NICARAGUA

A government crackdown on protests in 2018 and 2019 resulted in at least 45 reported attacks on education in Nicaragua. Police used excessive and lethal force on university campuses and during protests, injuring hundreds of students. Arbitrary arrests and convictions of students also occurred during this period.

Context

On April 18, 2018, university students and pensioners led peaceful demonstrations in Managua and León, Nicaragua, in response to unpopular social security reforms. Police and pro-government armed groups (often referred to as “turbas sandinistas”) responded violently, in some cases using lethal force, to the peaceful protests that erupted across the country and continued for nearly six months.

Beginning on May 7, 2018, students and young people occupied the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN-Managua), which became a site of attacks on higher education students, personnel, and infrastructure during protests. Police and pro-government armed groups also attacked several other universities during the reporting period, including the National Agrarian University (UNA) and the Central American University (UCA). Protesters often used roadblocks and barricades as a protest tool; some protesters reportedly used violence against police, although the majority of protesters remained peaceful.

Violent repression of protests by police and armed pro-government groups resulted in 328 deaths, more than 2,000 people injured, and 777 arrests. The UN reported that leaders of rural and student movements, or those associated with them, were targeted and persecuted, forcing many into exile or hiding. At least 88,750 Nicaraguans fled the country between April 2018 and November 2019, according to the UN.

The National Police banned public protests on September 28, 2018, and subsequently denied several requests for protest permits. However, unauthorized protests against President Ortega still erupted in March and April 2019, as did student-led protests in May and November 2019. By June 11, 2019, the government had released 492 people detained in the context of the 2018 protests, including students, after negotiations with the opposition in February 2019. However, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), 160 people detained in the context of protests remained imprisoned as of December 2019.

Secondary and university students were threatened, attacked, and detained during this reporting period for participation in or association with protests, impacting access to education. According to reports, 29 children were killed in the context of protests while some secondary students were expelled for acts of civic dissent. Meanwhile, several schools and universities suspended classes in order to protect students and some university students dropped out due to fear of repression.

The socio-political crisis also had a negative impact on the quality of education, or limited families’ ability to afford to send their children to school, with Afro-descendants, indigenous communities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons particularly impacted. Access to education was also negatively affected for Nicaraguan students who fled to neighboring countries, since some students lacked the correct documentation to enroll in classes, or faced discrimination. IACHR reported that, as of June 2019, 144 university students had been expelled and many of their records erased, making it difficult for those who fled the country to resume their studies.

Nicaragua was not previously profiled in Education under Attack, and therefore no comparisons have been made to earlier reporting periods.

Attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel

For the 2017-2019 reporting period, GCPEA collected at least three reports of incidents of attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel. In addition, primary and secondary students have been adversely impacted by repression in Nicaragua, according to IACHR. In particular, schools altered schedules due to the crisis in 2018, and children fleeing the country with their parents were, at least temporarily, taken out of school.

GCPEA collected three reports of attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel in 2018 from...
international organizations and media. For instance:

- The Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI, by its Spanish acronym), appointed by the IACHR, documented reports that, in Managua on May 10, 2018, members of a pro-government armed group allegedly fatally shot a secondary school student in the abdomen, while he stood outside his school with friends.

- Local media outlet *La Prensa* reported that on November 22, 2018, police officers allegedly threatened with a gun and arrested two secondary students, at their school in Managua, after the students protested that the police were repressing people during recent demonstrations. The police officers were reportedly at the school in response to a fight between two students.

**Sexual violence at, or on the way to or from, school or university**

Between 2017 and 2019, GCPEA identified at least three reported incidents of education-related sexual violence by police and pro-government armed groups.

In interviews, the UN documented reports that police and prison authorities subjected both male and female government opponents to sexual violence while detained, including rape and threats of sexual abuse, between April and August 2018; male victims reported cases of rape, including with firearms. Human Rights Watch similarly documented cases of Nicaraguan police and pro-government armed groups raping or threatening rape against protesters and government opponents in 2018.

GCPEA gathered reports of three instances of education-related sexual violence in 2018. For instance:

- One female university student interviewed by the *Miami Herald* recounted an incident occurring on June 4, 2018, in Tipitapa, Managua department, in which she and two other students were targeted and detained by armed men, for allegedly being student protesters. She was forced to remove her clothing, groped, threatened with rape, and interrogated at gunpoint before the armed men ripped one of her toenails out. The survivor reported that she believed police, or armed groups associated with them, were responsible.

- In an account published by the *Associated Press* on August 10, 2018, it was reported that police and members of a pro-government armed group repeatedly punched a student from the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua in the stomach while she was pregnant and refused her medical treatment, during her five-day imprisonment by the police, in mid-July. After her release, the student went to a hospital where she was told she had miscarried, which reportedly occurred while she was being held by the police.

**Attacks on higher education**

Between April and September 2018, both police and pro-government armed groups systematically targeted and used excessive, and often lethal, force against university students. Documented by international media, UN, IACHR, GIEI, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch, these attacks began as early as the first day of protests, on April 18, and continued at a less frequent rate from September 2018 through the end of the reporting period.

In 2018, GCPEA recorded 32 reported incidents of attacks on higher education that led to the injury or death of approximately 125 students and personnel, and the detention of at least 20. Police and pro-government armed groups indiscriminately fired rubber bullets and ammunition at protesters, threatened and detained academics and students, and damaged academic buildings. Separately, the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy, a local civil society organization, stated that 137 student casualties had occurred by August 8, 2018.

Amnesty International determined that many victims of violence did not file complaints of rights violations or register the deaths of family members due to fear of reprisal. The extent of attacks on university students and personnel was therefore potentially underreported during this period.

Within weeks of the inception of the protest movement in April 2018, students occupied a number of universities in Managua and other cities, sometimes erecting barricades. Police and pro-government armed groups repeatedly entered university campuses and used force against students, in some cases inflicting damage to higher education facilities, such as in the following incidents:
IACHR received reports that on April 20, 2018, police and pro-government armed groups entered the National University of Engineering, set fire to the postgraduate building, and opened gunfire. The UN, IACHR, and media reported that during the campus siege, a 15-year-old secondary student was mortally wounded while bringing water to student protesters.  

On the night of June 7, 2018, a pro-government armed group reportedly attacked a student barricade at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua, killing a 19-year-old student and injuring another student, according to Miami Herald and The Guardian.  

Scholars at Risk reported that on June 23, 2018, state security forces opened fire on student protesters at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua; two students were reportedly killed and at least 12 were injured.  

Amnesty International, Scholars at Risk, and international media reported that on the afternoon of July 13, 2018, dozens of members of pro-government armed groups entered the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua and fired indiscriminately while police guarded entrances to the campus, trapping at least 200 students inside. Student protesters reportedly retaliated by throwing homemade explosives. During the 20-hour siege, police blocked emergency medical services from entering and prevented protesters from leaving. Two young people were killed and 16 injured, though their status as university students or personnel is unknown. Some students were injured while seeking refuge at a church located at the edge of the campus. Several buildings were also burned, though the reports did not specify who was responsible for the damage.  

During the crackdown on protests in 2018, anti-riot squad and police repeatedly fired rubber bullets into crowds of protesters, injuring many students; IACHR identified this as a systematic tactic and documented nine youths who lost an eye from this form of attack in April 2018. Two cases, in particular, involving students who sustained the loss of an eye due to rubber bullets were:

- On April 19, 2018, a 17-year-old student participated in a protest at the National University of Engineering, into which police fired tear gas and rubber bullets. As the student attempted to barricade himself with tables, a riot squad officer reportedly shot him in the head, at a distance of only 10 meters, hitting his left eye and resulting in total loss of vision.  
- IACHR reported that on the morning of April 19, 2018, police and anti-riot squads violently repressed a student protest at the National Agrarian University, using rubber bullets, mortars, and tear gas, causing protesters to seek shelter inside the university. A young student testified that a rubber bullet hit him in the eye; the student required two operations and he lost vision in the affected eye.  

President Ortega’s government also arrested and detained student leaders in 2018, sometimes aided by members of pro-government armed groups. For instance:

- Human Rights Watch documented the arrest of two student leaders in Managua, in late May 2018, by armed, hooded men, who beat the leaders and took them to El Chipote prison.  
- On August 25, 2018, in the city of León, members of a pro-government armed group arrested seven student leaders of the April 19 University Movement, shot at and beat others, as reported by Human Rights Watch and local media.  

In addition to physical attacks, student leaders and academics supporting the protests received death threats in 2018. GCPEA collected at least four accounts of student leaders who went into hiding, often staying in safe houses, out of fear for their lives. Personnel and students also suffered from academic repression as a result of their involvement in the protest movement. Human Rights Watch and Scholars at Risk reported that at least 40 university personnel at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua were fired between April and December 2018. IACHR reported that, as of April 2019, 144 students were expelled from that same university.  

Incidents collected by GCPEA of student protesters who were reportedly threatened or arrested in 2018 included:

- The UN reported that on July 22, 2018, two student protest leaders from the city of Masaya were arrested, while attempting to flee to Costa Rica. They were reportedly charged with murder, organized crime, and kidnapping,
as well as “terrorism” and “financing terrorism” by the Nicaraguan government’s definition of such offenses.1330

- A medical student at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua-León was reportedly arrested on September 10, 2018, and later charged with kidnapping and illegal possession of firearms, as well as “terrorism” under the Nicaraguan government’s definition of this offense.1331 After her subsequent release from prison under the June 2019 amnesty law, the student leader reportedly received threats, allegedly from the police and pro-government armed groups, and then, in November 2019, she was arrested for taking water to hunger strikers in a church in Masaya, Nicaragua, as reported in international media.1332

- Police reportedly arrested a professor employed by the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua on September 15, 2018, on accusations of murder and “terrorism” under the Nicaraguan government’s definition of the latter offense. Prior to his arrest, the professor had received threats and had shots fired at his home in June 2018, according to Scholars at Risk.1333

GCPEA collected at least eight instances of reported attacks on higher education in 2019,1334 a significant decrease from 2018. While demonstrations were smaller and fewer in number in 2019, state forces still violently repressed student protests and arrested student leaders, while pro-government armed groups continued to threaten the movement’s leaders. Examples included:

- On March 16, 2019, in Managua, the National Police reportedly detained a student leader and other members of the Civic Alliance for Justice and Peace, which had led negotiations with President Ortega’s administration, according to local news sources.1335

- The National Police allegedly violently repressed student protests on July 25, 2019, in Managua, injuring several students and arresting 14. The students marched to demand electoral reforms and the release of 100 protesters still detained by authorities, according to media reports.1336

- IACHR received reports that a 19-year-old student leader was threatened on several occasions in 2019 by pro-government armed groups, including having property near his house destroyed and a threat painted on his house. On September 14, 2019, eight individuals from such a group allegedly arrived in a pickup truck then attempted to enter his property, shooting at his house with a pellet gun.1337

- On November 19, 2019, riot police reportedly blocked the main entrance to the Central American University, pressuring their riot shields and banging batons against the gate to prevent students from leaving to protest off campus; in turn, the students allegedly threw water and dirt at the police. The students were reportedly testing to show solidarity with hunger strikers in the San Miguel church in Masaya, Nicaragua, and with the government protesters who attempted to resupply the church with provisions, 16 of whom were detained.1338

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1335 OHCHR, Human rights violations and abuses in the context of protests in Nicaragua, 18 April - 18 August 2018, (OHCHR, August 2018), paras. 19, 20.


1327 Kyra Gurney, “Nicaragua university students under attack in political uprising against Ortega,” Miami Herald, June 8, 2018; Loes Witschge, “‘This is a revolution’: Who are Nicaragua’s student protesters?” Al Jazeera, August 13, 2018; Scholars at Risk Network, Academic Freedom Monitor, National Autonomous University of Nicaragua, September 10, 2018; “After deadly government crackdown, Nicaragua’s student protesters reflect on what’s next,” NBC News, August 27, 2018.


1329 “IACHR reiterates its ongoing commitment to victims of human rights violations one year after the start of the crisis in Nicaragua (CIDH reitera su compromiso permanente con las víctimas de violaciones a derechos humanos a un año del inicio de la crisis en Nicaragua),” IACHR press release, April 17, 2019.

1330 OHCHR, “Human rights violations and abuses in the context of protests in Nicaragua, 18 April - 18 August 2018” (Geneva: OHCHR, August 2018), para. 35.

1331 Scholars at Risk Network, Academic Freedom Monitor, Polytechnic University of Nicaragua, September 15, 2018.

1332 Nuria López, “Amaya Coppens, ex-political prisoner in Nicaragua: “My house is marked with the word lead” (Amaya Coppens, ex presa política en Nicaragua: “Mi casa está marcada con la palabra plomo”),” El Mundo, October 1, 2019. "Respect the Church!”, students cry out to the Nicaraguan government (“¡A la Iglesia se respeta!”, claman estudiantes al gobierno en Nicaragua),” France 24, November 19, 2019.

1333 Scholars at Risk Network, Academic Freedom Monitor, Polytechnic University of Nicaragua, September 15, 2018.


1335 “Protesters freed who were detained today attempting to march in Managua (Liberan a manifestantes detenidos hoy cuando intentaban marchar en Managua),” El Nuevo Diario, March 16, 2019; Juan Carlos Bow, “Brutal police repression leaves 164 detained (Brutal represión policial deja 164 detenidos),” Confidencial, March 17, 2019.

1336 “Police from Daniel Ortega’s regime in Nicaragua repressed a student protest, leaving wounded and detentions (La Policía del régimen de Daniel Ortega en Nicaragua reprimió una marcha estudiantil que dejó heridos y detenidos),” Infobae, July 26, 2019; Mario Medrano, “Nicaraguan students attempted to march for the detained but were contained by the police (Estudiantes nicaragüenses intentaron marchar por los detenidos pero fueron contenidos por la policía),” CNN Español, July 25, 2019.


1338 Leonor Álvarez, “‘Respect the Church.’ Students protesting in the Central American University (‘La Iglesia se respeta’. Estudiantes se manifiestan en la Universidad Centroamericana),” La Prensa, November 11, 2019; “‘Respect the Church!’, students cry out to the Nicaraguan government (“¡A la Iglesia se respeta!”, claman estudiantes al gobierno en Nicaragua),” France 24, November 19, 2019.