

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/chile-journalist-denied-passport-over-61-20-08-2012,43248.html>

Americas - Chile

Buck-passing

Journalist denied passport over 61-year-old libel conviction

20 August 2012

Hernán Uribe Ortega, an 88-year-old journalist with a history of political involvement and defending his colleagues, may be unable to travel to Caracas next month for the annual congress of the Latin American Journalists' Federation (FELAP), which he helped to found in 1976, because the Chilean authorities are citing a 61-year-old defamation conviction as grounds for refusing to renew his passport.

"This would be nothing more than absurd if it did not violate the freedom of movement of someone whose job is to gather news and information," Reporters Without Borders said. "The renewal of Uribe's passport was already held up in 2006 for the same reason. Must he be held to account for a conviction that lapsed years ago every time his passport expires?"

"The bureaucratic buck-passing has gone on for long enough and must be brought to an end without delay by the government, which has promised to intervene. Uribe must be free to attend the FELAP congress in Caracas on 1-2 September."

While working for the now defunct newspaper *Democracia* in 1951, Uribe was sentenced to a spell of house arrest under the supervision of the Investigative Police (PDI) on a charge of insulting President Gabriel González Videla, who ruled from 1946 to 1952.

This kind of offence ceases to have any kind of judicial enforceability after five years. Coincidentally, five years is also the period for which Chilean passports are valid. Uribe used his last passport but one in 2005 to go to a FELAP meeting in Buenos Aires.

When he tried to renew it in June 2006 in order to attend FELAP's 30th anniversary celebration a few months later in Mexico City, the Civil Register and Identification Service (SRCEI) – the agency that issues passports – asked him to produce documentary evidence that he had served the 1951 conviction.

The agency did this under a 2002 law that empowers it to make this kind of request in order to ensure that no sentences are pending. It also asked him to produce a document relating to a 1969 freedom of expression case involving then finance minister Andrés Zaldívar, which did not result in a conviction.

Uribe finally got his passport at the last moment after receiving support from fellow journalists.

Six years later, history is repeating itself because of the 2002 law. The PDI and the SRCEI blame each other for the loss of documents that is again blocking renewal of Uribe's passport although the documents concern an offence with a long-expired statute of limitations.

"The PDI says it does not have Uribe's house arrest order and that it is the SRCEI's problem," **Marcelo Castillo**, the president of the Journalists' Association (CDP), told Reporters Without Borders. "The SRCEI responds that it is a police information technology problem."

Castillo added that he raised the case with presidential chief of staff Andrés Chadwick on 9 August and that Chadwick assured him that the government would intervene on Uribe's behalf. Castillo mentioned the case during a meeting at the presidential palace about the [many attacks on journalists during demonstrations](#) in recent months.

Journalists still in danger

With university and secondary-school students resuming a series of protests and a nationwide education strike scheduled for 23 August, the safety of journalists continues to pose a challenge. A group of youths was blamed for an arson attack on a *Red Televisión* TV truck on 16 August during the forcible eviction of students from the two secondary schools they had been occupying.

Reporters Without Borders urges all those involved to act responsibly, including the police, who are often [accused of excessive violence](#). The organization also reiterates its call for the withdrawal of the proposed Hinzpeter Law, a demand shared by the protesters.

The law – an earlier version of which would have [turned journalists into police auxiliaries](#) – would criminalize public expression.

The safety of journalists who cover sensitive issues is also still a source of concern, Reporters Without Borders said.

"We are thinking in particular of **Mauricio Weibel**, who reports for several foreign media and the Union of South American Nations. He has been warned about the 'risks' he is running ever since he began revealing details from the recently-opened archives of the 1973-1990 military dictatorship. He should be given appropriate protection."
