

5-3-2001

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### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Court Absolves Rios Montt." (2001). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8837>

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## Court Absolves Rios Montt

*by LADB Staff*

*Category/Department: Guatemala*

*Published: 2001-05-03*

In April, the *Comite para la Proteccion de Periodistas (CPP)* issued a report critical of the state of press freedom in Panama. The report said that the government failed to fulfill its promise to rescind its harsh press laws, took new steps to restrict press freedom, and imprisoned more journalists on slander charges. The report surveyed freedom of the press worldwide, and while Panama had a much better record than such countries as Colombia and Cuba, as many as eight journalists were jailed in 2000. This was the third recent negative report on the press in Panama.

The US government and the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA) issued reports complaining about legal actions taken against daily newspapers *El Panama American*, *El Siglo*, and others. Last year, Organization of American States (OAS) relator Santiago Canton wrote a report critical of the press laws, but Attorney General Jose Antonio Sossa rejected the relator's findings (see *NotiCen*, 2000-09-21). To respond to the government's claim that the 2000 report did not include recent information, Canton postponed release of his subsequent report, due in April, to gather additional information.

In February, a judge prohibited *La Prensa* journalist Gustavo Gorriti, a Peruvian national, from leaving the country. A lawyer representing Attorney General Sossa, who is suing Gorriti for slander, requested the order. Gorriti was also sued by former President Ernesto Perez Balladares (1994-1999) for slander because of *La Prensa's* reports on the US revocation of his visa (see *NotiCen*, 2001-02-15). Some 50 journalists have been charged recently with slander.

In mid-April, a criminal court judge sentenced two journalists to 18 months in prison or payment of a US\$400 fine for slander. The two journalists had published names of doctors and dentists identified by the attorney general as practicing with false credentials. One dentist, who had a bona fide degree, sued the reporters for slander. But the reporters testified that they took the names from a list issued by a government prosecutor. Also sentenced in April was a journalist who published the name of an indigent who died in a park. The judge in the case sentenced the journalist to one year in prison for damaging the honor of the indigent's family, who objected to having the information published.

The *Sindicato de Periodistas de Panama (SIP)* released a statement in April complaining of governmental persecution and intimidation of the press. The government crackdown on the press "has converted the exercise of journalism into the most dangerous, unprotected, and vulnerable of professions," said the statement. The statement also said attacks on journalists had increased with the growth of journalistic exposes of corruption.

Replying to the criticisms at the end of April, President Mireya Moscoso said she was not an enemy of the press. Unlike Panamanian dictators of the past, Moscoso said, she did not demand that the press print only what she wanted. She suggested that when journalists had information on a

subject, they should call her for confirmation. At the same time she criticized the media for not publishing positive things about her administration. "We inaugurate [public] works every weekend, nevertheless, we see that absolutely nothing appears about these things in the newspapers."

Alfonso Zamora of the Cruzada Nacional por la Libertad de Expresion said that Moscoso told him she would study the possibility of pardons for journalists who were convicted or charged. But Winston Spadafora, interior and justice minister, opposed pardons for anyone charged but not tried. "If we criticized the government of Perez Balladares because it pardoned persons being tried, we aren't going to make the same error," he said. Pardons, he said were for people convicted and for political crimes. Spadafora currently has suits pending against two El Panama America journalists.

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