

# Ecuador frees activist, halts expulsion

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QUITO, Ecuador --

A deportation order against a U.S. environmental activist was revoked late Saturday, hours after Ecuador's president ordered him expelled for his role in a police raid to seize shark fins that were apparently illegally fished.

"I thought I would have to leave the country and leave my Ecuadorean wife and daughter here," Sean O'Hearn told The Associated Press by phone after being freed from the immigration center in Quito, where he was taken before dawn. "Now I am happy."

O'Hearn said he was visited during the day by Interior Minister Gustavo Larrea and a police commander who, at President Rafael Correa's request, listened to his story and announced the expulsion order would be reversed.

"There was no justification for revoking my visa," said O'Hearn, 33, a representative of the environmental group Sea Shepherd, based in Friday Harbor, Wash.

O'Hearn had accompanied police Tuesday on a raid in which they seized two tons of shark fins, apparently caught illegally in the days before a widely criticized presidential decree on shark fishing rules was enacted.

O'Hearn said he participated as a representative of Sea Shepherd, which he said signed an agreement with police to enforce environmental controls.

His participation prompted Correa to order him deported for interfering in Ecuadorean affairs. "I am not going to allow any foreigner to come here to tell us what to do," the president said on his morning radio show.

A report by immigration authorities accused the American of violating the country's national sovereignty by "participating in searches for Ecuadorean citizens," resulting in the revocation of his visa.

But O'Hearn's lawyer, Gina Solis, told the AP Saturday night that Correa reversed his own decision because the activist "has a valid visa from being married to an Ecuadorean and not having any criminal record."

"The deportation order was illegal," she added.

Fifteen people were detained in Tuesday's raid in the Pacific port of Manta, according to police. But a prosecutor later ordered them released and the hundreds of seized fins returned to the fishermen.

Correa's decree, which took effect that day, legalized the sale of shark fins if the sharks - some of them threatened species - are caught accidentally.

Environmentalists warn the measure will encourage illegal fishing of sharks, and some critics accuse the president of trying to win the support of fishermen for next month's election of a constitutional assembly.

In his radio program Correa defended the rule change, stressing that deliberate shark fishing will still be illegal. However he has not explained how authorities will determine whether sharks are caught accidentally or on purpose.

Noting that each fin can fetch about \$80 in Asia, where they are considered a delicacy, he called the measure a way to help fishermen who "want to bring bread to their children."

"They're telling us to be sensitive with sharks and insensitive with people," Correa said.