



Integrated Country Strategy

NICARAGUA

FOR PUBLIC RELEASE

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1. Chief of Mission Priorities

In November 2021, President Ortega and Vice-President Murillo awarded themselves a fourth consecutive term in office through a manipulated, fraudulent electoral process that confirmed Nicaragua's status as a dynastic police state. The regime and the ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) have for years worked to supplant Nicaragua's democratic institutions with pliant replicas, twist the rule of law to their benefit, and quash independent media and civil society organizations. Nicaragua's descent into dictatorship and cultivation of authoritarian allies like Cuba, Venezuela, Russia, and Iran have jeopardized not only the security and prosperity of Nicaraguans, but also of their neighbors in Central America. Resultant irregular migration surges and the permissive environment for transnational crime also threaten other fundamental U.S. interests in the region.

Consistent with our global efforts to bolster democratic governance in the face of advancing authoritarian threats, the U.S. remains committed to helping Nicaraguans recover their democratic rights and put their country back on a path of increasing prosperity, security, and respect for the rule of law. Credible independent polling shows an overwhelming majority of Nicaraguans want such change and share our fundamental values, even while the Ortega-Murillo regime does not. This is not surprising, given the deep and longstanding historical, commercial, cultural, and human connections between Nicaragua and the United States. Building on these enduring bonds, we will 1) collaborate with our international partners and Nicaraguan democratic actors to support the restoration of democracy and promotion of inclusive economic growth; 2) work within the limits of our bilateral relationship to combat transnational crime and security threats and prepare to respond together to natural disasters; and 3) engage with Nicaraguan society and civil society organizations to bolster their resilience and capacity to pursue a more prosperous, democratic future.

Mission Goal 1: Nicaragua restores democracy and delivers inclusive economic growth. The Ortega-Murillo regime's ruthless tactics to remain in power, supported by authoritarian allies abroad, have led to a deterioration of democratic institutions and culture, and hampered economic development. In order to promote a restoration of democracy as well as the stability and prosperity that would come with it, we will work with our international partners to increase multilateral pressure on the Government of Nicaragua to restore respect for human rights, the rule of law, and fair political competition. We will also support the efforts of democratic actors as they seek to develop a cohesive, viable alternative to the Ortega-Murillo regime's repressive brand of governance. Finally, we will continue to utilize targeted financial and visa sanctions, in concert with other democratic governments when possible, to pressure Ortega-Murillo to allow a return to genuine democracy, competition, and rule of law. At the same time, we will continue to promote legitimate trade, assist U.S. companies doing business in Nicaragua, and build a path toward economic prosperity for all Nicaraguans.

Mission Goal 2: The United States and Nicaragua engage constructively to deter irregular migration and counter transnational threats. Nicaragua and the region face serious threats to safety and security that also directly affect U.S. national security interests. These threats include increased irregular migration to the United States driven by Nicaraguans' increasing desperation about the prospects of their own country, transnational criminal activities such as human and drug trafficking, and natural disasters and changing weather patterns to which Nicaragua is not well equipped to respond. Despite the challenging bilateral relationship, we must find ways to work together to address these threats to protect both Nicaraguan citizens and U.S. national interests. We will deter irregular migration by helping Nicaraguans understand the legal pathways through targeted messaging and education campaigns, as well as by investing in programs that promote development and prosperity for Nicaraguans at home. We will focus on detecting and disrupting criminal networks and activities, at times working with government contacts when possible and appropriate. Finally, we will enhance Nicaragua's natural disaster response capability by offering preparedness training, equipment, and assistance in the event of a natural disaster.

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Mission Goal 3: The U.S. deepens engagement with Nicaraguan society, building resilience and capacity through inclusive cooperation. To help build a future Nicaragua that is more democratic and prosperous, we must also engage and support Nicaraguan civil society to bolster its resilience and capacity to promote our shared values. Through strategic messaging, capacity-building, exchange initiatives, and partnerships with key institutions, we will seek to counter the regime's repression of Nicaraguan civil society. We will support and empower vulnerable and at-risk groups through education and public health programming, and help increase demand for rule of law within their communities. We will also showcase the best of American values and creativity through our cultural programming and strategic messaging to counter constant anti-American propaganda from the Ortega-Murillo government.

As we implement our strategy, we must ensure the most effective use of our resources and prepare for the continuity of operations in the event of crises. We will also develop new practices and structures to recruit, retain, and empower a diverse and innovative staff – both USDH and Nicaraguan LE Staff -- that is able and equipped to bring creative ideas to the table and make them happen.

Most importantly, we will apply strategic patience and sustained focus to the achievement of our ambitious, long-term goals. Our progress is unlikely to be rapid or linear and we must practice adaptive management. The Ortega-Murillo government has demonstrated over the last several years that it will stop at nothing to maintain its grip on power, including deadly repression, and will do what it can – with expert assistance from Russia, China, and Cuba -- to constrain, or even criminalize, U.S. engagement with Nicaraguan civil society. Under these extremely challenging conditions, we will need to take intelligent risks and look for creative approaches in order to pursue our Mission's strategic objectives. We will also need to continue allocating a modest but meaningful level of programmatic resources to carry forward our efforts. Despite the daunting obstacles we face, we still believe the aspirations and values we share with the vast majority of the Nicaraguan people – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – should ultimately prove a more powerful and enduring force than a morally bankrupt regime focused exclusively on its own survival.

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2. Mission Strategic Framework

Mission Goal 1: Nicaragua restores democracy and delivers inclusive economic growth.

- **Mission Objective 1.1:** The Nicaraguan government guarantees human rights, the rule of law, and fair political competition. (Incorporates USAID Strategy DO 1)
- **Mission Objective 1.2:** Nicaraguan democratic actors rebuild and coalesce into a broadly representative force capable of holding the government accountable. (Incorporates USAID Strategy DO 1 and DO 2)
- **Mission Objective 1.3:** The United States implements the most effective mix of sanctions and incentives to promote the restoration of democracy and private sector-led economic growth.

Mission Goal 2: The United States and Nicaragua engage constructively to deter irregular migration and counter transnational threats.

- **Mission Objective 2.1:** Deter irregular migration by shaping public and individual decisions as well as creating hope and improved prospects for development and prosperity. (Incorporates USAID Strategy DO 1 and DO 2)
- **Mission Objective 2.2:** Counter transnational threats to the United States, U.S. interests in the region, and U.S. citizens in Nicaragua.
- **Mission Objective 2.3:** ¶ Enhance preparedness for and response to natural disasters. (Incorporates USAID Strategy DO 2)

Mission Goal 3: The U.S. sustains engagement with Nicaraguan society, building resilience and capacity through inclusive cooperation.

- **Mission Objective 3.1:** The impact of the Nicaraguan government's aggressive propaganda diminishes, and Nicaraguans' positive perceptions of the United States and U.S. policy improves.
- **Mission Objective 3.2:** Nicaraguan civil society and communities develops the tools and capacity to address its most pressing challenges. (Incorporates USAID Strategy DO 2)

Management Objective 1: Expand and improve efforts for continuity of operations, increase cost-effectiveness and compliance with Department financial regulations, and improve customer service.

Management Objective 2: Ensure an inclusive, diverse, equitable, and accessible workplace that fosters staff resilience and professional growth opportunities and attracts, retains, and supports the candidates best suited to achieve Mission policy goals.

3. Mission Goals and Objectives

Mission Goal 1 | Nicaragua restores democracy and delivers inclusive economic growth.

Description | The preservation and promotion of democracy is a top national security priority.

Objective 1.1 | The Nicaraguan government guarantees human rights, the rule of law, and fair political competition.

- **Justification** | For years, the Ortega-Murillo government has undermined Nicaragua's democratic institutions and allowed corruption and impunity to reign.
- **Linkages** | Joint Regional Strategy (JRS) Objectives 1.1, 1.3, and 2.1; Joint Strategic Plan (JSP) Goal 3.
- **Risks** | The authoritarian Ortega-Murillo regime is a destabilizing force in the region and a threat to U.S. national security interests.

Objective 1.2 | Nicaraguan democratic actors rebuild and coalesce into a broadly representative force capable of holding the government accountable.

- **Justification** | The Nicaraguan government pursued a scorched-earth strategy of neutralizing all perceived political threats, exploiting historic divisions among Nicaraguans, and using police and parapolice to intimidate, assault, and detain democratic opposition leadership. The remnants of the opposition are in exile and in hiding in Nicaragua.
- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 3.1; JRS Objective 1.1.
- **Risks** | To mitigate risks, the U.S. government will remain engaged with Nicaraguan democratic leadership both inside and outside of the country, continuing to stress the importance of peaceful and democratic solutions and remaining neutral among political factions.

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Objective 1.3 | The United States implements the most effective mix of sanctions and incentives to promote the restoration of democracy and private sector-led economic growth.

- **Justification** | Financial and diplomatic sanctions can disrupt, deter, and prevent the Ortega-Murillo regime's negative actions that threaten U.S. national security and undermine the promotion of democracy and rule of law.
- **Linkages** | JSP Goal 2, JSP Objectives 2.1 and 2.2; JRS Objectives 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3.
- **Risks** | A failure to increase economic pressure on the regime would provide it with more resources to finance its repression and patronage.

Mission Goal 2 | The United States and Nicaragua engage constructively to deter irregular migration and counter transnational threats.

Description | Hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans have fled Nicaragua for the United States due to economic stagnation worsened by political crisis.

Objective 2.1 | Deter irregular migration by shaping public and individual decisions as well as creating hope and improved prospects for development and prosperity.

- **Justification** | USG efforts will encourage Nicaraguans to remain in Nicaragua and insist that their government create the conditions for a safer, more prosperous, and democratic future.
- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 1.5; JRS Objective 1.2.
- **Risks** | Failure to achieve this objective will exacerbate the growing number of Nicaraguan migrants, whose journey burdens the countries they pass through and, ultimately, those charged with protecting the U.S. border.

Objective 2.2 | Counter transnational threats to the United States, U.S. interests in the region, and U.S. citizens in Nicaragua.

- **Justification** | Human trafficking victims, illegal drugs, and other contraband pass through Nicaragua on their way to the United States, and fugitives from U.S. justice live in the country.
- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 1.5; JRS Objective 1.2; Consular Affairs FBS Objective 2.4; Defense Security Cooperation Agency Security Assistance Management Manual; Office of National Drug Control Policy National Interdiction Command and Control Plan; Department of Defense Directive 5105.21, Defense Intelligence Agency.
- **Risks** | Failure to achieve this objective would leave Nicaragua vulnerable to the operation of criminal enterprises, which could destabilize the region.

Objective 2.3 | Enhance preparedness for and response to natural disasters.

- **Justification** | Nicaragua is highly vulnerable to extreme weather events and natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, droughts), which fuel economic desperation and drive irregular migration.
- **Linkages** | JSP Objective 1.5; JRS Objectives 1.2, 2.5.
- **Risks** | We will mitigate this risk with outreach and planning to ensure our resources are in place before disaster strikes.

Mission Goal 3 | The U.S. sustains engagement with Nicaraguan society, building resilience and capacity through inclusive cooperation.

Description | Through whole-of-mission strategic messaging, capacity-building and exchange initiatives, and key institutional partnerships with non-governmental entities, formal and informal (including representatives and networks), post will inform, educate, and engage Nicaraguans based in the country and diaspora groups in exile.

Objective 3.1 | The impact of the Nicaraguan government's aggressive propaganda diminishes, and Nicaraguans' positive perceptions of the United States and U.S. policy improve.

- **Justification |** The United States must continue to frame the narrative around U.S. policy priorities and articulate to a beleaguered public the importance of democratic values, protection of the environment, and citizen security.
- **Linkages |** JRS Goals 1, 6, and Objectives 1.1, 6.3.
- **Risks |** The Mission will also use innovative approaches to inoculate the public to disinformation, helping them discern between reliable and unreliable information.

Objective 3.2 | Nicaraguan civil society and communities develop tools and capacity to address its most pressing challenges.

- **Justification |** We will build democratic culture and civil society capacity to strengthen the resilience of enable the Nicaraguan people to address their most pressing challenges in their communities.
- **Linkages |** JRS Goals 2, 5, and 6.
- **Risks |** The government continues to close down more civil society organizations.

4. Management Objectives

Management Objective 1 | Expand and improve efforts for continuity of operations, increase cost-effectiveness and compliance with Department financial regulations, and improve customer service.

- **Justification** | Post's ordered departure in 2018 had enduring, adverse effects on operations. In particular, the Management section suffered from the loss of key leadership due to curtailments and broken assignments. From 2020 to 2021, our efforts to protect our personnel from COVID-19 have taken priority, shifting our focus away from constant improvement in the efficacy of our operations. Now that we are once again fully staffed and adapted to a pandemic environment, Management must return the focus to efficacy of operations by reviewing existing contracts, improving cost-effectiveness, ensuring compliance with department financial regulations, and a renewed focus on customer service. As the pandemic and political uncertainties continue, management must continue improving our telework capacity and continuity of operations contingency planning, as well as providing a higher level of customer service under maximum telework conditions.
- **Linkages** | JRS Management Objective 1.
- **Risks** | If we do not invest in efforts to ensure continuity of operations during a crisis, including telework capability, we jeopardize the safety of our personnel and put the success of our mission at risk. If we do not take steps to improve the management of our resources, we risk superfluous spending in certain areas and limited ability to invest in programs and assets that have a higher impact on our mission goals.

Management Objective 2 | Ensure an inclusive, diverse, equitable, and accessible workplace that fosters staff resilience and professional growth opportunities and attracts, retains, and supports the candidates best suited to achieve Mission policy goals.

- **Justification** | Increased rates of migration out of Nicaragua mirrors turnover of mission staff. In CY 2022, Mission Managua observed a turnover rate of nearly 6 % of the LE Staff workforce; a dramatic increase from the previous attrition rate of less than 1% of the workforce. In response, recruitment, retention, and resilience efforts are essential for mission operations. Mission Managua must recruit a workforce that is diverse in experience, perspective, talent, and skill, including from Nicaragua's underrepresented Atlantic coast. It must also ensure our current and new team members are able to reach their full potential by investing in their wellness and professional development, and by creating an equitable, inclusive, and accessible workplace. We will focus our efforts to increase diversity on recruitment initiatives and best practices. To support our workforce's wellness, we will take steps to improve its benefits and provide resources for improving resilience. We will commit to Department Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) initiatives such as the formation of a DEIA Council and on-going trainings and workshops for employees and supervisors.
- **Linkages:** EOs 14035, 13985; JRS Management Objective 1.
- **Risks** | Failure to invest in DEIA initiatives, resilience, and professional development for our staff would diminish our capacity to recruit and retain the best talent for our mission and lead to a team that is unmotivated, burnt out, and unable to function at its full potential.