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Panama: Journalists, Human Rights Advocates & Labor Leaders Protest Repressive Legislation

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Nov. 8, an estimated 300 journalists marched down a main thoroughfare in Panama City, and rallied in front of the presidential palace. The protesters attempted to submit a letter to President Guillermo Endara requesting that "slander" be changed from a criminal to a civil offense. The letter said, "We are here because 21 years of castrated journalism has left us with a bitter taste of exile, threats, pressures and fears that we never want to repeat." President Endara refused to accept the letter and told the crowd that the law criminalizing slander would remain intact. According to the protesters, at least 60 formal suits have been filed against journalists in 1990, most by government officials. Persons convicted of slander can be sentenced from two to five years in prison. Earlier in the week, Endara filed a slander and damages suit against El Siglo reporter Dagoberto Franco. Franco wrote a column titled, "Endara: The Great Swindle." The journalist was subsequently detained for two days and released on \$5,000 bond. On Nov. 10, Robert Troncoso, president of the independent Panamanian Human Rights Committee (CPDH), accused the government of maintaining repressive laws inherited from the former regime. He pointed out that laws criticized by President Guillermo Endara during his election campaign remain in effect. According to Troncoso, the fact that the constitution is a product of the former regime reflects the inconsistency between what Endara says and what he does. Organized labor leaders have called for elimination of the so-called war laws which they say are used by the current government to fire public employees. (Basic data from AP, 11/08/90; AFP, 11/10/90)

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