

SOCIETY

Scientists under siege amid Nicaragua's political unrest

Government's response to the protests has led to the firing of university faculty members.

BY MICHELE CATANZARO

Ongoing protests against the Nicaraguan government have led to violent clashes, and the crackdown by security forces has engulfed the country's scientists, causing some to flee their homes in fear for their lives.

The student-led protests started in April 2018 in response to a decree from President Daniel Ortega that increased social-security taxes and reduced pensions. Ortega's increasingly authoritarian administration tried to quell the protests with deadly force, which sparked demonstrations across Nicaragua. Fierce confrontations between protesters, police and activists supporting the government have resulted in more than 300 deaths.

Universities have fired faculty members who have criticized the administration's response to the demonstrations, and scientific conferences have been moved or postponed. In early December, the government shut down the offices of nine non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including the Rio Foundation in San Carlos, which focuses on environmental protections for the southeastern region of Nicaragua. The state seized the property of all nine NGOs, and they cannot operate legally in the country.

An economic crisis that has proliferated in the wake of the political unrest resulted in emergency cuts to the 2018 budget in August. They included a roughly 7% reduction for the National Council of Universities, Nicaragua's governing body for higher-education institutes.

The trouble has even affected the Nicaraguan Academy of Sciences, which released several statements starting in April in support of students and academic freedom. Its president, lawyer María Luisa Acosta, fled the country in May after receiving death threats. The threats stemmed from those statements of support and her long-standing criticism of government projects that would affect Indigenous groups and the environment.

CRACKDOWN

At least 40 faculty and staff members have been fired, and 82 students expelled, from the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN), which has campuses in León and Managua, according to a report



INTI OCON/AFP/GETTY

Students from across Nicaragua gather to demand the resignation of President Daniel Ortega.

by Scholars at Risk, a New York City-based organization of universities and associations focused on protecting academic freedom.

They include Mauricio Álvarez Argüello, a biologist at UNAN in León, who was fired in November and allegedly attacked by police officers close to his house. Álvarez Argüello refused to sign a letter denouncing the actions of a government critic, and his brother is a constitutional scholar who has criticized Ortega's administration.

UNAN also fired Javier Pastora, former head of the surgery department and a surgeon at the university hospital in León. "I had worked at the hospital for 32 years," says Pastora.

A letter notifying Pastora of his dismissal gave no reason for the action. And UNAN officials did not respond to *Nature's* request for comment. But Pastora attributes his sacking, as well as that of 12 other doctors and hospital staff who were fired at the same time, to the fact that they joined some of the protests. The physicians were also outspoken about alleged attempts by government forces to discourage wounded protesters from seeking treatment, by sending police to hospitals to arrest them.

The firings have also cut into collaborations with medical faculty in the United States. "It's so sad to see what has happened. I do not have a contact any more to work with," says Michael Lawson, a clinical researcher at the University of California, Davis. He has worked with Pastora since 2009 to set up an endoscopy

department at the UNAN university hospital. Lawson provided donated equipment, and helped with training, surgery and an exchange programme for medical students.

"Students are a target for the government," says Jorge Huete-Pérez, a molecular biologist and senior vice-president of the University of Central America in Managua. Government security forces are now patrolling many university campuses, so a lot of students simply don't attend classes any more, he says.

CHANGE OF PLANS

The violence is also affecting scientific conferences. A November meeting of the Mesoamerican Society for Biology and Conservation, involving close to 1,000 scientists, had to be moved from Granada, Nicaragua, to Panama for security reasons. And the biannual Nicaraguan Biotechnology Conference, scheduled for September, has been postponed by a year.

Many people in Nicaragua fear that the situation will get worse. Several members, including Acosta, of the Civic Alliance — an organization that was meant to establish a dialogue with the government in the name of the protesters — have been arrested, threatened with death, or have fled the country.

Still, not everything is lost, says Huete-Pérez. "International participation can help a lot to create the environment for the government to sit down and negotiate." ■