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## Press Freedom Under Attack in Latin America

by LADB Staff

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On Oct. 19-20, the Inter-American Press Association (Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa, SIP) met in Guadalajara, Mexico, for its 53rd General Assembly. At the conference, the SIP reported that attacks against journalists, including assassinations, continue to be a serious problem throughout Latin America. Some dangerous precedents received special attention at the meeting, such as the unsolved Jan. 25 killing of an Argentine photojournalist, Cuba's new guidelines for foreign correspondents, and a proposal by Venezuela's president to draft a "truthful information" code for reporters.

According to SIP, some 200 Latin American journalists have been assassinated during the past decade. SIP's outgoing president, Colombian Luis Gabriel Cano, said that "impunity is a constant in almost all the assassinations, kidnappings, and terrorist acts" against the press. According to Cano, crimes against journalists remain a scourge despite the end of regional wars and repressive military regimes. On the other hand, Cano commended the SIP for its efforts to pressure governments and judicial bodies to investigate and prosecute crimes against journalists. "Someday, hopefully not far off, the use of violence as a macabre system of press censorship will be eradicated," said Cano.

### *Journalists most at risk in Colombia, Mexico*

So far this year, 11 journalists have been assassinated, including four in Colombia, three in Mexico, two in Guatemala, and one each in Argentina and El Salvador. Danilo Arbillo, head of SIP's freedom of the press committee, singled out Mexico as a country where press freedom is in particular jeopardy. "Freedom of the press has undergone one of its most difficult times this past year in Mexico," said Jose Santiago Healy of El Imparcial, the Hermosillo daily. He said in addition to the slain journalists, four others were abducted, and 20 documented attacks against journalists have occurred. Five of the attacks involved journalists probing the Sept. 8 deaths and disappearances of six youths from a Mexico City slum, who were last seen alive in police custody.

SIP exhorted Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo to take steps that will allow journalists to work in an atmosphere of security and to step up investigations of killings. In his address to the assembly, Zedillo promised to bring those responsible for killing journalists to justice, but critics say such pledges have been made before without results.

### *Abuse in Argentina, Cuba, Peru, Puerto Rico reviewed*

Bartolome Mitre, publisher of Argentina's daily La Nacion, said journalists in his country are frequently targeted by attacks or threats. The killing of Jose Luis Cabezas, who was shot and his body burned in an Argentine resort while probing suspected government corruption, caused an international outcry. However, Mitre said, no substantive progress has been made toward bringing those responsible to justice (see NotiSur, 04/04/97 and 07/18/97).

Delegates criticized the Cuban government's new code for foreign journalists, which demands that foreign correspondents work "with objectivity...in accordance with Cuba's norms and regulations."

Delegates called for freedom of the press in Cuba, where journalists have been arrested trying to report independently of state-controlled media. In Peru, the SIP said, press freedom has been "seriously affected" by the silencing of a television channel that denounced human rights violations by President Alberto Fujimori's administration. SIP condemned the "anti-democratic attitude" of the Peruvian government and called for rescinding the decree that revoked the Peruvian citizenship of Baruch Ivcher, majority owner of the affected television station (see NotiSur, 07/25/97 and 09/19/97).

SIP said it would send a delegation to Puerto Rico to investigate alleged government pressures against the daily newspaper El Nuevo Dia. El Nuevo Dia representatives said the Puerto Rican government recently canceled a paid ad in retaliation for the paper publishing reports of alleged irregularities in tax payments by government telephone workers. The government, however, says the advertisement's withdrawal was just a "marketing strategy" that had nothing to do with El Nuevo Dia's stories.

Meanwhile, in contrast to these critical reports, SIP expressed approval of Panama's decision to renew Gustavo Gorriti's work permit. The government had threatened to deport Gorriti, a Peruvian, after he wrote investigative reports of corruption in President Ernesto Perez Balladares's government (see NotiSur, 09/05/97). Venezuela's proposed code of conduct seen as danger to press During the Assembly, SIP also condemned a new proposal by Venezuelan President Rafael Caldera to adopt a "truthful information" code. The proposal will be discussed at the next Ibero-American Summit, to be held on the Venezuelan island of Margarita Nov. 8-9. SIP called the proposal the "most immediate" threat currently endangering press freedom in the region because it is "particularly attractive and pernicious."

The SIP resolution said opposition to the initiative could easily lead to accusations that the group supports information that is not truthful. "The proposal for a 'right to truthful information' is based on the presumption that one truth exists and that the government can determine what it is," read the resolution. For its part, the Caldera government denied that it was trying to regulate or control press freedom and said its proposal is meant to be used as an ethical principle. In its final resolutions, the SIP also cited threats to press freedom in Brazil, where President Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government has submitted a bill to the legislature that would make journalists liable for fines up to US\$90,000 for "moral and material damages" resulting from their news stories. The SIP asked Brazilian authorities to withdraw the initiative, which SIP said could "threaten the economic survival" of reporters and newspapers. (Sources: Inter Press Service, 10/08/97; Associated Press, 10/19/97, 10/21/97, 10/22/97; Reuter, 10/21/97, 10/22/97)

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