

MEXICO - Writer Who Exposed Major Child Sex Ring Fears the Worst is Yet to Come (by Diego Cevallos, IPS)

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IPS - When Mexican freelance journalist and human rights activist Lydia Cacho published a book last year exposing a paedophile ring, she was warned by friends and colleagues that she would run into trouble.

It did not take long for their warnings to come true. She was arrested by the police, driven 900 kms to the state of Puebla, held for 30 hours, mistreated and threatened. Now that she is the target of the wrath of powerful Mexican businessmen and politicians, she is worried that the worst is yet to come.

"Now I am news, and that protects me somewhat. But when I am no longer news, I'm afraid of reprisals by these criminals, who stop at nothing," Cacho told IPS.

Her book, "Los demonios del Edén" (The Demons of Eden), contains the personal accounts of minors who talk about the sexual abuse they suffered at the hands of a child prostitution and pornography ring in which prominent figures were allegedly involved.

Cacho said that her personal plight is not important, and that what matters is that the existence of child sexual exploitation and pornography in Mexico has come to light. "In the end, the real heroes of this whole thing are the girls and boys who dared to tell their stories," she stressed.

The 43-year-old writer, who is the director of a Cancún women's shelter, has been under police protection since she began to receive threats last year.

More recently, she was dragged into a scandal after a dozen taped telephone conversations were leaked to the press and broadcast on Feb. 14. In the obscenity-laced conversations, a voice identified as that of Mario Marín, the governor of the state of Puebla, can be heard telling a man who is allegedly textile mogul Kamel Nacif that "I just gave a bump on the head to that old witch."

In her book, Cacho described Nacif as a friend of Jean Succar, a Lebanese-born businessman who is facing charges of arranging paedophile parties.

The illegally taped phone conversations attributed to the governor and various individuals, including a reporter, apparently took place in December, after Cacho was taken into custody by the police in the southeastern resort town of Cancún and driven to Puebla.

In the conversations, the voices identified as those of Nacif and Marín discuss how they had the activist arrested and thrown into a cell with "nutcases and dykes (lesbians)," so that she would be raped.

That did not happen, however, because in the prison in Puebla, "the prisoners themselves and the guards protected me," said the writer.

But she was mistreated. Cacho described how she was threatened during the nearly 20-hour trip to Puebla and was only allowed to eat once.

When the news of her arrest broke, the rights watchdog Amnesty International, the World Organisation Against Torture, the Inter-American Press Association and other international groups raised an outcry, and Cacho was released on bail.

Nacif, a textile magnate with factories in Puebla and other states, filed suit against Cacho for criminal libel last October. He is named in her book as a close friend of hotel owner Succar, who fled Mexico in 2003 after being exposed as the head of a child sex ring in Cancún. Succar was arrested in the United States in February 2004 and is currently awaiting the conclusion of an extradition trial.

Marín, a member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) - which ruled Mexico for 71 years until 2000 - insists that the recording of his telephone conversation with Nacif was doctored. But numerous independent experts have refuted this claim.

The Catholic Church, politicians, business representatives and other sectors are calling for the governor's resignation, but he and his fellow PRI members maintain that he is innocent and will not step down.

Nevertheless, the pressure on Marín is building alongside the wave of indignation sparked by the tawdry telephone conversations.

In addition, the Mexican Congress has called on the Supreme Court of Justice to investigate Marín, in order to determine whether or not he is guilty of manipulating the courts in Puebla to attack Cacho.

"I will not rest until I see Marín removed from office and punished for defending paedophiles and for using the full weight of his power to manipulate the justice system and persecute me," said the activist, who is now working with her lawyers to prepare a lawsuit against the governor.

Nacif filed his suit against Cacho in Puebla, where most of his business interests are based and where he claims to have influential friends, including the governor himself. However, the crimes in which he is implicated took place in Cancún, and the book that accused him of involvement was published in Mexico City.

There are numerous irregularities in the trial against Cacho which demonstrate that Governor Marín and his friends manipulated the justice system to suit their own purposes, says Miguel Granados Chapa, a columnist with the Mexican daily Reforma.

Cacho, who is also the co-founder of the Centro Integral de Apoyo a la Mujer (CIAM), a shelter for victims of domestic violence and rape in her home base of Cancún, interviewed many of Succar's victims for her book. The youngsters described how the hotel owner sexually abused them himself, set up a prostitution ring to allow others to abuse them, and photographed them in order to sell the pornographic images on the Internet.

This case is just one thread in a vast web of similar rings throughout Mexico.

Some 17,000 minors in Mexico are victims of the sex trade, according to a study by researcher Elena Azaola, published in 2004. Azaola's research included visits to the establishments where these children and teenagers are forced to engage in prostitution and interviews with some of those who have managed to escape.

"I hope that my case will represent a watershed," marking the end of government apathy in the face of child sexual exploitation and the beginning of decisive action against this crime, said Cacho.