Reporters Without Borders

Americas - Panama

Deported

Expulsion of two Spanish journalists deals blow to freedom of expression

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Spanish journalists **Paco Gómez Nadal** and **Pilar Chato** agreed under pressure to be repatriated yesterday, 48 hours after being arrested during a demonstration by indigenous groups outside the parliament building in Panama City in protest against a mining law reform.

While transiting through Costa Rica yesterday, the couple told journalists the Panamanian authorities pressured them to accept voluntary repatriation, which would allow them to return to Panama within two years, instead of four years if they had been deported.

"Regardless of the legal nuances, Gómez and Chato were the victims of a politically motivated expulsion because their support for the indigenous cause as journalists and their involvement in the NGO Human Rights Everywhere ran counter to the Panamanian government's interests" Reporters Without Borders said.

"This case represents a denial of freedom of expression on a matter of public interest," the press freedom organization added.

Their expulsion serves as a reminder of the risks to which journalists are exposed when they specialize in covering sensitive environmental issues. Mining is a particularly sensitive issue in Latin America.

Reporters Without Borders drew attention to the need to protect environmental journalists in a thematic report covering several continents released last June.

28.02.11 - Two Spanish journalists facing deportation after arrest during indigenous protest

Two Spanish journalists who were arrested during a demonstration by indigenous groups outside the parliament building in Panama City on 26 February – **Paco Gómez Nadal** and his wife, **Pilar Chato** – are still being held and are facing the possibility of deportation for allegedly encouraging the indigenous groups to protest against a proposed reform of the mining law.

Reporters Without Borders regards the legal proceedings initiated by the authorities in this case as suspicious and irregular, and calls on the National Directorate for Migration to immediately rescind the order for their detention.

A freelance contributor to the national daily *La Prensa* and to several foreign newspapers, Gómez is well known for his support for Panama's indigenous population. As a result, he had been threatened in the past with withdrawal of his residence permit, as he told Reporters Without Borders last July.

Following his arrest, President Ricardo Martinelli publicly accused Gómez of being an "agitator" and of "inciting" the protest in violation of the restrictions imposed on foreign residents. The Panamanian authorities claim that this is clear in a video of the demonstration.

"That is false," Gómez's lawyer, Giulia de Santis, told Reporters Without Borders after viewing the video. "On the contrary, it shows police officers warning Paco that they are going to charge the demonstrators. They take him and Pilar away immediately afterwards."

Initially detained in the parliament building, Gómez and Chato were quickly transferred to the headquarters of the National Directorate for Migration, which issued an order for their detention.

"This is against the law, which provides for this kind of measure only when someone is residing in the country illegally, and both Pilar and Paco are legal residents," De Santis said, adding that it was clear that "there is a political desire to expel them."

Reporters Without Borders shares this view and regards President Martinelli's public comments as a violation of the principle of the separation of powers.

The operations of multinational mining corporations and the threat they pose to local communities are a sensitive issue in Central America, one that can create problems for the journalists who specialize in covering it. In El Salvador, community *Radio Victoria* and its lawyer, Héctor Berríos, were again the targets of serious threats last month.