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17 Foreign & Salvadoran Journalists Detained In San Francisco Gotera, Morazan

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Feb. 2, 17 foreign and Salvadoran journalists were taken by soldiers to military headquarters in San Francisco Gotera, Morazan department. The news personnel were detained for three hours, and their equipment photographic film, cameras, portable computers, tapes, notebooks confiscated. The journalists employed by AP, AFP, Reuters, IPS, EFE, WTN, VISNEWS, CBS, Los Angeles Times and Salpress were en route from Perquin, Morazan, where they covered the return of seven surface-to-air missiles by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front to the Nicaraguan army. Col. Oscar Leon Linares accused the reporters of failing to secure safe-conduct passes from military authorities to travel in a conflict zone. The colonel said he acted on order from the military high command to confiscate equipment and materials obtained in Perquin. Soldiers reportedly attempted to conduct a "strip search" of two female reporters, but were deterred by the women's colleagues. The journalists submitted a complaint to the army high command, demanding the return of their equipment. The complaint pointed out that freedom of movement throughout national territory as guaranteed by the Salvadoran Constitution does not grant the military exceptional powers to limit this right. A government communique released Feb. 3 accused the journalists of "clear and open violation of established norms and proceedings." The communique said the reporters ignored requests by soldiers posted along the highway to Perquin. The journalists responded by saying they never received orders or requests pertaining to their trip to Perquin, and military posts along said highway were abandoned. The government communique asserted that circumstances required confiscation of the reporters' belongings. The statement added, "such actions do not constitute restrictions on the constitutional freedom of the press." On Feb. 4, the Association of Foreign Journalists in El Salvador (SPECA) released a communique denouncing the incident, described as "an effort by the government and the armed forces to restrict freedom of the press and to arbitrarily limit the dissemination of information concerning important events in the country." Next, the SPECA rejected "government accusations that we ignored [instructions at] military checkpoints for the simple and obvious reason" that in order to respect such instructions, the posts "must first of all exist." Under a May 8, 1989, agreement signed by SPECA and armed forces representatives, the army agreed, among other things, to avoid confiscation of journalistic materials under any circumstances. Next, SPECA charged that the government and the military have obstructed journalists' access to conflict zones during the last 10 years in attempts to "limit the diffusion of perspectives or viewpoints" contrary to their own. The journalists reiterated that they were detained for over three hours. Military spokespersons claimed the group was released after several minutes. The army promised to return the confiscated property, but did not specify a date. (Basic data from ACAN-EFE, EFE, 02/04/91; AFP, 02/03-04/91)

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