENSIC MEDICAL EXAMINATIONS AND REFUSAL TO REGISTER FAMILIES' COMPLAINTS


An autopsy and recovery of the body are the minimum steps needed and are vital in order to preserve the evidence and ensure an effective investigation.⁶²

However, in the cases of Nelson Téllez and Juan Carlos López the families reported that the hospital demanded that they present "a notification of withdrawal of complaint" before it would issue a death certificate. Such a notification would mean effectively agreeing that the body would not be transferred to the Institute of Forensic Medicine for an autopsy and that there would be no formal investigation into the death by the competent authorities.

In four of the nine documented cases no autopsy was carried out.⁶³ In two of the cases in which autopsies were conducted (Orlando Pérez and Franco Valdivia), this was done 13 days after the deaths after the bodies were exhumed and at the families' insistence. Relatives said that while they were in the morgue, the medical staff explained that the police had not issued the order to ensure the autopsy was carried out immediately after the death.

An independent forensic pathologist participated in these two autopsies, at the request of the families of Orlando Pérez and Franco Valdivia. According to the families, the coroner reported that the bullets that killed the youths may have been fired from a position high up and were aimed to kill. The Attorney General's Office should have handed over the final report of the Institute of Forensic Medicine to the families on 10 May 2018. However the prosecutor in charge of the investigation refused to do so.⁶⁴



 The family of Juan Carlos López's notification of withdrawal of complaint. He was allegedly killed when shot by a member of the National Police.

⁵⁹ Cases of Álvaro Conrado, Franco Valdivia, Orlando Pérez and Moroni López.

⁶⁰ Extract from Inter-American Court judgment in the case of the Barrios Family v. Venezuela (Inter-American Court, Case of the Barrios Family v. Venezuela, Judgment of November 24, 2011 (Merits, reparations and costs) Series C No. 237, para 66: "In addition, the forensic examination determined that he was shot from above, indicating the victim's position of helplessness, which does not support the version of a confrontation reported by the police officials involved."

⁶¹ Inter-American Court, Case of the Pueblo Bello Massacre v. Colombia, Judgment of January 31, 2006 (Merits, Reparations and Costs), Series C No. 140, para. 143; Case of the "Mapiripán Massacre" v. Colombia, Judgment of September 15 (Merits, Reparations and Costs), 2005, Series C No. 134, para. 219.

⁶² Inter-American Court, Case of the Garífuna Punta Piedra Community and its Members v. Honduras, Judgment of October 8, 2015 (Merits, Reparations and Costs), para. 295.

⁶³ Cases of Nelson Téllez, Juan Carlos López, Álvaro Conrado and Cristhiam Cadenas.

⁶⁴ Exchange of information with Francys Valdivia and Aracely Pérez, sisters of Franco Valdivia and Orlando Pérez respectively.

JUAN CARLOS LÓPEZ Y NELSON TÉLLEZ: REFUSAL TO INVESTIGATE



Graciela Martínez holds a picture of her brother Juan Carlos López, killed in Ciudad Sandino. © Óscar Navarrete/Amnesty International

On 20 April 2018, Juan Carlos López and Nelson Téllez were together when they were hit by live ammunition in Ciudad Sandino. Although a protest was taking place there, the two young men were not involved. Juan Carlos López died the same day at the Monte España Hospital. Nelson Téllez did not die immediately. He died 12 days later at the Lenin Fonseca Hospital after undergoing a number of operations. Before he died, he told his wife that he had seen the man who shot both of them with a firearm; it was a member of the National Police based at the Ciudad Sandino police station dressed in civilian clothes and riding a motorcycle. Nelson Téllez died on 2 May.

Both men had been shot in the upper thorax. In the case of Juan Carlos, the medical staff at the morgue told his family that it was best that they take the body away as soon as possible to avoid problems because it was a private hospital and they had provided treatment despite the fact that he did not have health insurance. His relatives had to carry the body home in their arms, without a forensic examination. In addition, National Police officers based at the Ciudad Sandino police station pressed relatives to sign a "notification of withdrawal of complaint" for the killings, as a precondition for the issuing of a death certificate. In the case of Nelson's family, the police requested that his mother write a letter stating that she was taking her son's body home and would not be making a formal complaint. Nevertheless, the family of Juan Carlos lodged a complaint with the CENIDH on 3 May and Nelson's family lodged a complaint with the in the Nicaraguan Permanent Commission on Human Rights (Comisión Permanente de Derechos Humanos de Nicaragua, CPDH) four days later. Both these organizations referred these as formal complaints to the Attorney General's Office. According to the information received, the Attorney General had not initiated an investigation into the deaths prior to that.

B) LACK OF THOROUGHNESS IN THE HANDLING OF EVIDENCE

Securing and preserving the crime scene correctly are among the most important factors to ensure an impartial and effective investigation.⁶⁵ International standards state that in this type of case, minimum procedures indispensable for the preservation of evidence, and that can contribute to the effectiveness of the investigation, must be carried out. Likewise, due diligence in the investigation of a death requires a chain of custody of all forensic evidence to be maintained.⁶⁶

However, Amnesty International has observed that in most of the documented cases, the crime scene was not preserved (where possible) nor was evidence secured promptly, exhaustively or accounted for in a proper chain of custody.

In at least two cases, the families told Amnesty International that the evidence had been removed from the crime scene. According to the videos analysed by the organization, the morning after the murders of Orlando Pérez and Franco Valdivia, several people cleaned away traces of blood and other evidence using a hose and buckets of water.

⁶⁵ Inter-American Court, Case of the Pueblo Bello Massacre v. Colombia, Judgment of January 31, 2006, (Merits, Reparations and Costs), Series C No. 140, para. 143; Case of the "Mapiripán Massacre" v. Colombia, Judgment of September 15, 2005 (Merits, Reparations and Costs) Series C No. 134, Para. 219.

⁶⁶ Inter-American Court, Case of González et al. ("Cotton Field") v. Mexico, Judgment of November 16, 2009 (Preliminary Objection, Merits, Reparations, and Costs) Series C No. 205, para. 305.



Several people clean up the evidence of the killings of Orlando Pérez and Franco Valdivia. 20 April 2018.

In the case of Cristhiam Cadenas, a young man whose body was found inside a building set on fire in the city of León, police did not preserve the evidence (the clothes), nor guarantee the chain of custody. At the time of the interview with Amnesty International, his brother, Alexander Sarria Cadenas, explained that the police showed him his brother's half burned trousers on one side and a body burned beyond identification on the other. Although Alexander Sarria identified the clothes, he was not completely sure that the body was his brother, since there had been no DNA test to verify his identity. In addition, according to Alexander, the body had no legs, arms, or teeth. Despite this, the forensic pathologist told him that he had died from smoke inhalation without offering any further explanation.⁶⁷

ORLANDO PÉREZ Y FRANCO VALDIVIA: SIGNS OF THE POSSIBLE PRESENCE OF A SNIPER



One of the photos shows Franco Valdivia reporting the attack by police and pro-government armed groups on social media, minutes before he was killed.

On 19 April 2018, Franco Valdivia and Orlando Pérez were shot and killed while taking part in anti-government protests in the city of Estelí. Franco was a law student, a composer and a socially conscious rapper. Orlando was an environmental activist and was studying renewable energy. According to relatives' testimony and the videos analysed by Amnesty International, after being shot and lying motionless on the

⁶⁷ Amnesty International interview with Cristhiam Cadenas' brother, Alexander Sarria Cadenas, on 8 May 2018.

ground, Franco was apparently dragged along the ground by a group of "motorizados" who left him bleeding in a ditch. In the recording, the people dragging him can be heard saying: "This was what they wanted".

Orlando Pérez was killed as he was delivering water to the protesters. According to the death certificate, both were shot: Franco suffered severe trauma to the cranium and brain and Orlando was hit in the chest.

Franco's family told Amnesty International that they requested a forensic pathologist's report from the Institute of Forensic Medicine, but the police refused the request on the grounds that an ex officio investigation based on the hospital's files would be initiated. As Franco was dead on arrival at the hospital, no such hospital files existed. The family removed Franco's body from the morgue, following pressure from the police to take him home and bury him.

According to information received, the day after the deaths of the two men, a dozen people "cleaned up" the crime scene with buckets of water and hoses. Following public complaints actively pursued by the families of the young men, the Attorney General's Office agreed to the exhumation of the bodies. The family insisted that a private forensic pathologist be present during the exhumation and autopsy. On 10 May 2018, the date agreed for the result of the examination to be given to the family, the Attorney General's Office refused to hand over the opinion of forensic and ballistics experts and offered no explanation for this. Both families told Amnesty International that one of the preliminary conclusions of the independent forensic pathologist was that the firearms had probably been fired from a vantage point high up and that they were fired with the intent to kill. The relatives believe that the shots were fired from the Estelí town hall.

C) OBSTACLES TO ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND HARASSMENT OF VICTIMS' FAMILIES

It is up to the competent bodies to direct the investigation and to channel it in keeping with the strategies or lines of investigation that they have identified. This is the responsibility of the state and the victims or their next of kin should not have to take the initiative.⁶⁸ However, in at least six of the nine cases documented, the families reported that the prosecution was imposing the burden of investigation on them.

For example, in the case of Orlando Pérez, the family complained that the Attorney General's Office demanded that they find the witnesses and persuade them to make a statement, as well as look for photographs and videos of the events. In an interview with Amnesty International, Orlando's sister said that all the Attorney General Office had was the evidence that the family had provided.⁶⁹

Likewise, some families reported an alarming passivity and lack of interest on the part of the police authorities in the initial stages of the investigation and said that they were not even notified of some of the few actions taken. The family of Franco Valdivia, the young man murdered in Estelí, said that the authorities never informed them officially of their plans for a reconstruction of the crime scene and that they learned about it through friends.⁷⁰

"It is seven days since we lodged our respective complaints, but there's no sign of any progress in the investigation process that the National Police should already have started. We see no intention or desire to initiate an investigation".

Extract from the complaint filed by relatives before the office of the Departmental Prosecutor of the Estelí Public Prosecutor's Office, dated 27 April 2018.

These testimonies also reveal the lack of respect for the right of the family of the deceased to participate in the investigation process.⁷¹ The Inter-American Court has established that the victims of human rights violations or their relatives must have ample opportunities to be heard and act in the relevant processes.

⁶⁸ Inter-American Court, CASE OF VELIZ FRANCO ET AL. v. Guatemala, (Preliminary objections, merits, reparations and Costs) JUDGMENT OF MAY 19, 2014 Series C No. 277, para. 221.

⁶⁹ Amnesty International interview with Orlando Pérez' sister, Aracely Pérez, on 6 May 2018.

⁷⁰ Amnesty International interview with Franco Valdivia's sister, Francys Valdivia, 6 May 2018.

⁷¹ Inter-American Court, Case of the Ituango Massacres v. Colombia, Judgment of July 1, 2006, (Preliminary Objection, Merits, Reparations, and Costs), Series C No. 148, para. 296; see also, OHCHR, The Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016), The Revised United Nations Manual on the Effective, Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions, para. 35.

This includes making statements, receiving information, providing evidence, formulating allegations and asserting their interests.⁷²

In addition, at least three families were subjected to intimidation. The family of Moroni López were the victims of police harassment following his killing. According to their testimony, during the vigil, members of the National Police came to their house carrying guns and wearing hoods and questioned those present about why they were there. After that, the family noted more police patrols and visits.

"Uniformed officers came to the church while we were holding a vigil. They even came inside [...] and started asking questions [...] A few days later some men came to the house [...] they told me that they would pay me compensation, but that I had to sign a declaration. They never explained what their statement consisted of because I immediately told them: my son is not a dog, and I will not sign anything for money. You're the people that killed him."

Interview with Alba del Socorro García, mother of Moroni López

Álvaro Conrado's family complained that his uncle's mobile street stall was destroyed days after Álvaro's death. Álvaro's parents believe that the aim was to intimidate them and get them to drop their public complaint. Similarly, relatives of the journalist Ángel Gahona reported that they received a threatening call from a stranger regarding his killing.

International guidelines state that: "Family members should be protected from any ill-treatment, intimidation or sanction as a result of their participation in an investigation or their search for information concerning a deceased or disappeared person."⁷³

MORONI LÓPEZ: MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL POLICE ARRIVED AT HIS WAKE AND QUESTIONED SEVERAL OF THOSE PRESENT



Family of Moroni López, following interview with Amnesty International.
© Amnesty International

⁷² Inter-American Court, Case of Radilla Pacheco v. Mexico Judgment of November 23, 2009 (Preliminary objections, merits, reparations and Costs) Series C No. 209, para. 247. See also, Inter-American Court, Case of the "Street Children" (Villagran-Morales et al.) v. Guatemala, Judgment of November 19, 1999, Series C No. 77, para. 227.

⁷³ OHCHR, The Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016), The Revised United Nations Manual on the Effective, Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions, para. 36.

Moroni Jacob Lopez Garcia, aged 22, died on 20 April 2018 in the vicinity of the UNI. According to his family, several witnesses said that a hail of bullets came from the Denis Martín baseball stadium. When his family arrived at the Institute of Forensic Medicine a few hours later, the staff did not allow them to enter and they had to identify Moroni from a photo. Once the identity of the young man was confirmed, two relatives were allowed to enter just to pick up the body. They were not given the autopsy results or any other information.

In an interview with Amnesty International, Moroni's mother said that on the day of the funeral, 22 April, several National Police patrol cars arrived at the church where they were holding a vigil and began to question several of the relatives. Similarly, on 8 May, two people who identified themselves as representatives of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), offered her "compensation" in return for her signing a declaration, which she refused. She considered these visits to be intimidation to get her to drop her complaint.

On 9 May 2018, the family had still not been able to register Moroni's death in the civil registry at the Ciudad Sandino town hall because the mayor's office refused to write the full cause of death, as stated on the death certificate. According to the death certificate, Moroni died as a result of a projectile from a firearm penetrating his chest and causing cardiac tamponade and lacerations to the right lung and pulmonary artery.

Although the family filed a formal complaint on 27 April, more than a week later the Attorney General's Office had not requested footage from the surveillance cameras of the stadium from which the bullet that hit Moroni was believed to have been fired, nor had a ballistics analysis been requested. In addition the family feared that the statements contained in their complaint were the only testimonies obtained up to that point contained in the investigation file.

3.5. DENIAL OF MEDICAL ATTENTION

The rights to life and personal integrity are directly and closely linked with health care.⁷⁴

The UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials stipulate that law enforcement officials must ensure that assistance and medical aid are rendered to any person injured and that relatives or close friends of the injured or affected person should be notified at the earliest possible opportunity.⁷⁵ However, what happened in Nicaragua is far from what is required by international law. The testimonies documented show numerous instances when people seriously injured during the demonstrations did not receive assistance from nearby police officers.

During the night of 20 April 2018, several public hospitals such, as the Cruz Azul Hospital, the Alemán Hospital and the Lenin Fonseca Hospital, refused to treat injured protesters.⁷⁶ Amnesty International documented the case of Álvaro Conrado, aged 15, who died on 20 April at the Bautista Hospital after security personnel denied him access to the public Cruz Azul Hospital. Medical staff from the private

⁷⁴ Inter-American Court, Case of Vera Vera v. Ecuador, Judgment of May 19, 2011 (Preliminary Objections, Merits, Reparations and Costs), Series C No. 226, para. 43.

⁷⁵ Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, Principles 5 (c) and (d)

⁷⁶ Amnesty International interview with medical personnel at the Bautista Hospital in Managua, 7 May 2018.

hospital that treated him told the organization that if he had been treated earlier, his life might have been saved.

ÁLVARO CONRADO: DENIAL OF MEDICAL CARE



Álvaro Conrado holds a picture of his 15-year-old son, killed by a shot to the neck during a protest in Managua. © Óscar Navarrete/ Amnesty International

On 20 April 2018, 15-year-old Álvaro Conrado was shot in the neck as he was distributing water to protesters in Managua. According to the testimony of his relatives and medical staff at the Bautista Hospital where he was treated, he was first taken to the public Cruz Azul Hospital, but was refused treatment there. As a result, by the time he reached the Bautista Hospital, where he underwent surgery for four hours, his chances of survival were very slim. Álvaro Conrado was buried without an examination by a forensic pathologist; the bullet that killed him was not removed. On 25 April 2018, the police tried to prevent his family from filing a complaint for the murder of their son at the CENIDH and hours later his uncle's mobile food stall was destroyed. Álvaro's parents believe these actions were a threat in retaliation for their persistent complaints which were publicized in the media. They consider the response of the Attorney General's Office "a farce".

In the city of León, the press reported the visit of the Minister of Health, Sonia Castro, who together with the management of the Óscar Danilo Rosales Argüello School Hospital had threatened medical staff with expulsion from the public health system if they provided treatment to students and other protesters.⁷⁷

Several families described to Amnesty International "the ordeal" they had to go through to find their loved ones in hospitals. One of the relatives reported that he visited three hospitals to try and find his murdered relative.

⁷⁷ La Prensa, *Médicos se rebelan en el hospital de León e informan que atenderán a universitarios*, (Doctors in the hospital in León rebel and say that they will treat university students), 11 May 2018, Available at: <https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2018/05/11/departamentales/2417744-medicos-se-rebelan-en-el-hospital-de-leon-e-informan-que-atenderan-a-estudiantes>, (in Spanish), last visited 17 May 2018.

3.6. ATTEMPTS TO CONTROL THE PRESS

The Human Rights Committee considers that respect for freedom of expression and freedom of opinion "constitutes one of the cornerstones of a democratic society".⁷⁸ This right "includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."⁷⁹

There were repeated reports of censorship, attacks and threats against the media and journalists by riot police and pro-government armed groups during the protests. On 19 April 2018, the Nicaraguan Telecommunications Institute (Instituto Nicaragüense de Telecomunicaciones, Telecor), the 100% News Channel, Channel 12, Channel 23 and Channel 51 were pulled off air. In addition, a radio station in León, Radio Darío, was set on fire on 20 April. Its owner indicated government supporters were responsible for the fire.⁸⁰

ANÍBAL TORUÑO Y RADIO DARÍO: "DANIEL ORTEGA IS RESPONSIBLE FOR PUTTING OUR LIVES IN DANGER AND FOR WHAT HAPPENS TO US, BECAUSE THE THREATS AND PRESSURE CONTINUE"



Aníbal Toruño, director of Radio Darío, in the radio station which was burned down the night before this photo was taken in the context of the protests in the city of León. © Óscar Navarrete

In an interview with Amnesty International, Aníbal Toruño, director and owner of the radio station Radio Darío described how on 20 April 2018, around a dozen people wearing hoods threatened and injured the security guard and forced their way into the building. They then poured petrol all over the building before setting the radio station alight and setting off a mortar. Radio Darío, which is critical of the government, was founded by his father in 1949, which means that for Aníbal the radio station is more than a job. On at least five occasions, under different governments, the radio station has been attacked. That is why many people in the city of León, from where the station broadcasts, consider it a "symbol of resistance".

However, Aníbal told Amnesty International that this time it was "a terrorist act on an extraordinary scale", since "they burned the radio station down when there were still 12 people inside the building; they only just managed to get out alive." In the event, two of the attackers set themselves on fire when they let off the mortar used to set the building on fire and died as a result of extensive burns. In his public statements, Aníbal Toruño indicated that he recognized the two people as supporters of the ruling party and singled out a Sandinista deputy as directly responsible for the attack. He ended by sending a message to the government: "if anything happens to me, Daniel Ortega is responsible".

In addition, attempts to restrict freedom of expression resulted in physical attacks, threats and theft and damage to the audio and video recording equipment of the journalists covering the protests.

⁷⁸ Human Rights Committee, General comment No. 34 on Article 19 (Freedoms of opinion and expression), CCPR/C/GC/34, 12 September 2011.

⁷⁹ UN General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Resolution 217 A (III), 10 December 1948, Article 19.

⁸⁰ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Press Release, 24 April 2018. See also: Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights, CENIDH denuncia violaciones sistemáticas a los derechos humanos de los nicaragüenses por el régimen dictatorial de Daniel Ortega y Rosario Murillo, May 2018, p. 5.

On 18 April, several journalists were attacked while covering the protests. Carlos Herrera, from the digital newspaper El Confidencial, was assaulted by a National Police officer while reporting in the Camino de Oriente area. The officer knocked him down, kicked him several times and tried to steal his photographic equipment. Carlos was helped by fellow journalists and managed to protect his cameras. At the same protest, APF reporter Alfredo Zúñiga was attacked and his camera stolen by a member of a pro-government armed group⁸¹.

ÁNGEL GAHONA: KILLED WHILE BROADCASTING LIVE ABOUT THE PROTESTS



Ángel Gahona, with his journalist's camera in Bluefields. © Photo provided by family

On 21 April 2018, journalist Ángel Gahona died after being shot several times during a live broadcast about protests in the city of Bluefields. Seeing Ángel fall to the ground when a pellet pierced his skull almost live on screen shocked the country. The journalists' union condemned the killing of Ángel Gahona, stating that it was part of a government strategy to censor journalism, because apparently the only people armed at that time were the National Police and the riot police. On 30 April, Ángel's brother, Juan Carlos Gahona, filed a complaint with the Attorney General's Office. According to his testimony, the Attorney General's Office had not opened an investigation at that point and, regrettably, at the time of the interview with Amnesty International 13 days after the shooting, had yet to request even the images from the cameras at the cash point in front of which his brother was killed.

Days after filing his complaint, the Attorney General's Office charged two young people in connection with this crime.⁸² Ángel Gahona's relatives have serious doubts about this investigation by the police and the Attorney General's Office and believe that it is a strategy to conceal state responsibility.

It is important to highlight that in this case, the active role of reporter Ileana Lacayo was especially significant. Ileana Lacayo told Amnesty International that following her statement in the news media condemning the events and accusing the police of being responsible for the death of Ángel Gahona, her house was raided on 23 April 2018 by unidentified men, possibly in retaliation for her comments.⁸³ Fearing for her life and individual freedom, she filed a petition for protection (*amparo*) on 8 May before the Bluefields court against the Chief of the Bluefields National Police and the regional public prosecutor. In an interview with Amnesty International, Ileana said that she was afraid but did not want to be silent. "I feel vulnerable to police actions. I don't know why the police are killing us, but it must be denounced," she said.

Likewise, Julio López, a journalist with Onda Local, was attacked by members of pro-government armed groups while he was broadcasting live. As a result of blows to his face, back and head, he suffered short-term memory loss.⁸⁴ Photojournalist Óscar Navarrete of the newspaper *La Prensa* told Amnesty

⁸¹ Amnesty International interview with Carlos Herrera, a journalist at El Confidencial, 5 May 2018.

⁸⁴Amnesty International interview with Julio Lopez, journalist at Onda Local, 22 April 2018.

⁸⁴Amnesty International interview with Julio Lopez, journalist at Onda Local, 22 April 2018.

⁸⁴Amnesty International interview with Julio Lopez, journalist at Onda Local, 22 April 2018.

International that at least eight pieces of photographic equipment and two mobile phones were stolen from journalists by police officers and pro-government armed groups between 18 April and 12 May 2018.⁸⁵

Days later Ángel Gahona, a journalist with *Noticiero el Meridiano*, was killed while carrying out his work in the city of Bluefields. According to information obtained by Amnesty International, on 21 April, Ángel was hit by at least four pellets in various parts of the body (including the head), during a live broadcast on tensions sparked by riot police.⁸⁶ The journalist Ileana Lacayo reported that her home in Bluefields had been raided on 23 April, allegedly in reprisal for publicly singling out the police as responsible for the killing of Ángel Gahona.⁸⁷



Alfredo Zúñiga, a journalist with AFP is beaten by a member of a pro-government armed group in Managua. 18 April 2018. Photo: Jorge Torres/EFE

⁸⁵ Amnesty International interview with Óscar Navarrete, journalist with *La Prensa*, 12 and 18 May 2018.

⁸⁶ Amnesty International interview with Ángel Gahona's brother and cousin, Juan Carlos Gahona and Luis Gahona, 4 May 2018.

⁸⁷ Amnesty International interview with Ileana Lacayo, 22 April 2018.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Amnesty International has concluded that faced with the legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of expression, through protests in different parts of the country, the Nicaraguan government's response has been fundamentally unlawful and beset with serious human rights violations and even crimes under international law.

The organization has also concluded that the strategy adopted by the Nicaraguan authorities, which has resulted in, among other things, an alarming number of fatalities and serious injuries, was intended to punish dissenting voices, discourage further public criticism and cover up human rights violations and crimes under international law.

Following an analysis of the facts described in this report, Amnesty International considers that the elements of this repressive strategy were:

1. OFFICIAL DENIALS

Through various media outlets, the President and the Vice-President promoted a discourse of "denial" (that is, of remaining silent and denying what was clearly happening) and vilifying the protesters. This discourse not only denied and ignored the reality of the violence that was occurring under their direct command, specifically serious violations of human rights and crimes under international law, but also, in a context of social conflict, could have incited confrontations. At the highest levels of the Executive, both President Ortega and his wife, Vice-President Murillo, referred to groups of protesters as "violent", "criminals" and "vampires demanding blood", stigmatizing them as instigators of the violence. As the commander in chief, the President should have taken concrete and effective measures to put an end to the serious violations and crimes that were being committed by state agents or private individuals dependent on his consent. Such pronouncements are a clear indication that not only did he not do so, but instead justified their actions by criminalizing the demonstrators in his statements.

2. THE USE OF PRO-GOVERNMENT ARMED GROUPS

The information collected indicates that the authorities used pro-government armed groups to carry out attacks (sometimes armed), incite violence, increase their capacity for repression and operate outside the law. This strategy enabled them to sow fear in the population, impede the identification of the attackers and thereby generate a climate in which the government could evade responsibility.

3. EXCESSIVE USE OF FORCE

The alarming number of deaths and people injured indicates that the government used disproportionate, excessive and sometimes unnecessary force in responding to the protests, allowing demonstrators to be deliberately attacked. The evidence and patterns of behaviour analysed in this report indicate that National Police officers and riot police directly attacked demonstrators.

4. EXTRAJUDICIAL EXECUTIONS

Most of the fatalities during the protests were the result of firearm injuries, despite the fact that the use of such lethal weapons by state officials should only be authorized in the most extreme situations where there is an imminent threat to life. Eight of the nine fatalities documented by Amnesty International were the result of firearm injuries.

In addition, analysis of the points of entry of the bullets indicates that in many cases people were hit in parts of the body where the injury was most likely to prove fatal, indicating that there was an intention to shoot to kill. In the eight cases detailed in this report, people were shot in the head, neck or upper chest. In at least four cases, the trajectory of the bullets was downward, suggesting that they were fired by snipers or people shooting from a vantage point high up.

Amnesty International considers that these elements, taken together with the use of pro-government armed groups, would seem to indicate that the aim was to implement a policy of repression using lethal force; that is, that there was an intention not only to control those who were protesting, but rather to deprive political opponents and demonstrators, or those who were perceived as such, of life.

5. IRREGULARITIES IN THE INVESTIGATION

From the beginning of the investigation process, a string of irregularities was identified that had a direct impact on the future success of the investigation and therefore on access to truth and justice.

The state, by refusing to carry out autopsies in some cases, tried to prevent the bodies of the deceased from being examined by forensic pathologists who could determine key facts for the investigation. By putting pressure on several families to sign "notifications of withdrawal of complaint", state agents tried to prevent relatives from going to the Attorney General's Office to request that a formal criminal investigation be initiated and impede the start of the necessary process to bring those responsible to justice.

There were a number of irregularities that seriously affected the thoroughness of the investigation, including the lack of due diligence in the collecting the evidence and in securing the scene of the crime appropriately (where possible), as well as the failure to ensure the chain of custody.

These irregularities, taken together with the harassment and threats against some of the victims' families to discourage them from pursuing their search for justice, are tantamount to a violation of the families' right to truth, justice and reparation.

6. DENIAL OF MEDICAL ATTENTION

Several public hospitals denied access to people injured in the protests for at least a day, during which time several people died and dozens were injured. This decision was taken with the intention of affecting the physical integrity of the demonstrators. In at least one of the cases documented by Amnesty International, the lack of medical treatment was a significant contributing factor in the person's death.

7. ATTEMPTS TO CONTROL THE PRESS

Several channels covering these events were prevented from broadcasting and there were targeted attacks on journalists by pro-government armed groups and police in an attempt by the state to conceal or downplay citizens' demands and to cover up the human rights abuses and violations committed by the National Police, riot police and pro-government armed groups acting with their acquiescence. Amnesty International documented several cases of attacks on journalists during the protests and considers that the control and harassment of the press in such contexts is often used as a way of imposing the official version of events, restricting access to the information and limiting freedom of expression.

Consequently, Amnesty International makes the following recommendations:

TO THE PRESIDENT OF NICARAGUA

- Guarantee and respect the right to freedom of expression and peaceful public protest of those who use demonstrations to condemn and comment on public policies.
- Implement effective measures to ensure that police forces immediately stop the excessive use of force and open an internal investigation into instances of violent repression where police officers are reported to have used unnecessary or excessive force against demonstrators.
- Ensure that members of the police refrain from acts that constitute intimidation, harassment and reprisals against the families of the victims and human rights defenders.
- Stop using language that stigmatizes and criminalizes those who protest against public policies and guarantee the protection of human rights defenders and journalists.

TO THE PUBLIC PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE

- Initiate prompt, impartial, independent and thorough investigations into cases of possible extrajudicial executions and other human rights violations, including those allegedly committed by pro-government armed groups.

These investigations must include not only those who committed or ordered the crimes, but also their accomplices. In other words, judicial investigations should include officials who knew or should have known that their subordinates were committing such acts and did nothing to stop or restrain them. In the case of acts attributable to police officers, investigations should cover any senior police officer or other person with responsibility in the chain of command who knew, or should have known, that the police forces were committing or were going to commit such crimes, directly or through third parties, and did nothing to prevent the crime or bring the suspects to the attention of the authorities.

- Ensure due diligence in the gathering of evidence, secure the scene of the crime appropriately and guarantee the chain of custody.
- Guarantee the effective participation of the victims and their families in the investigation process, in accordance with international standards.

TO THE INSTITUTE OF FORENSIC MEDICINE

- Ensure that the forensic pathologists involved in investigations act with independence and impartiality and in line with best forensic practices, including those set out in the Minnesota Protocol.⁸⁸

In the case of arbitrary killings or extrajudicial executions, the Institute of Forensic Medicine must perform autopsies and issue pathologists' reports.

TO THE JUDICIAL AUTHORITIES

- Guarantee the independence and impartiality of judges so that they can exercise their functions free of any interference, pressure or undue influence.

⁸⁸ OHCHR, The Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016), Revised version of the 1991 United Nations Manual on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions.

TO THE NICARAGUAN STATE

- Comply with the IACHR recommendations in the context of its recent working visit and establish, together with the IACHR, a follow-up mechanism to monitor the implementation of these recommendations.
- In some circumstances, states have created special mechanisms to fulfil their duty to investigate criminal acts. Having documented serious obstacles in the investigations for this report, Amnesty International urges the Nicaraguan state to promptly create a special investigation commission in relation to the acts of violence which have taken place, as recommended by the IACHR.

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SHOOT TO KILL

NICARAGUA'S STRATEGY TO REPRESS PROTEST

Amnesty International considers that the Nicaraguan authorities implemented and maintained a strategy of repression, sometimes intentionally involving loss of life, throughout the weeks of protest in April and May 2018.

In this report, Amnesty International documents how the government not only used excessive force in the context of the protests, but possibly carried out extrajudicial executions in conjunction with pro-government armed groups (*parapoliciales*). Amnesty International identified the use of firearms by the police and these groups, and confirmed indiscriminate attacks against protesters.

The alarming number of deaths, the majority of which were caused by firearm shots to parts of the body where the injury was most likely to prove fatal (such as the head, neck or upper chest), indicates that there was an intention to shoot to kill on the part of the security forces. In addition, Amnesty International identified possible acts of concealment and obstruction in investigations to cover up the grave violations committed by the state.

Finally, in order to advance this repressive strategy, the government attempted to censor media outlets, promoted an official discourse of denial of the repression and its consequences and vilified protesters.