

Nicaragua: Arrest and deportation of US-Austrian journalist shows escalating pressure on press freedom

ARTICLE 19, Front Line Defenders, Freedom of the Press Foundation, and Reporters Without Borders call on the Nicaraguan government to immediately halt the harassment and repression of journalists, and investigate death threats, harassment and doxxing of journalist Carl David Goette-Luciak. We urge the Nicaraguan authorities to respect the right to freedom of expression of journalists, including foreign and independent journalists, in Nicaragua, and to immediately, independently, and transparently investigate death threats, the release of personal information (doxxing), and harassment of independent US-Austrian journalist Carl David Goette-Luciak for his journalistic work in Nicaragua, and to put in place measures for the protection of all journalists.

On 1 October 2018, Goette-Luciak was arrested at his home in Managua, and his belongings were seized. No explanation for his arrest or charges were provided, he was taken for questioning, and subsequently deported. Goette-Luciak is an independent journalist who was in Nicaragua covering events for a number of international news outlets. His arrest and deportation followed two weeks of online campaigns against him which included doxxing (the release of his home address), and calls for his capture, imprisonment, or murder for his coverage of the ongoing crisis in the country. During his interrogation, he was asked if he was a CIA agent and had his personal devices searched under duress.

Goette-Luciak had previously become the target of an online campaign on Facebook and Twitter, beginning in September 2018. This was fuelled by false claims that Goette-Luciak is a CIA agent working in Nicaragua, is directly aiding rebel groups, and is working with Nicaraguan opposition groups, leading to an intense campaign of doxxing and calls for violence against him. Online posts quickly began advocating for his arrest, assault, or torture. ARTICLE 19, Front Line Defenders, Freedom of the Press Foundation, and Reporters Without Borders consider these posts to constitute incitement to violence and a direct threat against Goette-Luciak's life, and are deeply concerned by the lack of investigation into them. After the campaign began, Goette-Luciak was forced to relocate for his safety. There are signs that the campaign may have led to his subsequent arrest, detention and deportation by Nicaraguan authorities.

Attacks against journalists continue to be perpetrated with impunity in Nicaragua, and the forced removal of a journalist based on his reporting further contributes to a climate of fear, censorship, and a culture of self-censorship.

On 1 October, Edison Lanza, Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the IACHR wrote, “The news of the deportation of Carl David Goette-Luciak underlines the reality of a regime which is marching inexorably towards oppression and censorship of all voices which they consider to be against their interests.” Special Rapporteur Lanza had previously condemned “the persistence of constant threats against the safety of journalists, surveillance, and political pressure on the media in Nicaragua,” in a press statement. The Office of the Special Rapporteur made an “urgent appeal” to the State of Nicaragua “to stop these actions and guarantee the free and independent functioning of the media in the country.”

International human rights law requires the Nicaraguan authorities to protect journalists from threats of violence. Such offences should also be considered particularly serious where they are designed to intimidate a person from exercising their fundamental rights, including to freedom of expression. ARTICLE 19, Front Line Defenders, Freedom of the Press Foundation and Reporters Without Borders, note that foreign national journalists, reporting on political struggles from within the country, are particularly vulnerable to these forms of censorship by intimidation, harassment, and direct threat.

Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) requires States to protect the right to freedom of expression, including that of journalists and media workers, whose ability to work is essential to ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms: explicitly recognised in Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals. States are also obliged to promote a safe and enabling environment for journalists to perform their work independently and without undue interference, taking appropriate steps to prevent violence, threats and attacks against journalist, and ensure impartial, speedy, thorough, independent and effective investigations into all alleged or threats of violence falling within their jurisdiction. Leaders and representatives should refrain from stigmatising or contributing to the stigmatisation of journalists and other media professionals.

The online harassment and doxxing of Goette-Luciak constitute incitement to violence, and should immediately be investigated as such. His arbitrary arrest and deportation are deeply concerning acts by the Nicaraguan state, which must also be remedied.

We recall that the 2012 Joint Declaration adopted by international and regional freedom of expression mandates, condemn “crimes against freedom of expression.” The Joint

Declaration calls on authorities to unequivocally condemn attacks such as those experienced by Goette-Luciak. The declaration sets out States' obligations to prevent and prohibit such attacks, and to ensure protection for individuals likely to be targeted for exercising their right to freedom of expression. It also sets out the obligation to ensure independent, speedy, and effective investigations, as well as redress for victims.

Intimidation of journalists is not new in Nicaragua and Goette-Luciak's harassment and arrest suggests an increase in repression of journalism. Since the crisis began in June 2018, numerous journalists have faced intimidation, threats, and violence. Several journalists have been seriously injured, and one, Ángel Gahona, was killed while reporting on a protest. On 27 August 2018, Brazilian filmmaker Emilia Mello was also deported after being arrested filming the demonstrations in Nicaragua.

"Carl David Goette-Luciak is a freelancer for The Guardian and has contributed reporting on recent violence in Nicaragua. We find the online campaign against Carl David Goette-Luciak extremely troubling. We urge the Nicaraguan authorities to investigate who's responsible for these acts and to ensure the safety of Carl David and all journalists in their line of work," said the Guardian News & Media spokesperson. The Guardian - one of the main outlets Goette-Luciak writes for - has also been targeted by the campaign for their coverage of Nicaragua.

ARTICLE 19, Front Line Defenders, Freedom of the Press Foundation, and Reporters Without Borders reiterate their call for an independent and transparent investigation into the threats, doxxing, and harassment of Goette-Luciak and other journalists in Nicaragua, to ensure accountability for those responsible and redress to Goette-Luciak. We further call on the Nicaraguan government to take action to protect journalists in the country from harassment and violence, as well as implementing measures to protect the expression rights of journalists reporting in country.