

XIX

ARTICLE 19

STATEMENT

Nicaragua: Freedom of Expression is an Essential Component to the Upholding and Strengthening of Democracy

A number of recent incidents in Nicaragua show a worrying trend for freedom of expression in the country. On 18 November, during a march against the Electoral Council (CSE) in the City of Leon in Western Nicaragua various reporters were injured. Rocks were thrown at them, and some of their property was damaged. Several local radio stations were also attacked and vandalised by a group of alleged government supporters.

There have been reports of attacks against journalists covering the aftermath of the contested local elections in Leon, Nicaragua on November 9th. On November 18th representatives of newspapers *La Prensa* and *El Nuevo Diario*, and TV station *Canal 2*, were stoned and prevented from reaching the scene of a demonstration against election irregularities. Reports state that the journalists were attacked by people carrying clubs and machetes with signs that read “love and reconciliation”. They were said to have asked the reporters where they were going and then to have threatened them, calling them “lying liberal media”.

Two photographers Miguel Alvarez from *Agence France Presse* and Germán Miranda from *La Prensa* were injured by rocks thrown at them, as was Ary Neil Pantoja of *El Nuevo Diario*. Some property was also destroyed including a *Canal 2* truck. There are also reports of attacks on the premises of several local radio stations *Radio Darío*, *Radio Metro Stereo*, and *Radio Caricias* in the city and damage done to their property. Two days after the attack, representatives of the Nicaraguan Journalists Union arranged an emergency meeting to address the recent upsurge in violence against the media. Elsa Gómez, President of the Union stated that members had come together due to their increasing worries regarding the situation.

These incidents depict a deteriorating situation for freedom of expression and indeed human rights in general throughout the country. Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right that paves the way for a range of other human rights, and for the enabling of democracy. This right is protected by a number of international instruments which Nicaragua has ratified, including ARTICLE 19 of the International Covenant on civil and political rights which protects everyone’s right to freedom of expression, including the right to seek receive and impart information. As such it

includes the right of citizens to express their ideas as well as the right of society to be informed.

The recent attacks against the press in Nicaragua constitute therefore a double violation of the right to freedom of expression: not only has the individual's right to expression been restricted, but also the collective right of society to be informed. These actions greatly undermine media diversity and the expression of plurality of ideas, both essential elements for democracy.

The Nicaraguan government is under an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the right to freedom of expression. This includes the obligation to protect the journalists against attacks by others and to ensure that there is an environment in which all citizens have access to information. So far, though, the Nicaraguan government has failed to take appropriate and required actions to ensure that the journalists are able to report and work in all safety.

The Vienna Declaration and Programme Action (1993) recognises that democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. In this context the full exercise of freedom of expression is essential to the progressive realization of a democracy that respects all human rights.

ARTICLE 19 expresses its solidarity with the journalists that were victims of recent aggressions and reinforces the need to recognise the importance of their role in informing society and strengthening democracy.

ARTICLE 19 calls on the Nicaraguan State to clearly demonstrate that acts of violence and intimidation of the press are clearly unacceptable and are not, in any way, condoned by the state. The Nicaraguan authorities should take all the measures in their power to investigate the attacks and threats, bring those responsible to justice, and ensure that such incidents are not repeated. Until this is achieved it will be impossible to ensure that Nicaraguans have access to a diverse media culture in which all points of view can be expressed and respected-an essential condition to the holding of free and fair democratic elections.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

- For more information: please contact Ricardo González ricardo@article19.org
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.