



Amnesty International and Nicaragua: Why does AI refuse to listen to criticism about its work?

A briefing by the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign Action Group

Amnesty International has repeatedly criticised Daniel Ortega's government, disregarding its massive achievements in tackling real human rights issues in Nicaragua such as significantly reducing levels of severe poverty, massively improving health services and addressing gender inequality.

Why is Amnesty International doing this? And why does it reject any criticism and fail to respond when it gets things wrong? In this briefing written for NSCAG by John Perry, an NSC member living in Nicaragua, we look at AI's blinkered campaign over the past three years and its refusal to abide by its own rules.



Armed protesters at La Trinidad, near Estelí: one of the multiple roadblocks set up across Nicaragua by opposition forces in May-June 2018, and where much of the violence took place

Amnesty International's role

No one can fairly argue that Amnesty International shouldn't be a fierce critic of governments, that's part of their job. As they say themselves, 'No government is beyond scrutiny'. But it's also part of their job to be fair and balanced. AI's core values include 'impartiality and independence' and [since 2001](#) AI claims to address issues of human rights not just at government level but among 'armed political groups, companies and other non-state actors'. However, this requires it to recognise that the political groups are armed, which in Nicaragua's case AI consistently fails to do.

AI states that their vision is 'a world in which every person is able to enjoy the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.' Articles 25, 26, and 27 of the declaration refer to economic, social and cultural rights which are indivisible from political and civil rights. AI's [strategic plan 2016 to 2019](#) explicitly states that 'we will work to create a world wheremore people can enjoy their economic, social and cultural rights.' It has published [a primer on economic, social and cultural rights](#). Yet AI seems to face overwhelming difficulties in putting these goals into practice in an integrated way that recognises all aspects of human rights.

AI also claims to be open and accountable, providing feedback mechanisms for complaints and subscribing to an independent body, [Accountable Now](#), which is supposed to ensure that they are 'transparent' and 'responsive' in what they do.

Sadly, in relation to Nicaragua at least, AI has failed to meet its own standards. Here we catalogue efforts made by the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign Action Group and a number of individuals and groups with direct knowledge of Nicaragua, who have attempted to bring to AI's attention their failings and errors in covering human rights issues. As we will show, AI has refused to address the complaints, either by not replying at all or by merely making statements about how it goes about its work.

AI's track record of misinformation on Nicaragua

In the 1980s, when Nicaragua's revolutionary government was struggling to survive against the US-funded Contra forces, US sanctions and even the CIA-led mining of Nicaragua's ports, any objective assessment of Nicaraguan human rights should have put the blame squarely on the United States. But AI saw it differently. As the respected magazine *Envío* saw it at the time, AI's major report on Nicaragua in 1986, at the height of the Contra war, 'reflect[ed] the Reagan Agenda on human rights reporting from Nicaragua', giving scant attention to Contra atrocities and US complicity in them. For example, it elevated to 'prisoner of conscience' status a man called Luis Mora, who was arrested in 1984 and charged with involvement in armed opposition groups. Mora worked at the time for the Contra radio station in Costa Rica.

Envío accused AI of 'sloppy investigation' and of relying uncritically on known right-wing 'human rights' organisations for its evidence. *Envío* concluded that 'a report like Amnesty's, released weeks before a vote on Contra aid in the US Congress, inevitably has an effect far beyond Nicaragua. Indeed, this appears to have been the intention.' Paul Laverty, at the time a human rights lawyer and now a screen writer for Ken Loach, also produced a stinging analysis of Amnesty's work in a report published by Scottish Medical Aid for Nicaragua, for whom he was working in the 1980s.

Sadly, AI paid little attention, as its criticisms of Sandinista governments in Nicaragua resumed after Daniel Ortega regained the presidency in 2007.

AI and the interoceanic canal

Envisaging what is potentially a huge project that would transform the country, in 2013 the government announced a partnership with a Chinese firm to build a new interoceanic canal, to rival that in Panama. The government understood the scheme's massive impact on communities and the environment, holding hundreds of consultation meetings along the possible routes for the canal, and commissioning in-depth environmental studies which are publicly available and have led to more detailed investigations which are still ongoing. The canal project became very popular, enjoying around 70% support in opinion polls in 2017. The government says that it is still going ahead, although observers have severe doubts given the state of the Chinese economy and other threats to world trade.

Rather than seeing it as an opportunity to tackle poverty in Nicaragua, AI have consistently viewed the canal as a threat that will 'divide the country in two'. AI [claimed](#) that Nicaragua's government 'secretly sold the country's future to the highest bidder' (the Chinese firm). They have championed the views of one group opposing the canal, whose members live around one section of the canal's route, and are led by a known opponent of the Sandinista governments, Francisca Ramírez. This group has held more than 90 demonstrations, yet AI claimed its right of protest was compromised by the police. In emotive terms, AI quoted one supporter as saying that when she leaves home to take part in the protests 'I tell my children goodbye because I don't know if I'm going to make it back.' One press release has [a photo of](#) Ramírez in a graveyard, giving the impression that her life is under threat. Taking up AI's stance, the Guardian began [their report](#) by calling the protests 'a mix of anger, fear and defiance not witnessed since the civil war between the Sandinista government and US-backed Contra rebels'. That war cost 30,000 lives, but no one has died in the canal protests.

AI often works with Bianca Jagger to promote its reports on Nicaragua: she is [seen here](#) marching alongside Francisca Ramírez in an August 2017 demonstration. Jagger is a member of the Executive Director's Leadership Council of Amnesty International. She is also a long-time opponent of Daniel Ortega, who [since 2013](#) has been calling him an 'autocrat' who should resign.

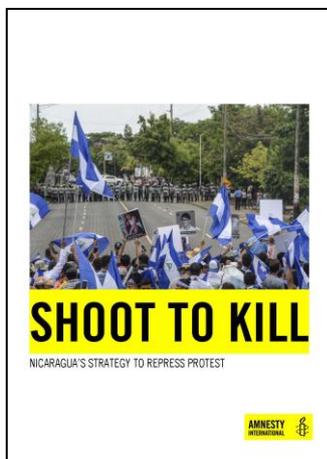
Even though the anti-canal demonstrators (in many cases not small landowners, but farm workers sent by their employers) usually carried machetes (a fact unmentioned by AI), there were no fatalities. In clashes with the police, injuries occurred on both sides. In its [annual report for 2017/18](#), AI continued to say that 'Attacks against human rights defenders persisted'. The only 'evidence' for such attacks came from a 2017 report from Global Witness, which also focussed on Francisca Ramírez, linking the canal story to a completely different (and geographically remote) part of Nicaragua where deaths had resulted from clashes between established communities and peasant farmers trying to occupy their land. There was [ample evidence](#) to show that GW had misrepresented these incidents, and it has barely mentioned Nicaragua in its recent reports.

The NSCAG made detailed comments on AI's report on the canal, [Nicaragua: Danger, Rights for Sale](#), shortly after its publication. It received only a one-word reply, 'Gracias', from the then General Secretary, Salil Shetty, on 3 September 2017.

AI's portrayal of armed protesters as peaceful would, of course, be repeated in 2018 and 2019. Francisca Ramírez would be one of the principal organisers of the violent roadblocks that paralysed the country in May and June last year (even putting her name to [a map of the country's roadblocks](#) that appeared in national media).

Launch of 'Shoot to Kill'

After the far from peaceful protests against the Sandinista government began in April 2018, AI was again ready to make one-sided condemnations. Its first report on the issue, called [Shoot to Kill](#), was [launched jointly with Bianca Jagger](#) in May.



As Wales Nicaragua Cymru [pointed out](#), Amnesty's report relied heavily on Nicaraguan human rights organisations to provide them with information, as well as local right-wing media. It was compiled after holding just 30 interviews and examining the documentation of 16 deaths. Shortly afterwards AI increased its estimates of the deaths, to the point where an AI representative speaking in Wales in July claimed that over 300 protesters had died. But even one of Amnesty's main local sources, CENIDH, didn't agree with this, saying that at least 52 of the 292 dead were police and government supporters.

Others challenged this number as well. [A detailed analysis by Enrique Hendrix](#), who is open about his support for the Sandinista government, goes through the list of names compiled by human rights organisations in Nicaragua (ANPDH and CENIDH) from April 18 – June 25. They add up to a total of 293 deaths, more than CENIDH's figure a month later. This is partly explained by the fact that ANPDH has consistently exaggerated its numbers (see below). Hendrix showed conclusively that a significant number of these deaths were not the responsibility of the Nicaraguan government, including 51 deaths not related to protests and 60 people killed by the opposition. Why is there such a huge difference? Since the start of the protests, solidarity organisations had been saying the situation was extremely complex and information was hard to verify, particularly after much of the country was shut down with *tranques* (roadblocks), and people had been killed on both sides.

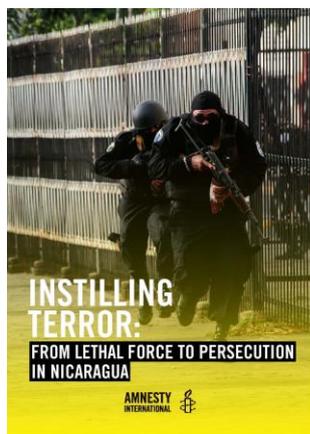
This uncertainty was not shared by Amnesty International. Part of the reason may be their Director for the Americas, Erika Guevara-Rosas, who travelled to Managua with the Amnesty delegation that compiled their report. Even a cursory glance at her twitter feed shows she is openly siding with the opposition, regularly tagging the anti-Ortega #SOSNicaragua, and re-tweeting Fox News.

The report was also heavily criticised at the time by a former Amnesty Prisoner of Conscience, the Nicaraguan Camilo Mejia. In an [open letter to Amnesty International](#), he pointed out the complexity of the situation and the past tendency for AI to simplify conflicts of the kind that Nicaragua was experiencing. He argued that AI was relying very little on its own research, but instead accepting what was being put out by right-wing media outlets such as *Confidencial*, *100% Noticias* and *La Prensa*, all of which are sworn enemies of the Ortega government. All of them have at times used images of violence which do not even come from Nicaragua, and have otherwise grossly misrepresented events during the conflict. In addition, AI accepted the evidence of local 'human rights' bodies whose material was similarly biased, and which all receive foreign funding (principally from the US) for their work.

Mejia gives various other examples of deficiencies or mistakes in *Shoot to Kill*. He concludes by saying: 'It is now up to [AI] to correct that wrong, and to do so in a way that reflects a firm commitment first and foremost to the truth, wherever it might fall, and to neutrality, peace, democracy, and always, to the sovereignty of every nation on earth.' When asked if he had received any reply, he said he'd only had a perfunctory response.

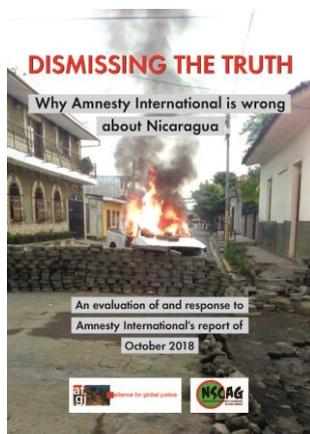
Launch of 'Instilling Terror'

AI's next report, in October 2018, was called [Instilling Terror: From lethal force to persecution in](#)



[Nicaragua](#). It showed that AI had learned nothing from the criticisms of its first report. Once again, and perhaps even more clearly than in May, it portrayed the conflict as entirely one-sided, the opposition as peaceful, and all human rights abuses attributable entirely to the government, the police or government supporters.

By then there was, of course, ample evidence of murders, kidnapping, torture, robbery, arson attacks and more on the part of protesters. Yet AI continued to portray any action by the police against them as persecution or 'arbitrary detention', even though by that stage 22 police officers had been killed and 400 injured, many left with life-changing injuries.



A group of activists, including people living in Nicaragua who had seen the violence of the protests, prepared a counter-report which analysed AI's second publication in full detail. [Dismissing the Truth](#) was published in February 2019 by NSCAG, jointly with the Alliance for Global Justice in the United States.

Its 55 pages use eye-witness accounts, reports from government and human rights bodies, media analysis and knowledge of the places where events highlighted by AI took place, to examine AI's analysis and accusations. *Dismissing the Truth* not only refutes many of the claims made by Amnesty International about the period of mid-April to mid-July in 2018, but shows that the evidence they produce is biased, incomplete and in several cases simply wrong.

For example, *Dismissing the Truth* shows that:

- The city of Masaya was the subject of armed siege by opposition forces for several weeks. AI claims that the government, in ending this siege, used indiscriminate and lethal force and pro-government armed forces. The report explains how, given the failure of peace negotiations, the police were obliged to use armed force to free Masaya from heavily armed actors who had declared their 'independence' from the national government.
- Amnesty International wrongly asserts that a police officer killed during the violence was the subject of a possible 'extrajudicial execution' by the government for deserting his post. In fact, he was killed by opposition sniper fire, along with a colleague, while carrying out his duties.
- Other cases of alleged 'extrajudicial execution' or 'arbitrary detention' cited by AI can be shown either to be false or to present conflicting evidence. In each case, AI virtually ignores any evidence that contradicts their pre-existing beliefs about the situation.

Dismissing the Truth includes a case study of one region of Nicaragua showing how AI might have carried out a balanced appraisal of the violence and who caused it. It shows that, over a similar period to that covered by AI reports, half the deaths reported as linked to the protests in this region

had other causes, and of the protest-linked deaths, all but one resulted from *opposition* violence, not police or government attacks.

Perhaps the most egregious example of misrepresentation occurred in AI's reporting of the death of police officer Faber López, which occupies several pages of *Instilling Terror*. AI's account relies entirely on López's family members, from whom he was estranged because he continued to serve in the police (having received awards for his service just before his death), even though his family were antagonistic both to the police and to the Ortega government. The family concocted two conflicting stories about his death, in which he was either shot for desertion by his colleagues or else murdered in prison. In reality, as eyewitnesses were able to testify to the authors of *Dismissing the Truth*, he was killed (along with a colleague) in an opposition sniper attack as he left a police station. Later, his widow was [interviewed in detail](#) about the build up to the event of his death, corroborating the eyewitness accounts. AI's account was not only wrong but maligned the bravery of a fallen police officer and, in effect, portrayed him as a coward. AI has never retracted or apologised for this gross error on their part despite direct efforts to get them to do so.



Police officer Faber López during a training session a few months before last year's violence. Along with a colleague, Hilario Ortiz, Faber was shot and killed by opposition snipers in Jinotepe on July 8, 2018. According to AI, he was either killed by his police colleagues or tortured to death in prison.

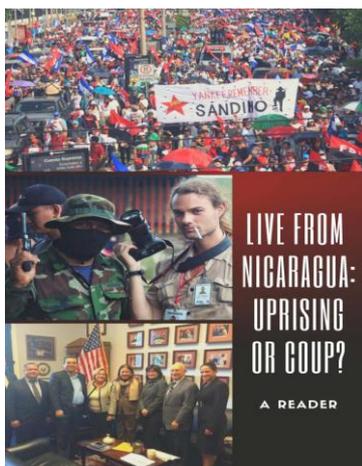
Dismissing the Truth points out in detail some of AI's methodological failings, amply demonstrated by the López case:

- AI is supposed to abide by the so-called HURIDOCs research standards, but fails to compare information from what are self-avowedly opposition sources with evidence from elsewhere, for example the National Assembly's Truth Commission or the government's Office of the Procurator for the Defence of Human Rights.
- AI appears to treat murders of Sandinista victims such as in the Morrito massacre (where four police were killed and nine kidnapped) as a matter of domestic law, but then AI attacks the government for applying the law and creating 'political' prisoners of the perpetrators.

- Despite its declared intentions, AI appears to hide behind a legally anachronistic and incorrect insistence that only governments can commit human rights abuses. Yet UN Security Council and General Assembly resolutions over the last 20 years have repeatedly insisted on the human rights obligations of armed non-state actors.

AI's repetition of information from unreliable sources

While it is understood that AI has limited resources and must make use of evidence beyond what it is able to compile itself, in the case of Nicaragua its choice of sources and its defence of them if they are subject to domestic law is extraordinary and singularly lacking in fairness or discrimination. Its main local sources are of two kinds. One is the local 'human rights' organisations and the other is the local 'independent' media. Everyone in Nicaragua is fully aware that the sources are heavily biased, but either AI is unaware of this or disregards it. The 'human rights' organisations all receive foreign funding, in two cases from what effectively are propaganda arms of the US government. The 'independent' news media are not only vociferously anti-Sandinista, but extremely partial in their reporting and regularly guilty of repeating lies about events involving the opposition and government forces. One news station in particular, *100%Noticias*, has gone so far as to provoke terrorist attacks so as to create news stories, or has appeared to know about them in advance so as to have reporters on the spot when they take place (see next page).



In April 2019, a wide group of Nicaraguans and international activists collaborated to produce the report [Live from Nicaragua: Uprising or Coup?](#) Among other chapters, one by internationally known human rights lawyer Dan Kovalik documented the failure on the part of local and international human rights organisations. Another chapter exposed the role of social media and the Nicaraguan and international press in purveying highly biased accounts of events in 2018, giving numerous examples.

AI has paid no attention to these criticisms, as it continues to defend local news media and NGOs which have been censored by the government, disregarding the fact that they are essentially propaganda mechanisms with little or no commitment to accepted standards either of human rights analysis or of journalism. Both the funding of local 'human rights' bodies by the United States, and their recent internal disputes which have revealed their true role as propaganda mechanisms, have been amply exposed in a detailed article by [The Grayzone](#); these are overlooked by AI.

AI makes frequent reference to its use of material from international bodies such as the UN Commission for Human Rights, the Interamerican Commission for Human Rights (IACHR), and teams they have sent to Nicaragua. It never investigates whether they are subject to any pressure or bias in their work. For example, *Dismissing the Truth* gave evidence that the head of the IACHR has openly supported the opposition, and that investigatory teams have assured Nicaraguan government officials that they have found no evidence of 'political' prisoners being tortured, but have then repeated the torture allegations in their reports. AI accepts such reports at face value without, apparently, any questioning of their impartiality (as their 'core values' require).

A new 'human rights' organisation set up this year in Costa Rica has also begun propaganda attacks on the Ortega government, and its messages and reports in September/October 2019 have been

used without scrutiny by international bodies such as the UN, the Organisation of American States and the IACHR. Its lies, too, have been recently exposed by an independent news outlet, Carta Boden (recounted with additional detail by [Tortilla con Sal](#)).

Given AI's international reputation and expertise in the human rights field, why does it accept without criticism or any apparent deeper investigation, what it is told not only by international bodies which often have their own 'agenda' but also by small, difficult to regulate 'human rights' bodies which are known to receive US-funding and to be run by implacable opponents of the Sandinista government?

An example of Amnesty International's wilful ignorance



An arson attack by opposition forces from Masaya destroys Granada's historic town hall

AI has [recently defended](#) the 'journalist' Lucia Pineda of *100%Noticias*. Here is just one example of her true role in last year's events.

On June 5th 2018, opposition groups entered the tourist city of Granada and set fire to one of its most historic buildings, the town hall. Pineda was – apparently from pure coincidence – transmitting from Granada, 45km from her office in the capital, when the arson attack occurred. Initially she made the error of reporting live the truth of what was happening, which was that the arsonists were opposition protesters who had travelled from Masaya, having already destroyed the town hall there.

But later Pineda changed her story to misrepresent the arsonists as government supporters, who had set fire to the building and who also attacked the opposition protesters (rather than the reverse). The real story has been told in [a recent interview](#) with Granada's mayor, following the partial restoration of the town hall.

Pineda's news outlet, whose name means '100% News', is commonly referred to in Nicaragua as '100% Lies'. AI apparently made no effort to ascertain Pineda's real role.

AI's latest campaign

In October 2019, Amnesty launched a new campaign, [What we left behind: fleeing repression in Nicaragua](#). It says that the Ortega government continues to be repressive, and that as a result tens of thousands are in exile, including journalists and 'human rights' defenders of the kind just mentioned. It calls on the government to release people held solely 'for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly'.

Like a previous [AI report in August](#) which invited readers to write to President Ortega (see below), it fails to mention the government's conditional amnesty for those convicted or accused of crimes pertaining to last year's events, which led to hundreds being released under the supervision of the International Red Cross (AI had briefly referred to the amnesty when it took place in [June](#), but misrepresented the numbers released). It makes no recognition of the fact that many of those arrested were guilty of serious crimes, or that some cases of arrest that have occurred since the amnesty have involved crimes such as drug trafficking.

Third UA: 082/19 AMR 43/0953/2019 Nicaragua

Date: 30 August 2019

URGENT ACTION

DETENTION CONTINUES FOR OVER A HUNDRED PERSONS

Scores of people continue detained in Nicaragua after more than one year from the beginning of the human rights crisis. We urge the Nicaraguan authorities to immediately release and drop all charges to all those detained solely on the grounds of the exercise of their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

The new campaign specifically mentions Francisca Ramírez and Lucía Pineda, who as we have pointed out are vehement critics of the government who themselves provoked or were involved in violent acts of protest last year. Pineda was arrested but then freed under the amnesty, while Ramírez fled to Costa Rica.

The effects of Amnesty's campaigns

Amnesty's unbalanced judgements in its reports are far from insignificant because they profoundly affect Nicaragua's international image. The stakes are high. While almost all Nicaraguans desperately want reconciliation and a return to the peaceful state which existed before last April, the ongoing media campaign by Amnesty and others is fuelling the hostile stance of the Trump administration and encouraging sanctions by bodies such as the European Union.

In November 2018 Trump declared Nicaragua [an extraordinary threat to the United States](#), and his former national security adviser John Bolton said that Nicaragua (along with Cuba and Venezuela) is part of a [troika of terror](#) in the continent. Earlier this year, Nicaragua was supposedly [Trump's next target](#) after Venezuela. Nicaragua's opposition continue to make trips to the US to plead for stronger US sanctions, which would be enormously damaging to ordinary Nicaraguans.

Amnesty International should question whether its reports help justify such sanctions – or worse – by the United States, against one of Latin America’s smallest and poorest countries, in the process jeopardising the real human rights of its poorest citizens.

Amnesty’s response to feedback and criticisms

For a body which claims to be open and accountable, it is extraordinary difficult to engage with AI and impossible to achieve any sort of dialogue about the kinds of issues covered in this report. Some of the attempts to engage with AI in 2017 and 2018 have been noted earlier.

Other attempts have been made to engage with AI, with no success. Here are some examples:

- An Amnesty supporter who contributed by direct debit, Julie Lamin, visited Nicaragua and [subsequently complained to AI](#) about the stance it was taking. She received no response.
- Emails to Duncan Tucker, Regional Media Manager for the Americas, either complaining about press releases or eliciting more information, receive no reply (even though his details are given and contact invited by AI).
- Emails to the AI General Secretary, Kumi Naidoo, from the NSCAG (for example one on April 17th 2019) are unanswered.
- We understand that formal complaints by the Nicaraguan government have also received no response.

However, a recent complaint on September 8th using the AI feedback form, about an [urgent action update](#), *did* receive a response. The reply did not engage with the detail of the complaint at all, but simply stated how AI carries out its work and how it agrees with other organisations in their stance on Nicaragua.

Amnesty’s failure to respond to *Dismissing the Truth*

Most shockingly, however, AI has never responded to or even acknowledged the existence of the report *Dismissing the Truth*, despite the fact that it was specifically aimed at AI and was sent to AI by various different means on February 25th 2019. Because of its failure to respond, AI was sent a formal complaint under its feedback process, dated March 19th. This was sent by registered post. Under the AI feedback mechanism, according to AI procedures it should have elicited an initial response within two weeks. No response of any kind was received.

One of the authors of the report then wrote to Mwikali Muthiani, chair of the Amnesty International Board on May 25th 2019, directly complaining that AI had not responded to *Dismissing the Truth* or to other complaints. The letter ended: ‘In your capacity as chair of the International Board, we urge you to secure a full response to these complaints, including to our report, and to investigate AI’s failure to make impartial and balanced investigations in Nicaragua as its statute and its documents about its working practices require’.

Mwikali Muthiani replied on June 7th, but simply repeated what is largely public knowledge about how AI prepares its Nicaragua reports and what other international bodies say about Nicaragua. Nowhere did she address our actual complaints. As well as ignoring *Dismissing the Truth*, she failed to respond to the specific case example which was picked out, that of the death of policeman Faber Lopéz (see above). She did not acknowledge that AI had failed to follow its own published complaints procedure by (a) not responding within the stated period, (b) not ‘investigating’ the

complaint 'fully' and (c) not instigating 'a more formal process aiming for resolution' of the complaint. All of these are promised in AI's procedures.

A reply was sent to Mwikali Muthiani on June 10th, making these points, and a response was received on June 19th 'taking note' of it but promising no further action. When this was challenged, with a reminder of the formal procedure, a further short reply was received on July 2nd, saying that AI had already responded and ending: 'There is no other process to address your complaint.'

A subsequent friendly offer to meet at AI's office to discuss *Dismissing the Truth* received no reply.

Conclusions

Amnesty claims to be open and accountable. It says that it uses its complaints process to 'help the organisation to learn'. Attempts by the NSCAG, and by individuals with knowledge of or living in Nicaragua to engage with it on these issues, have been dealt with summarily or have been ignored. Sadly, it seems far from clear that AI has even looked at the details of the complaints or at the 55-page report *Dismissing the Truth*, much less responded to or learnt from the feedback they have both encouraged and have received.

Our conclusion is that Amnesty International is either not interested in or intends to deliberately ignore any criticism of or feedback on its reports on Nicaragua.

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