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Journalists Face Attacks and Even Death in Peru

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Journalists associations are demanding that authorities solve the murders of three reporters—one in May and two in September—who denounced possible corruption by public officials. So far this year, 79 attacks on journalists and media outlets have been reported, mostly in the provinces. Most alleged attackers have been public officials.

September, with 12 attacks against information freedoms, was the second-most-dangerous month to date in 2011 for journalists, after May, which saw 20 attacks, according to the January-September report from the Instituto de Prensa y Sociedad (IPYS), a journalists organization that defends freedom of speech in Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Colombia.

"The number of attacks in the months prior to September had fluctuated between four and seven, down sharply from May, when the unique climate of the presidential-runoff campaign exacerbated attacks on journalists, basically by insiders in the two groups competing for the presidency [Gana Perú, now in office, and Fuerza 2011, headed by former congressional deputy Keiko Fujimori]," wrote Luis Alarcón on Sept. 30 on the institute’s Web site.

The IPYS study found that 77% of the attacks between January and September occurred in 18 cities in the provinces, and 23% occurred in Lima, which saw the largest number of attacks (18), followed by Cajamarca in the northern highlands (12) and Ancash in the central highlands (10).

Killed by hired assassins

On May 3, Julio Castillo Narváez, host of the Ollantay news program on Radio Ollantay in the city of Virú in the northern coastal department of La Libertad, died after unknown assailants shot him while he was eating at a local restaurant. Castillo Narváez was a harsh critic of local, provincial, and regional authorities. He reportedly received death threats, both direct and indirect, which intensified in the days before his murder, following his on-air reports of alleged irregularities within the regional government of La Libertad and his complaints about the danger inherent in the proliferation of common criminals in the area.

The Consejo de Prensa Peruana (CPP) released a communiqué on May 5 repudiating Castillo Narváez's murder and demanding that the Ministerio Público and the Policía Nacional del Perú (PNP) carry out an immediate, exhaustive, and transparent investigation of the incident.

"We reiterate the commitment that the Consejo de la Prensa assumed in 2005 when, along with the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa (SIP), we wrote and signed the Declaración de Pucallpa, in which we warned society that the murder of a journalist affects not only the right to freedom of expression but also the citizens' basic right to be informed," read the communiqué.
On Sept. 7, Pedro Alonso Flores Silva, director of a program on Canal 6 television station, was murdered in similar circumstances by masked assailants near his home in Casma in the Ancash region, north of Lima.

Flores' wife, Mercedes Cueva, told the press that for three months her husband had regularly received death threats in connection with corruption allegations that he had made on his television program Visión Agraria against Marco Rivero Huerta, the mayor of the district of Comandante Noel. The mayor, who had filed a lawsuit against the journalist, denied any responsibility for the crime.

A week later, on Sept. 14, José Oquendo Reyes, director and host of the BTV Canal 45 program Sin Fronteras, was shot to death in Chincha, in the southern region of Ica. On his program, Oquendo Reyes had alleged accounting mismanagement and irregularities in the awarding of public contracts by Chincha mayor Lucio Juárez Ochoa. Oquendo Reyes was near his home when three individuals on a motorcycle ambushed him. One assailant shot him five times at point-blank range.

"Oquendo's murder brings the number of journalists murdered this year in Peru to three," Reporteros Sin Fronteras (RSF) said. "Although the motive has yet to be established, it is clearly a very disturbing signal for investigative journalists who dare to report cases of corruption or stand up to local officials. Oquendo had the courage to do so, as did Pedro Flores and Julio Castillo Narváez. The investigations into the murders of Flores and Castillo have yet to produce any significant results. We hope the Oquendo murder investigation will have more success."

The Federación de Periodistas del Perú (FPP) demanded at the end of September that the executive and the legislature spare no effort to solve the cases of the three journalists murdered this year "for having denounced possible cases of public corruption in their localities."

The SIP/IAPA (Inter American Press Association) in September called on Peruvian authorities to amend the laws to remove the statute of limitations from crimes against journalists and also to combat impunity. "You don't kill the truth by killing journalism," said the SIP.

Abuse of power

Paul Garay Ramírez, director of a program on Visión 47 TV and correspondent for Radio La Exitosa, was sentenced to 18 months in prison for "defamation" of a prosecutor. Since April 19, the journalist has been held in the Miguel Castro Castro prison in Lima for allegedly having called Agustín López Cruz, the chief prosecutor in Coronel Portillo in the Ucayali region of the Peruvian jungle, an "erotic dwarf."

The supposed evidence of defamation that landed Garay in prison was a short audio clip from a local radio station where Garay did not work. He denied that the voice was his and said that at that time he was working at another local station. Garay had also criticized López Cruz, who filed the lawsuit, for having shelved two serious corruption cases.

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"The struggle against impunity is an essential guarantee for the future of information and the exercise of the journalistic profession. Another pending matter in Peru is the decriminalization of media offenses," said RSF referring to the Garay Ramírez case.

Garay Ramírez is known for having suffered persecution after he accused the former mayor of Coronel Portillo, Luis Valdez, of being the intellectual author of the murder of journalist Alberto Rivera in 2004. Rivera was murdered a day after accusing Valdez of being the ringleader of a band of drug traffickers.

Attorney General Pablo Sánchez has asked that the verdict be annulled because of a series of irregularities, but the journalist remains in prison and the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) is dragging its feet in making a decision.

On Oct. 13, journalist Augusto Álvarez Rodich, in his column in the daily La República, called on his colleagues to express their solidarity with Garay Ramírez. "All journalists should speak out clearly and energetically regarding the arbitrary action against journalist Paul Garay Ramírez to call attention to the case and thus contribute to correcting this unacceptable arrogance in a democracy where basic human rights such as freedom of speech should exist," wrote Álvarez Rodich.

In its study, IPYS identified the "abusive use" of state power in 21 cases. Those include the abuse by state oversight, administrative, and tax agencies as well as through telephone interceptions. It also recorded 13 verbal attacks, threats, and insults intended to intimidate journalists and discredit their work.

September seems to have been a very dangerous month for journalists in Peru. In late September, in the southern department of Arequipa, Fritz Du Bois and Gessler Ojeda, director and journalist with the daily Perú 21, were each given two-year suspended sentences in a defamation suit filed by a relative of a congressional deputy.

The complaint charged that last March, in the midst of the election campaign, Perú 21 published an article titled Pantaleón y la Tía Pocha that referred to alleged links between a relative of Ana María Solórzano, a Gana Perú candidate for Congress, and prostitution rackets.

"For some time we've been seeing in our country governing-party deputies denouncing the media and influencing the judiciary to restrict Peruvian's right to freedom of speech," wrote Du Bois in his opinion piece.

From Oct. 14-18 in Lima, the Peruvian capital, SIP will hold its 67th General Assembly, to evaluate media laws, "which are becoming a new form of censorship," and will look at the violence that undermines journalists' work. At least 21 journalists have been murdered since April in Mexico, Brazil, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, El Salvador, and Guatemala, according to SIP statistics.

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