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Cacho Faces Defamation Charges in Mexico

By Theresa Braine, WeNews correspondent

MEXICO CITY (WOMENSENEWS) – In a country where journalists are routinely killed by drug traffickers for reporting on the narcotics trade, Lydia Cacho Ribeiro has taken aim at another scourge: the forced prostitution of minors.

Her book, “The Demons of Eden: the Power Behind Pornography,” published in Spanish in May 2005, alleges the involvement of important Mexican businessmen in child pornography rings.

In it she names Jose Kamel Nacif Borge, a textile executive in Puebla, Mexico, as a close friend and associate of Jean Succar Kuri, a businessman jailed in Arizona awaiting extradition to Mexico on child pornography and prostitution charges. In the book, Cacho alleges that Nacif is not only a friend but also a protector of Succar and implies that Nacif may be a child abuser as well.

Nacif responded with defamation charges against the 42-year-old author that led to her arrest in Cancun on Dec. 16. On that date police took her on a 21-hour car ride to Puebla, capital of the state of Puebla in central Mexico, where the arrest warrant was issued.

“The way in which I was detained, as if I were a drug trafficker, with four armored vehicles, with a police escort, (it’s) the kind of thing we would like to have had to arrest those who assassinate the women of Juarez,” Cacho told Women’s eNews, referring ruefully to the unsolved murders of hundreds of women in the border city.

The attorney general’s office in Puebla, whose state police picked up Cacho, said that only three police officers accompanied the journalist.

“The elements of the judicial police completed their job and the apprehension order was carried out exactly according to legal procedure,” Juan Carlos Lopez Roja, a spokesperson, told Women’s eNews.

Over the course of the next several months to a year a judge will review Cacho’s case – there are no jury trials in Mexico – and decide whether she is guilty, or not. She faces six months to a year in prison if found guilty.

Defamation a Crime

As in much of Latin America, defamation in Mexico is a crime, not a civil offense.

In Mexico the words only have to harm a reputation. Even if the information about a subject is true, it can still be ruled as defamation. Cacho says she needs to prove that she did not make the allegations in the book out of malice, but that it was necessary for the performance of her job as a journalist.

Cacho's book also includes the transcript of a video in which Succar states outright that he has sex with girls as young as 5. The video, part of a sting operation in which the initial victim secretly taped a conversation she had with him, was obtained by news outlets when it came out two years ago and was widely publicized.

"They are very close friends; they've declared as much," Cacho says of Succar and Nacif, known in Mexico as the "Denim King" for his jeans-making plants in Puebla. What she wrote in her book about Nacif was an exact transcript of what the victim told the federal police, Cacho says.

This was enough to bring the defamation charges and prompt what Joel Simon, deputy director of the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, calls a "judicial kidnapping."

He says defamation's classification as a crime throughout most of Latin America limits free speech. His organization has asked Mexican President Vicente Fox to appoint a special prosecutor to investigate crimes against freedom of expression.

"Our view is that defamation should never be a criminal offense," says Simon. "It's not a crime. If in the exercise of free speech you offend someone or defame someone . . . it's a civil matter between the journalist and the person who was allegedly defamed."

Threatens Freedom of Expression

Amnesty International has called Cacho's detention "judicial harassment" and said it threatens Cacho's right to freedom of expression as well as making her other work more dangerous. The London-based International PEN Foundation and other groups have also spoken out in favor of Cacho.

The activist and author says her psychologist mother, who treated many victims of domestic and sexual abuse, instilled in her six children the belief that "we have an obligation to do something for our country, not as an act, but as a responsibility," Cacho told Women's eNews in an interview, adding that her mother's influence made her want to help.

For about four years, Cacho has run a center for domestic-violence victims in Cancun, the Centro Integral de Atencion a la Mujer (the Integrated Service Center for Women), which has gained a reputation for protecting women estranged from husbands in organized crime and who are vulnerable to being silenced for what they know about their illicit businesses.

Cacho is well-established in Mexican journalism as the editorial director of the magazine *Esta Boca Es Mia* (This Mouth Is Mine), an alternative women's magazine based in Cancun. She is a member of *Comunicacion e Informacion de la Mujer* (Women's Communication and

Information network), an international network of female journalists and other professionals based in Mexico City that aims to disseminate information useful to women. She is also a contributor to the Sunday magazines of two popular newspapers and a columnist for various newspapers.

Once Sought Tranquility

This was not what the Sorbonne-educated daughter of French immigrants expected when she left chaotic Mexico City 20 years ago for what she hoped would be a “tranquil and peaceful” life in Cancun, which the Mexican government had just carved out of the jungle to make a grandiose tourist mecca.

Instead, Cacho has pursued work that has led to threats and perhaps one attack. She suspects that her 1998 rape in a bus station was meant to silence her.

Now, her risks are escalating. Since shortly after the publication of her book, Cacho has been under federal police protection, although they did not have the authority to protect her from arrest by Puebla state officers.

The pedophile case first came to Cacho’s attention when one of Succar’s victims went public and filed charges a couple of years ago, she said. The victim said Succar had shown up at her school one day, when she was 13, and invited her to his house to swim and watch television. After a visit or two he forced her to have sex and later he had her round up other girls even younger. She pressed charges four years later at the urging of a teacher she had confided in.

After testifying, the victim, whose name is withheld in the book, turned to Cacho’s domestic-violence center for help because she was being threatened.

Cacho referred her to a shelter in Texas where she hoped the girl would be safe, but Succar’s lawyers found her, Cacho says, and got her to retract her statement. Cacho said the girl has since gone to an institution in Los Angeles, where she is being treated for psychological trauma.

Theresa Braine writes for several publications as a freelance journalist based in Mexico City.

For more information:

Centro de Investigacion y Atencion a la Mujer (in Spanish): <http://www.ciamcancun.org/>

Dia Siete – Book excerpt from “Los demonios del Eden: el poder detras de la pornografia” (in Spanish): <http://www.diasiete.com/nota.cfm?nro=277&pl=masinfo&s=1,27,15>

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