We must keep our promise to Nicaraguan exiles | Opinion. By Lynn Northcutt Vega, *South Florida SunSentinal*, 28 Oct. 2026



The Spanish word for “Murderer” covers a mural of Nicaragua’s President Daniel Ortega, as part of anti-government protests demanding his resignation in Managua, Nicaragua, May 26, 2018. The Inter-American Human Rights Court declared the government of Nicaragua in contempt of court Tuesday, Nov. 29, 2022, for ignoring its rulings on political prisoners.

In February 2023, 222 Nicaraguans boarded an airplane in Managua, uncertain what awaited them in the United States. They were political prisoners whose opposition to Daniel Ortega’s authoritarian government had cost them their freedom.



These were not ordinary travelers. They included presidential contenders, journalists, religious and private sector leaders, students and human rights defenders imprisoned for challenging Ortega. Upon their departure, they were branded traitors, stripped of their citizenship, stripped of their assets, and banished from their homeland.

Lynn Northcutt Vega is a retired career foreign service officer. (courtesy, Lynn Northcutt Vega)

The United States arranged the flight that brought them to Washington's Dulles International Airport. It was an extraordinary diplomatic and humanitarian operation, offering some of Nicaragua's most courageous advocates for democracy a chance to rebuild their lives.

Some were people I had known decades earlier, when I worked in the U.S. Embassy in Managua and lived with my family in my then-husband's hometown of Masaya. Others I have come to know since their arrival. Several have participated in discussions with a well-known Latin America and Caribbean group I co-chair in Washington, sharing their experiences of imprisonment, persecution and forced exile.

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Their stories and my ongoing conversations with them painfully connect the Nicaragua I knew more than three decades ago with the country it has become.

Today, some members of that same group have been detained by U.S. immigration authorities, and at least one has been deported. Others face possible removal from the country that once welcomed them.

Human Rights Watch reported Oct. 2 that seven members of the original group had been detained, some with pending asylum applications. One was deported to Honduras, despite concerns about the reach of Nicaragua's government into neighboring countries.

When I arrived in Nicaragua in 1991, the country was emerging from revolution, civil war and economic devastation. Violeta Chamorro had defeated Ortega in a historic election. Exiles were returning home. Former enemies were learning to work together. There was tremendous optimism.

I worked alongside Nicaraguans to build democratic institutions, improve local government, support civil society, and expand education and economic opportunity.

We believed democracy could take root and endure.

Thirty-five years later, much of what Nicaraguans worked so hard to build has been dismantled.

Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, have consolidated control over the courts, electoral authorities, legislature and other institutions. Independent journalists have been silenced or forced into exile. Civic organizations and universities have been closed. Political opponents have been imprisoned, expelled or stripped of their nationality.

The repression continues. Reuters reported on Oct. 14 that families are desperately searching for relatives who have disappeared into state custody. United Nations experts have documented 161 cases of enforced disappearance since the government's crackdown began in 2018.

And Nicaragua's repression no longer stops at its borders.

The U.N. Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights have documented surveillance, threats, harassment and violence against Nicaraguan political exiles and their families. Even those who escaped Ortega's prisons may remain within the regime's reach. This should be particularly troubling to Floridians, whose communities include Nicaraguans who fled persecution and rebuilt their lives in the United States.

There is a troubling contradiction in American policy. The Trump administration has sanctioned Nicaraguan officials for repression while American immigration authorities have detained some of the very people who resisted that repression.

The United States should enforce its immigration laws. But those laws must be enforced consistently along with our obligations to protect people from persecution or torture, including when removal to a third country could expose them to such harm or lead to their forcible return to Nicaragua. My years in Nicaragua taught me a difficult lesson. We helped build institutions, strengthen courts, and empower citizens. Those accomplishments were real. But we made a fundamental mistake when we confused progress with permanence.

While international attention shifted, Ortega pursued a decades-long strategy of consolidating political power. The institutions remained, but their independence gradually disappeared.

Democracy, I learned, has no finish line. It requires independent institutions, the rule of law, and people willing to defend them, sometimes at enormous personal cost.

The Nicaraguans who boarded that American plane in 2023 had already paid that price. Now, some face losing that freedom again, not at the hands of Ortega's government, but through the actions of the country that rescued them.

The United States cannot single-handedly restore Nicaragua's democracy. But we can decide how America treats those who sacrificed their freedom trying to preserve it.

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