

Daniel Ortega's most wanted: Nicaragua's exiles in Costa Rica

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This project was produced by [Dawning](#), an organization devoted to investigative journalism. It is an independent effort, self-funded, non-partisan and non-ideological, in the tradition of journalism in the public interest.

Forty years ago, Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo hid together in safe houses around Costa Rica's capital while waiting for the imminent fall of the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza. Today, [thousands of their exiled compatriots hide in the same city](#), San José, awaiting the fall of the presidential couple.



- Food and secondhand clothing from the US are distributed to Nicaraguan refugees at this refugee center in San José.

Nicaraguan exiles come from every walk of life. All of them have one thing in common: if they returned home, they say they would be arrested, tortured or killed. They are some of Ortega's most wanted.



- Nicaraguans wait to apply for asylum. As of March 2019, almost 30,000 have formally filed asylum applications. According to the UNHCR, ‘with reception capacity overstretched, 26,000 others are waiting to have their claims formalized’.



Víctor Barrantes, Costa Rica’s vice-minister of government and police, says “the government has no concrete evidence that would suggest that Nicaraguan paramilitary or counter-intelligence groups are operating in our country. However, we are investigating, as we do receive complaints.” In this project, based on more than 50 interviews over a four-month period in San José and Managua, we hear their voices and see their faces, as they recount their wounds and hopes in the midst of great uncertainty.

‘I don’t want to die in exile’



- Dr Estrada, 60, in the garage bedroom he shares with four other exiled Nicaraguans in San José.

When the protests began in April 2018, Dr Estrada left his job to serve as a medic in a makeshift clinic in his native Monimbó, [an emblematic locale since the Sandinista revolution](#). “We used restaurant tables, a tent and some stretchers. In 88 days, we treated about 2,000 people. We hardly slept. But it felt good to serve my town.” On 17 July 2018, government forces regained control of Monimbó, and Dr Estrada walked for six days towards the Costa Rican border. “I received money to maintain the barricades, and now the government is accusing me of funding terrorism.”

Unable to find a job in San José, Dr Estrada lives off donations. “It’s a slow but sure death if I continue here. I don’t want to die in exile without seeing my family again. Ortega is destroying us.”



- A street scene in Monimbó. On 17 July 2018, Monimbó was taken and its barricades removed by government forces. At least four people died, and dozens were injured.



- Remnants of recent violence inside a home in Monimbó.

'The government offered us \$5,000 per kill'



- A former Nicaraguan police officer, who was captured and taken to El Chipote prison.

“Vice-President Murillo issued an order offering us \$5,000 per kill during the protests. But I refused to participate in that massacre.” The 35-year old officer spoke on condition of anonymity. After refusing orders, he was captured and taken to El Chipote prison in Managua in April 2018. “Everyone was naked and crying.” Over 16 days he was raped and mutilated and, suffered electroshocks to his genitals. Three

toenails were removed, his jaw dislocated, and two teeth yanked out. “They took me and four others, threw us into Tiscapa lagoon and shot at us. I don’t know where I got the strength from, but I started running.”

He was found by students. After recovering in Jinotega, he and his wife crossed the border. He is undergoing psychological treatment.

“San José is infested with Nicaraguan intelligence. I don’t want to live in fear, but I can’t sleep at night.”

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‘Nicaraguan exiles have major psychological problems’



- Ricardo Pineda, 55, was a doctor at a private clinic in Managua before becoming a nationally renowned figure for [providing medical assistance to student protesters](#).

“I suddenly saw many hospitals closing their doors to injured students. That made the protests very personal to me.”

Ricardo was one of the doctors at the Divine Mercy Church which was [besieged for 18 hours by pro-government militias](#) when student rebels took shelter there. “I recorded a video inside the church, and within minutes it spread all over Nicaragua. I began receiving death threats via text, including one that said: ‘We’re giving 50,000 córdobas to whoever kills the doctor.’”

“As soon as we left the church, I started heading to the Costa Rican border.” Ricardo is not allowed to practice in San José, but he still volunteers to help newly arrived Nicaraguans. “Some people come here badly wounded, many raped. The government uses rape as a weapon of war. Nicaraguan exiles have major psychological problems.”

'I was convicted of false charges'



- Raúl Oporta, 53, praying inside La Merced church in San José.

Raúl Oporta was an active community leader in Boaco. He founded a new political party called Citizens for Freedom soon before the protests, during which he established himself as a logistical leader. Raúl was arrested while sitting on his front porch. He was charged with damages against state property – which he denies – and was put on trial.

“The witnesses appointed by the prosecutors and police did not want to show up in court to incriminate me because they knew it was all false.”

In December 2018, only one witness testified, a neighbor. “I am convinced he was coerced to lie. With just one witness, I was convicted and sentenced to two years in prison. During recess, I fled.” Disguised as a priest, he escaped to [Costa Rica](#) on a motorcycle. In San José, Raúl participates in political meetings of exiles to organize and discuss the future of Nicaragua.



- Raúl Oporta showing the original court documents that sentenced him to two years in prison.

Oporta's restaurant business in [Nicaragua](#), currently managed by his wife, was recently denied the renewal of its alcohol license. The official letter from the Nicaraguan police states that they "will not authorize business permits for people who participated and were investigated for their actions in the failed coup", and affirms that Raúl "wants to use his business as a meeting point with the sole goal of continuing his terrorist acts".

'I am optimistic'



- Carlos Fernando Chamorro, 62, at Teletica studios in San José, where he works as an independent journalist.

The most renowned journalist in Nicaragua, [Chamorro went into exile in Costa Rica in January](#) after [police raided the offices of Confidencial](#), of which he is founder and editor. “We filed a lawsuit against the government for robbing us during our broadcasts of the protests. Shortly after, I appeared as one of the first names on a notice of capture. But I’ve been persecuted these last 10 years. There is massive repression of news channels in Nicaragua.”

In San José, Chamorro continues working on stories, now broadcast via YouTube. “I am optimistic about the crisis resolving itself through political means. But a quick exit isn’t just going to fall from the sky. We need the international community to reach a negotiation with or without Ortega.”

‘Ortega has tried to silence us, but we’re reporting from here’



- Leticia Gaitán, 29, preparing to record a news segment at the provisional studio she has set up in San José with some colleagues from 100% Noticias, the independent news channel that was closed down by the Nicaraguan government.

Leticia, one of the most visible faces in the channel, covered the protests since April and, on multiple occasions, was assaulted and had equipment confiscated or broken.



- The office of 100% Noticias in Managua, closed and permanently guarded by the police since 21 December.

While traveling to cover protests in Ticuantepe in June, her station van was intercepted. “They ransacked our vehicle and stole everything. The entire time they held an AK-47 to my head and whispered lewd sexual comments in my ear.”

Today, the building of 100% Noticias is still guarded by armed police, and Miguel Mora, owner, and Lucía Pineda, news director, were accused of “terrorism” but [released from prison in June](#).

“Ortega has tried to silence us, but we continue reporting from here.”



- Managua, Nicaragua. Canal 12 continues its broadcasts under threats.

In January 2019, the government asked Canal 12 to stop broadcasting all programs by Carlos Fernando Chamorro. That same month, more than 30 police officers entered the studio and asked journalists to present their identification.

'Violence will not solve this crisis'



- Rafael Solís, 65, at a coffee shop in San Jose.

Rafael Solís was considered one of Ortega's closest allies for decades, but his public renunciation letter described Nicaragua as a "dictatorship". Solís championed the controversial [legal modifications to allow Ortega to run for re-election in 2011](#).

"I made a mistake", says Solís. "Nicaragua needs a profound judicial reform, or even a new constitution. And we need a truth commission to investigate everything that happened since April 2018."

Solís is hopeful about the opportunities for dialogue. "Violence will not solve this crisis. We need dialogue. But Ortega has to free all political prisoners. We need to be patient."

This is the first time Solís has been photographed in a public space in Costa Rica. "I take precautions here, but I am not afraid. I risked my life against Somoza's dictatorship. I have faith."

'We are interrupting Costa Rica's democracy'



- Nemesio Mejía, 43, is one of the leaders of Nicaragua's largest farmer movement.

"Many farmers have been killed in the past six years. What happened in April 2018 is not new to us – Ortega's regime has consistently tried to silence us. He has sold our land to the Chinese."

Nemesio was responsible for the national coordination of the farmers' barricades.

"We faced a lot of crises because we had different views on how to approach the protests. We don't agree with violence." In July, with his town under heavy attack, Nemesio fled.

"We lost many people that day. I don't know if they're alive, dead or in jail." Nemesio's wife and children joined him in Costa Rica, but he only sees them twice a month.

"This is not a safe exile for me. I know they're trying to kill me. In a way, we are interrupting Costa Rica's democracy, because Nicaragua is sending paramilitaries after us. Part of the Nicaraguan conflict is now here."

'My child was dead inside me for a week'



- María Alejandra Castillo, 20, with her mother, boyfriend and other family members in downtown San José.

In July, she was three weeks pregnant when police attacked the campus of Nicaragua's National Autonomous University (Unan), where she served as logistics manager for all 89 days of protests. "We cooked, showered and slept on campus. At night we played cards and sang songs." For two months, María hid in three secret safe houses until her capture in late September. She was taken to El Chipote, dressed in blue prison clothes, and presented to the press by the police.

"It was a total charade. I suddenly was all over the media as a dangerous delinquent." In prison, María slept on the floor and was beaten regularly. She was denied medical attention until an ultrasound revealed her child had died. "My child was dead inside me for a week."

She was released but continued being harassed by government forces. Soon after, María arrived in Costa Rica with her mother, exactly three weeks after her 20th birthday.

'I pretended to faint because I knew they would kill me'



- Jonas Cruz, 18, at the apartment he shares with five other exiled Nicaraguan students in San José.

During the first week of protests in April, Jonas, who studied civil engineering, witnessed the deaths of 14 fellow students. “I suddenly saw myself in the middle of a war. I had never seen someone die before. I wasn’t ready.”

In early May, [he joined the barricades at the Unan](#), where he stayed for 77 days. “It was beautiful to see the whole city unite and support one another.” Jonas was arrested and taken to El Chipote prison. “They threw me into a cell. I was tortured every day by four masked policemen. They used electric shocks and a baseball bat. I never received food or water. I lost consciousness several times during the interrogations. On the fifth day, I pretended to faint because I knew my torturers would kill me. Luckily, they sent me to a hospital. I had four fractured ribs.”

Jonas escaped the hospital and took refuge in a safe house until he crossed the border, still wearing a bandage around his ribs. “I am free here, but it’s very hard to survive in Costa Rica.”

‘We won’t have peace without justice’



- Dr Álvaro Leiva, 55, assisting two newly-arrived Nicaraguan journalists at the office of the Nicaraguan Association for Human Rights in San José.

“I have been documenting the human rights violations committed by my government since the 1990s. During the first week of protests, I submitted an official report to the public ministry of Nicaragua, pointing to specific officials responsible for the deaths of 42 young people. We also know the government purposefully obscured its public morgue records during the protests.”

Two months later, Leiva received a call from a friend informing him the government had filed papers declaring him a terrorist and ordering his capture.

“He told me: ‘Álvaro, you need to run’.” He fled to Costa Rica with his team of human rights defenders. “I picked up dead bodies from both sides. I don’t defend parties, I defend humans. But it’s hard to remain impartial. We won’t have peace without justice.”

‘Terror has not stopped’

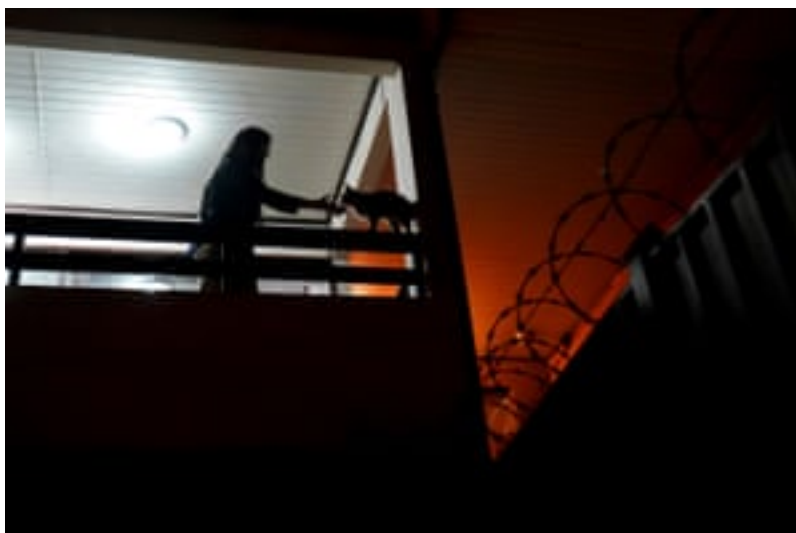


- Vilma Núñez, 81, is an activist and the president of the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (Cenidh), one of the NGOs whose legal registration was canceled by the national assembly in December 2018.

“The police entered our office at night and stole everything we had. After that, many of our colleagues left the country horrified. But I decided to stay in Managua.”

Vilma says that Cenidh is rebuilding. “Terror has not stopped. People are still imprisoned, tortured and disappeared here. Our prisons are torture centers. Our fear is not pathological: it’s real fear. The government is crushing our ability to fight. Meanwhile, our exiles in Costa Rica are facing a humanitarian crisis.”

‘I am not free yet’



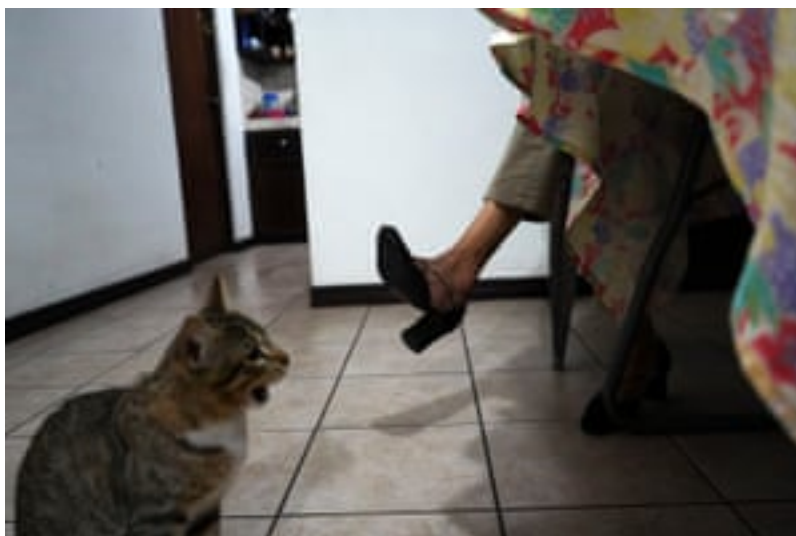
- Zoilamérica Ortega Murillo, 51, the daughter of the presidential couple, who [accused President Ortega of sexual abuse in 1998](#), at her home in San José.

“I am not free yet. Nicaraguan exiles live like prisoners in Costa Rica. We’re trapped in a system of constant persecution. I fear for my life on the street. My mother called me three months ago to threaten me again after years of silence. If I return to Nicaragua, I am sure I would disappear.”



- Zoilamérica at home with her youngest son.

After six years in Costa Rica, the government has not yet granted her refugee status. The embassy of Nicaragua refuses to renew her passport. “I am changing homes constantly for my own safety. But without refugee status I cannot travel outside of the country.”



Zoilamérica also opened up about her father. “Ortega is dominated by fear. Losing power would mean death for him. That’s why he’s so dangerous. To be judged for his crimes would be his biggest nightmare.”



Photographs, interviews, and transcripts by Jorge Cabrera, Juan Carlos Ulate, Ana Acosta, Mees van der Werf, Diego Rivera, Alberto Molina, M Sawyer Ballance, Rafe H Andrews, Raúl Román, Joey Rosa, Norman Fitoria and Nick Parisse.