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As Another Honduran Journalist Is Murdered, IACHR Demands Protection for Threatened Journalists

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In what has become a gruesome habit in Honduras, the murder of yet another journalist has taken place in this violence-ridden Central American nation, this time in a town up north.

The killing of Honduran newsman Nery Soto on Aug. 14 in the town of Olanchito in the northern department of Yoro, some 390 km northeast of Tegucigalpa, the country’s capital, prompted the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to call on Honduran authorities to investigate this and tens of similar crimes committed mostly since 2009—the year of the bloody coup that toppled then President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (NotiCen, July 2, 2009), now a congressional deputy—and to punish those responsible for the killings.

As was to be expected, Honduran authorities said that an investigation of the Soto homicide was underway.

Through the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, the IACHR also insisted on the need for a mechanism to protect journalists threatened because of their work. In its Aug. 21 press release, the IACHR rapporteur’s office condemned the homicide and urged "the Honduran authorities to act urgently to establish the motive of this crime and to investigate, prosecute, and punish the perpetrators and masterminds responsible for this murder."

The press release added that it "considers it essential for the Honduran state to clarify as soon as possible the motive for this crime; identify, prosecute, and punish those responsible; and adopt fair measures of reparation for the victim's family."

"The Office of the Special Rapporteur insists that the state needs to create special investigative bodies and protocols, as well as protection mechanisms designed to ensure the integrity of those who are being threatened because of their work in journalism," said the IACHR. "In light of the series of murders committed against journalists in Honduras since 2009, it is critical that the state carry out a complete, effective, and impartial investigation of these crimes, which have a negative impact on all of Honduran society."

The communiqué quoted Principle 9 of the IACHR Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression, which states that the "murder, kidnapping, intimidation of and/or threats to social communicators, as well as the material destruction of communications media violate the fundamental rights of individuals and strongly restrict freedom of expression. It is the duty of the state to prevent and investigate such occurrences, to punish their perpetrators, and to ensure that victims receive due compensation."

Killing journalists all too common in Honduras

By official figures, murdering journalists is nothing new in Honduras, but the situation has worsened since the coup. In the latest estimates by the Comisionado Nacional de Derechos...
Humanos (CONADEH), 46 media workers, mostly journalists, have been killed in Honduras since 2003, and more than 90% of such crimes remain unpunished.

A little more than two years ago, wrapping up a visit to Honduras, Guatemalan human rights activist Frank La Rue, UN special rapporteur for freedom of opinion and expression, told a Tegucigalpa press conference that "one of the top problems ... focused on is the violence against journalists, Honduras being the country in the region with the highest index of journalists murdered in proportion to its population."

In May last year, Janis Karklins, UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) communication and information officer, reported that "the countries that regrettably head the list of nations where more journalists are murdered are Mexico ... and Honduras, which has the sad honor of being ... the country with the highest per capita number of journalists murdered and the country with the highest per capita number of murders worldwide."

**Law in pipeline to protect journalists, human rights workers**

More recently, the unicameral legislature has passed in two of the three necessary votes—in June and last month—the Ley de Protección de Defensores de Derechos Humanos, Periodistas, Comunicadores Sociales y Operadores de Justicia. Among other provisions, the bill states that all civilian, military, and police authorities are required to promptly cooperate and provide whatever information requested by legal authorities.

On June 9, the day after the first successful vote, the Miami-based Inter-American Press Association (IAPA) welcomed the decision. In a communiqué, Claudio Paolillo, the head of IAPA’s Committee for Freedom of Press and Information, said, "This step is relevant in defeating violence in the country. We hope the law will have the adequate resources to be efficiently enforced and to protect journalists in risk situations."

It "also reminds us of the urgency to make progress and solve the unpunished crimes against journalists," said Paolillo. "No murder should remain outside the law."

But on Aug. 14, less than a week after the second vote, Soto, 32, was gunned down outside his Olanchito home by several men who, according to reports, were waiting for him. The local Canal 23 television journalist was killed late at night during a local electricity failure.

Olanchito civil-society leader Mari Padilla said, "There’s a murder every time there’s a blackout, and this is unbearable." Regarding Soto’s homicide, she said, "The sad thing is that there’s no investigation, there are no answers, the pain stays there."

Journalist and Canal 23 coworker Roder Acosta said, "Nery’s murder is a message ... because we keep the people informed in a transparent way. Some three or four journalists at the channel had been threatened by different means—by message, by WhatsApp, and by calls on the air. In that hostile environment, issues regarding drug trafficking and police corruption were touched."

"There’s been information that sometimes they want to hush, things that are seen and they don’t want to be brought in the open, there are things one can’t address because they threaten one’s family or oneself, and it’s never investigated," added Acosta, without identifying those he mentioned. "We ask the president to do something, because here there’s no trust in the authorities,
people don't want to cooperate with the police because the criminals quickly know who reported them, people fear for their lives."

-- End --