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Mexico must investigate US journalist's death

Amnesty International today has urged an investigation into the death of US video journalist Brad Will after the political activist wrongly accused of the killing was released.

The organization welcomed the release of Juan Manuel Martinez after he won an appeal. It also demanded an investigation into the abuses committed by the security forces during violent political protests in the Mexican state of Oaxaca in 2006 when Brad Will and at least 17 others, most of them political activists, were killed.

“This release was long overdue,” said Kerrie Howard, Americas Deputy Director at Amnesty International. “Juan Manuel has been used as a scapegoat by the Mexican authorities to claim there has been progress in the investigation around Brad Will’s death.”

A Mexican Federal Court today ordered the release of Juan Manuel Martinez due to lack of evidence. He had been wrongly detained since 2008. Witnesses to Brad Will's killing have also been falsely implicated and face criminal prosecution.

Amnesty International believes the arrest was the result of a deeply flawed investigation by the Office of the Federal Attorney General (PGR). It insisted Brad Will was shot at close range even though independent forensic tests showed the shot came from a distance.

The need to resolve the case became paramount after the US Congress made it a condition for the release of some of the funding to the Merida Initiative - a major regional bi-lateral security co-operation and assistance programme.

“The scape-goating of Juan Manuel amounts to a serious misuse of the criminal justice system which prevented a proper investigation and ensured the real perpetrator of Brad Will’s killing is still at large,” said Kerrie Howard. “Juan Manuel's safety must be guaranteed and he must receive appropriate compensation for the unnecessary suffering he has experienced as a result of his wrongful imprisonment by the authorities.”

No one has been brought to justice for any of the killings that took place during the Oaxaca protests in 2006. The PGR looked into seven of these cases, but in February 2008, it informed the families of the victims that the investigations were to be shelved on grounds of lack of evidence.

The family of Brad Will, Physicians for Human Rights, and the National Human Rights Commission have all highlighted the flaws in the PGR investigation, including the use of incorrect forensic evidence, and the failure to conduct a full and impartial investigation.

Background Information

Juan Manuel Martinez was a sympathizer of the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO) Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca, an umbrella organization which led political protests in Oaxaca in 2006, and supported an opposition party during municipal elections in Santa Lucia del Camino, near Oaxaca City, in 2007.

US video journalist Brad Will was filming a confrontation between protesters and local police when he was shot.

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