

Reporters Without Borders

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Americas - Nicaragua

Protection requested

Journalists want protection against attacks by government supporters

22 July 2014

Around 60 Nicaraguan journalists demonstrated outside national police headquarters on 17 July to demand effective police protection against violence by government supporters, who often use force to break up opposition protests.

Journalists accuse the police of being too passive when supporters of the Sandinista Front government resort to indiscriminate violence against anti-government protesters, resulting in attacks on reporters who are there to cover the protests.

Supporters on motorcycles, known as the "motorcycle brigade," often accompany the public appearances of the president and first lady or other senior members of the Sandinista Front, which has been in power again since 2006 after 16 years in opposition.

When the motorcycle brigade arrived to disperse a protest outside the Supreme Electoral Council building on 16 July, *Canal 12* TV cameraman **Xavier Castro** – who was covering the protest – was clubbed by a man in a motorcycle helmet and his camera was smashed beyond repair because he had to use it fend off the blows.

The police did not intervene to protect Castro, although the Supreme Electoral Council is right opposite police headquarters. Furthermore, the police showed little interest when he filed a complaint afterwards, he said.

Canal 2 reporter **Edgardo Trejos** has a similar complaint about an incident on 9 July, when he tried to interview the health ministry's director of supply warehouses and the director's driver drove his car into him. "I filed a complaint about this attack but there was no investigation," he said.

"We support the demands of these Nicaraguan journalists," said Camille Soulier, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Americas desk. "Their safety should be guaranteed by the police, who have a duty to protect all citizens regardless of their views. Intimidation and violence against journalists should be investigated in an exemplary manner. They should not go unpunished."

Captain Fernando Borge, the national police spokesman, seemed unimpressed by the 82 signatures at the foot of the letter handed in by the journalists and declined to make any comment aside from claiming that he was unaware of any of the incidents that prompted the protest.

The journalists were filmed as they left the police station, fuelling a climate of suspicion in which any question by journalist can be construed as hostile action, a climate that encourages self-censorship and complicates journalists' work.

Despite the extreme polarization of the Nicaraguan media, which government supporters and opponents use to wage vicious feuds, Nicaragua's journalists had always tended to close ranks when one of them was attacked, regardless of his or her political views.

But some journalists have now taken to employing the previously unused term of "independent" to label themselves and set themselves apart from journalists working for pro-government media, who get privileged access to official events.

The culture of secrecy espoused by many senior government officials is all the more disturbing when information of public interest is involved. It is reinforcing the widespread feeling that questioning the general lack of transparency is tantamount to a betrayal of national interests.

As a result, those who express or report critical opinions are exposed to public condemnation by government supporters, many of whom feel justified in using force to back up their disapproval.

No matter how necessary a debate may be, it can never justify the use of violence. The armed

attacks on buses carrying Sandinista Front supporters on the night of 19 July, in which five people were killed and dozens wounded, must therefore be firmly condemned. These ambushes clearly aimed in the most hateful manner to revive the darkest moments of the Nicaraguan civil war that caused tens of thousands of casualties between 1980 and 1990.

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