

El Nuevo Herald dismissals protested

An Internet campaign and some Cuban exiles protested the firing of El Nuevo Herald reporters paid for appearing on U.S. broadcasts.

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Some Cuban exiles, upset about the firing of two El Nuevo Herald reporters and a freelancer who received thousands of dollars in U.S. government pay as correspondents for Radio and TV Martí, protested the dismissals Tuesday and launched an Internet campaign.

"We reject the efforts of The Miami Herald to silence our voice in Cuba," Remedios Díaz-Oliver of the Cuban Liberty Council said at a news conference. "These journalists were professional and ethical."

Also Tuesday, the website www.fairplayforcubanamericans.info urged visitors to sign an online petition and download a letter addressed to Gary B. Pruitt, president and chief executive of McClatchy Co., parent company of The Miami Herald and El Nuevo Herald. The letter requests that a panel be established to determine whether the Miami Herald Media Co. should have fired the three journalists.

"Without resorting to a bunker mentality, we, nevertheless, feel that this action is one of the most blatant and direct rejections . . . of our community and of our right to be represented by our own voices in the pages of the newspaper," the petition states.

Howard Weaver, McClatchy vice president of news, said he has not received any petition or letters. "If we're contacted, we'll try to be responsive," he said.

The Miami Herald and El Nuevo Herald reported Sept. 8 that at least 10 local journalists, including three from El Nuevo Herald, were contracted as hosts or commentators on U.S.-government-owned Radio and TV Martí. El Nuevo Herald reporters Pablo Alfonso and Wilfredo Cancio Isla were dismissed. Olga Connor's freelance relationship with The Miami Herald Media Co. was severed.

With a \$37 million budget, Radio and TV Martí broadcast news and entertainment programs to Cuba in an attempt to undermine the island's communist regime and promote democracy. Their programming cannot be broadcast into the United States because of anti-propaganda laws.

Miami Herald Publisher Jesús Díaz Jr. met Monday with Cuban-American leaders. And in a front-page letter to readers on Sunday, he said he approved the dismissals because "as the publisher of these newspapers, I am deeply committed to the separation between government and a free press." He added that while The Miami Herald's editorial pages support Radio and TV Martí's mission, the reporters violated the company's conflict-of-interest rules.

But many readers, particularly Cuban Americans, have said the reporters were fired unjustly and too abruptly. As of Tuesday, 876 subscriptions were canceled at El Nuevo Herald and 449 at The Miami Herald. El Nuevo Herald's circulation totals 88,000 weekdays; The Miami Herald sells 296,000 copies daily.

In a related development, The Hartford (Conn.) Courant will no longer allow Washington Bureau Chief David Lightman to appear on the U.S. government radio network Voice of America. The decision was made after El Nuevo Herald reported last week that Voice of America paid Lightman and several other journalists to appear on its shows.