

Exiled priest says Sandinistas trying to silence Church

By Bill Pritchard

Washington (NC) — One of two Nicaraguan Catholic clergymen recently exiled from their country said the Sandinista government is trying to silence the Church.

Speaking through an interpreter, Monsignor Bismarck Carballo said that his exile and that of Bishop Pablo Antonio Vega of Juigalpa Prelature are part of an overall pattern of pressure on the Nicaraguan Church.

That pressure began in 1981 with a ban on televised Masses and has continued through the expulsion of 17 priests, the closing of the Catholic radio station, the seizure of a Church publication, and the priests' expulsions, he said in a July 8 interview with members of the Catholic press. The interview was held in the residence of Archbishop James A. Hickey of Washington.

Monsignor Carballo, head of communications for the Archdiocese of Managua, Nicaragua, was denied re-entry to his country June 28 as he returned from a Paris conference aimed at reconciling Nicaragua's internal conflict. Bishop Vega was expelled July 4 by the Nicaraguan government which accused him of backing the Reagan administration in its support for Nicaraguan rebels.

The monsignor said he believes that Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo of Managua may himself be subjected to some government action.

He said the exilings and church-state



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Monsignor Bismarck Carballo

tensions are obstacles to the cardinal's relations with bishops in other countries. If the cardinal were to visit another country, he might not be allowed to return home, the monsignor said.

The monsignor said he asked the Vatican Embassy in Washington, the U.S. bishops' conference and Archbishop Hickey for help in returning home.

National Catholic News Service learned

that a delegation from the bishops' conference staff met with Nicaragua's ambassador to the United States, Carlos Tunnermann, about Monsignor Carballo's case.

The monsignor said he has received no official notice from the Nicaraguan government of the reasons for his exile.

He said his only information came from officials of the Salvadoran-run airline which was to fly him from Miami to Managua. The monsignor said that when he attempted to confirm his reservation June 28, the officials said they had been ordered not to bring him to Nicaragua.

On Jan. 2, the government closed the Managua archdiocesan radio station, Radio Catolica, which Monsignor Carballo directs, for failing to broadcast a New Year's speech by President Daniel Ortega. The monsignor said the failure was a technician's error.

Last October, the government seized the first issue of Iglesia, an archdiocesan publication. The government said the publication was not properly registered, and government supporters alleged that it contained sensitive military information.

Monsignor Carballo said July 8 that the publication had the required clearance. The only military-related material was a denunciation of the drafting of 11 seminarians last September, he said.

He said the Paris conference he attended in June sought means of resolving the conflict involving Nicaragua's church, state and counterrevolutionaries or contras.

He said it was a preliminary effort to

"establish a dialogue between Nicaraguans" but did not aim at reaching a final agreement.

Monsignor Carballo said that although the government was invited to send a representative to the conference, arranged by an adviser to French President Francois Mitterand, none appeared.

On the contrary, Monsignor Carballo said the Church is at the "service of (all) the people" in Nicaragua. He compared the church's position in the struggle between the government and the rebels to a mother whose two sons are fighting with knives. She wants them to be reconciled, he said, but cannot disarm one for fear the other will stab him.

Monsignor Carballo said there is always "Christian hope" that the two will reconcile.

Pope John Paul II, at the beginning of his July 1-7 trip to Colombia, called the action against the monsignor a "problem of human rights."

He had stronger words July 5 concerning Bishop Vega's expulsion, saying it offended "the requirements of liberty" and violated "a man's and a citizen's basic rights." The pope, who was described as visibly angry, said the action contradicted Nicaragua's stated "desire for peaceful and respectful coexistence with the church."

The U.S. State Department said June 30 that Monsignor Carballo's exile "demonstrates the isolation of the regime from the people of Nicaragua and its hostility toward the Church and toward freedom of expression and freedom of thought."

Situation termed tense

Pope, U.S. Church leaders protest bishop's expulsion from Nicaragua

By NC News Service

Pope John Paul II, and other Catholic Church leaders, as well as the Reagan administration, protested Nicaragua's expulsion of a Catholic bishop accused by the Sandinista-led government of supporting U.S.-backed rebel forces.

During a visit to Colombia, the pope called the expulsion of Bishop Pablo Antonio Vega, head of the prelature of Juigalpa, Nicaragua, "quite incredible."

Bishop James W. Malone, head of the U.S. bishops' conference, said recent banishment of Nicaraguan Church leaders reflected "a new and dangerously repressive policy" toward the Church. Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston and Archbishop James Hickey of Washington also telegraphed their disapproval of the action.

White House spokesman Larry Speakes accused the Nicaraguan government July 7 of trying to eliminate its opposition.

On July 6, after a two-day emergency meeting in Managua, the Nicaraguan capital, the country's bishops expressed "solidarity with and appreciation for" Bishop Vega, while the head of the conference, Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo of Managua, called the situation "very tense."

Bishop Vega, conference vice president, was expelled July 4 after government officials accused him of violating Nicaraguan law by supporting U.S.-backed counter-revolutionaries, or contras.

The bishop was granted asylum in neighboring Honduras.

Father Ernesto Cardenal, Nicaragua's minister of culture, said Bishop Vega's hands "are bathed in the blood of all Nicaraguan war victims." Father Cardenal, prohibited by the Vatican from performing his priestly ministry because he refused to resign his government post, said Bishop Vega had "turned into a Judas."

In a statement at the end of an ordination Mass in Medellin, Colombia, July 4, Pope John Paul said Bishop Vega's expulsion offended "the requirements of liberty" and violated "a man's and a citizen's basic rights." He said he hoped "those responsible for the decision rethink its gravity."

Vatican sources said the pope was "indignant" and "depressed" after learning of the expulsion and that he directed aides to keep on top of the situation.

The Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, called the bishop's expulsion "one of the gravest acts of persecution that can take place in the life of the Church."

In a telegram to Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, U.S. bishops' conference president Bishop James W. Malone said: "I strongly protest your government's action in expelling Bishop Pablo Antonio Vega from Nicaragua."

Bishop Malone said the incident, combined with the June 28 banishment of Monsignor Bismarck Carballo, head of communications for the Archdiocese of Managua, represents "a new and dangerously repressive policy" toward the Church.

The bishop also sent a telegram to Cardinal Obando Bravo, assuring him of the U.S. bishops' "continued support in the face of these repressive actions and our prayers that the Nicaraguan government will reconsider and reverse the dangerously ill-advised policy it has apparently adopted toward the Church."

On June 28, Monsignor Carballo was refused re-entry in Nicaragua when he tried to board a flight from Miami. He remains in the United States.

In a carefully balanced statement, the superior general of the Maryknoll Missionaries, Father William M. Boteler, said the expulsion of Bishop Vega "can only lead to a hardening of positions by both sides in the besieged nation."

"It is difficult to see how this action and the earlier banning of the Rev. Bismarck Carballo can serve the needs of the Nicaraguan people," he said.

Father Boteler also said the order "joins the U.S. bishops in opposing U.S. military action against Nicaragua. We echo the Nicaraguan bishops' cry: 'Enough blood and death! The spilt blood of so many Nicaraguans cries out to heaven!'"

In a meeting with U.N. Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar in New York Jan. 21, Cardinal Obando Bravo asked for help in dealing with "persecution" of the Church by the government.

During the meeting, he quoted a December letter from the Nicaraguan bishops to Ortega, alleging threats against foreign priests said by the government to "meddle in politics," interrogation of Nicaraguan priests by police, pressures — including imprisonment — to make the laity "collaborate as informers" — against the Church, "harassment of Church institutions," forcing Catholics to "sign documents containing falsehoods and calumnies against the honor of Church persons", and "harsh censorship."

Prior to the actions against Bishop Vega and Monsignor Carballo, some Church observers had seen signs of a thaw in Nicaraguan church-state relations. They cited the pope's June 19 meeting at the Vatican with Nicaragua's vice president, the Nicaraguan bishops' Easter pastoral letter which criticized all foreign military aid to the country, and the bishops' unprecedented June commentary on a draft of the nation's proposed constitution.

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