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LASA urges the Nicaraguan government to stop repression against protesters

Nicaragua is in crisis. The brutal repression unleashed against the protests that sprouted up organically across the country on April 18, 2018 following the announcement of social security reforms by the government resulted in an enormous human toll: scores of persons wounded, killed (estimates reach 100 dead since last April¹, including young students and a journalist killed live on camera while reporting), many others disappeared, illegally detained, and tortured during their imprisonment, and a population at large terrorized by the threat of indiscriminate violence.

The Nicaraguan people have remained defiant in the face of the most violent repression the country has experienced in decades. We share their pain at the enormous human and civic toll that has ensued. We are saddened and aghast at the violence unleashed on citizens exercising their right to protest. We mourn for the fallen and their families, and for those whose relatives are still missing.

As academics who have spent our careers researching Central America and working with the people of Nicaragua, we want to express our profound concern for the extreme violations of basic human rights that have occurred in Nicaragua. No government should violently repress its own citizens for expressing their opinions, nor should it try to prevent the press from covering such protests.

We are especially concerned by the attacks on university campuses and the repression of university students. As in the US, where young protesting against police violence under the banner of Black Lives Matter were decried as “thugs,” Nicaraguan student protesters were accused of being “delinquents” and gang members. Those young Nicaraguans who have taken to the streets or staged takeovers of their campuses are the heirs of the Sandinista youth who fought against the Somoza regime to build a better future for their country. Like those who came before them, we hope the sacrifices of this new generation will not be in vain.

¹ Robles, Frances. *Nicaragua Protests Grow Increasingly Violent, 100 Killed Since April*. The New York Times. May 31, 2018. Online version.

As recently as this year Nicaragua was hailed as a notable exception to the violence that continued to plague its Central American neighbors long after the end of the civil wars of the 1980s. Unlike countries like Honduras and El Salvador, Nicaragua appeared to have avoided the scourge of *mano dura* policing and boasted the lowest homicide rate in Central America. This reputation has been indelibly tarnished as a result. Nicaragua now joins Honduras in the category of countries where citizens face violent reprisals from their own government for protesting against its policies.

The only way that this damage can begin to be repaired is by a thorough accounting of the violence. We therefore urge the Nicaraguan government to:

- stop the repression of peaceful protest.
- permit a thorough and impartial investigation of the violence.
- punish state agents (and others) found to be responsible for violence.
- release any remaining political prisoners.
- engage in good faith in the planned national dialogue with civil society.
- ensure the physical safety of students, faculty, and university staff, and respect the integrity of university campuses.

We hasten to add that these measures should be carried out at the initiative of the Nicaraguan people and their constituted representatives. Given the long and tragic history of US imperialism in Central America, and the many regional problems that have their roots in foreign interventions, we are well aware of the need to respect Nicaragua's sovereignty. That, however, does not preclude criticism of government-condoned violence against unarmed protesters.

It is with profound sadness that we write this. Nicaragua was once a beacon of hope to many across the world committed to social justice. We sincerely hope it can become so again.

About LASA

With more than half a century of history and already exceeding 12,000 members, the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) is the largest professional association in the world that brings together individuals and institutions dedicated to the study of Latin America from a multidisciplinary perspective. The mission of LASA is to foster intellectual debate, research and teaching about Latin America, the Caribbean and its people; promote the interests of its members and encourage civic engagement through networking and exchanging ideas.