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## Attacks Against Guatemalan Journalists on the Rise

by Louisa Reynolds

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The killing of nine journalists in Guatemala in 2016 has raised concern regarding press freedom in the country, especially in areas controlled by drug cartels or by local authorities that resent watchdog reporting.

The number of journalists killed doubled in 2016 from 2015, a year in which four murders were reported, leading Guatemalan freedom of expression organization Centro Civitas to describe the current situation in the Central American country as “very serious.”

On Nov. 5, Hamilton Hernández Vásquez, 28, a reporter for Canal 5, a TV station in the highland department of Quetzaltenango, and his wife, Ermelinda González Lucas, 35, were shot dead as they rode a motorcycle back to their home in the village of Nuevo Granados. Their belongings, including Hernández’s equipment, were stolen, and preliminary investigations point to the theft of his camera as the motive behind the attack.

According to local media reports, Hernández was last seen around 11 p.m. after recording an interview in a regional hospital. Hernández, had been a reporter for the Punto Rojo news bulletin broadcast by Canal 5 for seven years. González was a primary school teacher in the municipality of Flores Costa Cuca.

### *Other victims*

Two months earlier, a gunman fatally shot Felipe David Munguía Jiménez, a cameraman for Canal 21 and a community leader in the eastern department of Jalapa. According to the Guatemalan press freedom group Cerigua, the station reported on local news, including conflicts related to electric energy.

Another case that made the headlines last year was the killing of 65-year-old Álvaro Alfredo Aceituno López, the director of local radio station Radio Ilusión, who was gunned down in the southeastern municipality of Coatepeque, in the department of Quetzaltenango, by two unidentified assailants on a motorbike. According to local press reports, the attack occurred around 4 p.m. on the street where the station is located, while Aceituno waited for a bus.

Aceituno, a retired teacher who had worked in radio for around 37 years, mostly presented the news on his own radio show “Acontecer Coatepecano” (Day-to-day news from Coatepeque). In an interview with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Alex Coyoy, a local reporter from Coatepeque who had known Aceituno for nine years, said the journalist often took calls on his show from people who were critical of the local authorities, companies, and hospitals, and would raise issues such as inadequate road repairs. According to colleagues, Aceituno had not mentioned any threats, and the motive behind his killing remains unknown.

“Authorities in Guatemala should urgently conduct a thorough investigation into the murder of Álvaro Alfredo Aceituno López ... Police and judicial authorities should counter the clear, growing dangers to journalists by offering protection and aggressive investigations of threats and crimes

against them," said Carlos Ponce, director of Latin American programs at Freedom House, a Washington-based human rights organization.

On Aug. 2, one of Aceituno's daughters, Lindaura Aceituno, 36, a manager at a local mall, was in her car with her young daughter when she was shot dead by unidentified assailants on a motorbike. The police have yet to establish whether Lindaura Aceituno's death is related to her father's earlier killing.

"We urge the authorities to conduct a thorough investigation into both killings and to do everything possible to bring those responsible to justice," Steven M. Ellis, International Press Institute director of advocacy and communications, said in response to the murder. "We also reiterate our support for the demands of Guatemalan journalists' groups who wish to see the establishment of a special protection mechanism for journalists in their country."

The other journalists killed in Guatemala this year were Víctor Hugo Valdez Cardona, head of a cultural program on the local cable network TL-COM, shot on June 7 in the eastern city of Chiquimula; Mario Roberto Salazar Barahona, director of radio station Estéreo Azúcar, shot on March 17 in the southern department of Jutiapa; Diego Salomón Esteban Gaspar, 22, a radio journalist from Radio Sembrador, in the northeastern municipality of Ixcán, shot by three unknown assailants on April 30; radio journalist Winston Leonardo Túnchez Cano, from Radio La Jefa, in the department of Escuintla, on the Pacific coast, killed on April 8; Ana Leonor Guerra Olmedo, 46, a spokesperson for the San Juan de Dios public hospital in Guatemala City, shot by a gang member on Sept. 9; and the youngest victim, 17-year-old radio journalist Josué David Chamán, shot on Oct. 11 in the department of Alta Verapaz.

## *A pending task*

Guatemala ranked 121st out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders in April 2016.

According to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), 93 journalists and media staff were killed around the world in 2016. Regionally, the Middle East was the deadliest with 30 killings, followed by the Asia-Pacific region with 28, Latin America with 24, Africa with eight, and Europe with three.

In addition to the killings, cases of harassment and intimidation against Guatemalan journalists are also on the increase. One of the most widely publicized was that of Lucía Escobar, a columnist for daily newspaper *El Periódico*, who received death threats on Twitter after she published an article arguing that the yearly parade that takes place in Guatemala City to commemorate the National Army Day ought to be scrapped due to the Guatemalan Army's widely documented role in human rights violations during the country's armed conflict (1960-1996).

With the aim of protecting reporters from attacks, especially in rural areas controlled by drug cartels or by local authorities that resent watchdog reporting, Guatemalan journalists have campaigned since 2011 for the creation of a protection mechanism for journalists who have been threatened. This mechanism would establish protocols on how threats against journalists should be reported and the specific steps that must be taken to protect victims depending on the seriousness of the threat.

However, reaching a consensus among all parties involved (the Guatemalan government, local and national media outlets, and various journalism associations) has been a slow process,

and it wasn't until June 2016 that a coalition of Guatemalan media, journalists and freedom of expression campaigners submitted a final proposal to President Jimmy Morales' administration. Its implementation remains a pending task for the government.

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