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Honduran President, Human Rights Activist Disagree on Cause of Violence Against Journalists

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Nearly forty journalists have been murdered in Honduras since the bloody coup of June 2009 (NotiCen, July 2, 2009), an event that unleashed a wave of repression that has not stopped and, according to human rights organizations, is worsening, with no sign of ending.

The post-coup repression resulted in opposition demonstrations being severely dissolved by military and police forces, with protestors killed, wounded, and arrested, and also in selective repression targeting opposition leaders and civil rights organizations (NotiCen, Aug. 20, 2009).

Repression has not stopped since the coup and is now basically selective, responding to a policy of state terror focused, among other sectors, on journalists, according to human rights organizations (NotiCen, June 14, 2012).

The killings of journalists respond to the general situation regarding citizen safety and, specifically, to organized crime, according to Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, who insists his government is not restricting freedom of information or of expression, because that is not done in a democracy.

The nongovernmental Comité por la Libre Expresión (C-Libre) warns about the criminal targeting of journalists and puts figures in the gruesome picture. In its latest report, Informe de Libertad de Expresión 2013, released last month, which includes figures comparing last year and 2012, C-Libre says that 38 journalists were murdered from the coup through last year, and 95% of the cases remain unpunished.

In the 5% that were tried, only the actual killers were brought to justice, while in none of the cases have the intellectual authors been determined, making those crimes more suspicious," according to C-Libre, which describes itself as "a coalition of journalists and other civil society members" founded en 2001 "with the purpose of promoting and defending freedom of expression and the right to information in Honduras."

The escalated killings led Honduran communicators to request the Washington-headquartered Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) for precautionary measures, which were effectively ordered by the continental body.

The Honduran state reacted by providing, in some cases, police and military protection at journalists’ homes or workplaces, an insufficient move that, in activists’ view, could actually be aimed not so much at protecting but at closely watching members of the Honduran press and their families.

Human rights activist says journalists specifically targeted

An exponent of that line of analysis, Honduran human rights activist Bertha Oliva told NotiCen that the human rights situation is constantly worsening in this Central American nation, and there is no hope of it reverting any time soon.
Since the 2009 coup, which toppled President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya, now an opposition deputy in the unicameral Congreso Nacional, repression has become selective, focusing on sectors, and "journalists and social communicators are one of those sectors, something that has caused major scandal and high uncertainty," Oliva said. "Because if one starts to see the frequency of murdered journalists years before, yes, that happened, not in the present magnitude, which has made this sector a target of repression, even though not all journalists opposed the coup, but I think that's where the danger lies in all this."

"Because that’s part of a strategy, as if to say, 'It's not because they’re opposition, it’s because of crime,' thus justifying that some of them were going astray. So, there’s a strong situation there, because it’s more than 30 journalists that have been murdered since the coup ... thus the situation continues," said Oliva, who pointed out that one of the latest cases occurred last month, in western Honduras.

Within this context, in some cases, precautionary measures "were requested to the Inter-American Commission," said the activist, referring to the IACHR. She also said that, as a response by the state, some journalists "are being accompanied by policemen or military, who are the same ones behind [the murders], and in other cases "there’s patrolling around their place of residence or their workplace."

"To me, it’s full control," she said, adding that, more than protecting those journalists, the state is "keeping an eye on them."

The need for the precautionary measures ordered by the commission is because "here, in Honduras, there’s no space for human rights defenders, a category that would include journalists and social communicators, but that would only be possible when there is a law to protect defenders," Oliva said.

Since last year, a bill is under debate by Congress, and in its text "the creation of a space such as the one I’m telling you about is promoted," the activist said, referring to the bill that recently passed the first of the three necessary debates before being voted on. Asked about the outlook, Oliva replied, "I believe that unfortunately for now this feast of terror and death continues because the actors remain unpunished, and that’s the problem we have to face up to."

"There’s no democracy, in Honduras, which has lost ... the independence of the three branches of power, where now the legislature and judiciary are an extension of the executive, or are in complete obedience to it," she warned. In such a framework, "when I tell you about fear, I assure you that no one in their right mind wants to report human rights abuses committed by agents of the Honduran state ... or by their mercenaries. No one."

"It’s a difficult situation, and I wish I could tell you, 'Look, it’s true that we’re now living difficult moments, but what one perceives is that they’re short term.' But no, this is expanding, and it’s a very, very strong agony," added the activist.

**President blames organized crime**

But JOH—as Hernández is usually referred to in Honduras—has a radically different view of things.
Precisely during a journalism-award ceremony early last month, the president said, "Today our generation has to carry a very negative load, such as ... murder committed against many journalists. Until recently, most of those cases remained in impunity, there was no way to push them forward, there was no way to punish them [criminals], but little by little that outlook has begun to change, and there’s a rising number of people whom the courts have declared guilty of the crime of homicide against journalists."

"The trial against those responsible for the death of my dear friend [Alfredo] Villatoro is an example of the work done by justice operators, but the intellectual authors are missing, and we have to find them and put them in jail, where they belong," the president added, referring to Villatoro’s murder, after being kidnapped, in May 2012 (NotiCen, March 21, 2013).

"I want to make clear that in my government there’s an iron will to solve the criminal wave affecting the Honduran press, a lot of that having to do with organized crime, with gangs, with groups that have been attacking this country. But little by little, we’re going forward," Hernández said. "Here, media flying the flag of radical opposition say what they want, what they feel like saying, about our team, including myself, but, well, that’s what this is about, and society will have to judge each one, but we’ll never threaten to shut down media, because that’s improper in a democracy. Never."

-- End --