

Nicaragua's Ortega calls arrested opponents 'criminals' and US 'agents'

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said Wednesday that 19 of his opponents who have been arrested just five months before his country's presidential election are not candidates or politicians, but rather "criminals" who want to "overthrow the government."

"That is what we are pursuing, that is what is being investigated and that is what will be punished in due course," Ortega said in an official televised ceremony, while accusing the imprisoned of being "agents of the Yankee empire" who "conspire against Nicaragua to overthrow the government."

Pro-government security and paramilitary forces have arrested 19 people, including five opposition presidential challengers as well as journalists, businessmen and a banker.

All face charges of "inciting foreign interference" under a new law initiated by Ortega's government and approved by the legislature in December to defend Nicaragua's sovereignty. The law has been widely criticized as a means of freezing out challengers and silencing opponents.

"We are not dealing with pre-candidates, but criminals who have attacked the country," Ortega said.

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Image source: US News

The arrests have increased international condemnation.

At a session of the UN's Human Rights Council in Geneva on Tuesday, 59 nations issued a statement saying they were "deeply concerned that recently enacted laws unduly restrict political participation, freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association" in Nicaragua.

And the Organization of American States' human rights council on Wednesday denounced a "new phase of repression" in Nicaragua and urged the body's judicial arm to protect four of the detained opposition politicians.

Amid the international community's outcry and insistence on the release of the detainees, Ortega insisted that "there is no going back, only forward."

A firebrand Marxist in his younger days, Ortega and his Sandinistas toppled a corrupt

autocratic regime to popular applause and seized control of the country in 1979.

He ruled until 1990, returned to power in 2007 and has won two successive reelections.

Ortega, 75, is widely expected to run again in the November election, though he has not said so.

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