

Reporters Without Borders

RWB Representative visits a Mexican journalist jailed in Texas.

Reporters Without Borders Washington Director Lucie Morillon had initially planned to travel to El Paso on November 20 to testify at the hearing of Mexican reporter Emilio Gutierrez Gutierrez. Accompanied by his son, Emilio Gutierrez fled Mexico for the US last June after receiving death threats and requested political asylum. He has since been held in an El Paso detention center in Texas. While his lawyer believes he has a strong case and the judge seems sympathetic, the trial attorney for Immigration Services asked that the November 20th scheduled hearing be postponed until March. The reporter's provisional release was denied by the detention center, who has argued there was no proof that he was not a threat to society and that his identity was yet to be established.

Emilio Gutierrez lawyer, Carlos Specter, who is defending the reporter pro bono, asked Lucie Morillon to come down so she could meet with him, Emilio Gutierrez and local journalists and NGOs to discuss the situation and work together to obtain his release before the next hearing and insure a favorable decision in his asylum case.

On Thursday Nov 20, Ms Morillon went to the detention center with Mr Specter who introduced her as an expert witness on behalf of Mr Gutierrez. She was able to see Emilio Gutierrez for a little over five minutes before immigration agents intervened and asked her to step out, arguing that she was a journalist and as so, didn't have the appropriate authorization to meet with him.

While Ms Morillon assured the supervisors that she had notified the officer in charge of the case of her visit that day and that she was not there as a journalist but as an expert witness on press freedom issues, officials told her she could not be let in on such short notice since they needed to get the proper accreditation

After the brief visit, Emilio Gutierrez's lawyer showed her some court documents, introduced her to some local NGOs who deal with asylum issues, and with representatives of the local diocese, whose bishop may write a letter of support to Emilio Gutierrez.

Ms Morillon also met with journalists from El Diario in Ciudad Juarez, whose colleague Armando Rodriguez was killed last week. The Mexican reporters were very emotional in their accounts and told her that RWB' support was extremely important during these difficult times.

On Friday, Ms Morillon met with Mr Campos, the deputy director of the center. She explained to him that Mexico was now one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists and that 44 reporters had been murdered since 2000, including one of Emilio Gutierrez's colleagues less than a week ago. Sending Emilio Gutierrez back to Mexico was tantamount to signing his death sentence. She added that Reporters Without Borders was familiar with the case and believed that Emilio Gutierrez did not represent a threat to society nor was he likely to go into hiding. She told Mr. Campos that the best option would be to release Emilio Gutierrez so he could prepare his defense appropriately and Ms Morillon explained that more and more reporters had begun asking questions about Emilio Gutierrez's situation.

Reporters Without Borders issued a press release on the story and on the many risks faced by many Mexican journalists. The organization is now working on a larger mobilization for Emilio Gutierrez and his colleagues. It will be launching a press and communications campaign to denounce the impunity enjoyed by journalists' murderers and ask for Emilio Gutierrez release. The international press freedom organization will also be providing legal assistance to journalists seeking to leave the country after being threatened, ensuring that they are aware of their rights and duties, and the process to follow while applying for political asylum abroad.