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Organized Crime Continues to Target Journalists in Mexico

by LADB Staff

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The Mexican news media remains under siege, with at least two violent attacks on print and broadcast journalists reported within a month. A third journalist, who has not been seen for several days, is also suspected of having met with foul play.

The violence against journalists is part of a pattern that has evolved in Mexico during the past dozen years (see SourceMex, 2004-10-13), but the number of incidents has risen at an alarming rate in the past 18 to 24 months. Violence against journalists in Mexico is the highest in the Americas, surpassing even Colombia, said the French-based international watchdog organization Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF), or Reporters Without Borders.

The number of Mexican journalists killed while performing their duties was the fourth highest in the world in 2004, surpassed only by Iraq, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, said the RSF. As with most of the journalist deaths in recent years, the three latest victims may have been targeted because of their extensive coverage of the drug trade in Mexico.

Two victims, editor-publisher Raul Gibb Guerrero and radio reporter Dolores Guadalupe Garcia Escamilla, were shot to death in plain sight, while newspaper reporter Alfredo Jimenez is thought to have been kidnapped.

Editor of Veracruz newspaper murdered in ambush

Gibb Guerrero, who published the daily newspaper La Opinion in the industrial city of Poza Rica in Veracruz state, was ambushed by four assassins who riddled his vehicle with bullets as he traveled home on a public highway. The editor-publisher had received several death threats after his newspaper printed several pieces exposing drug-trafficking and gasoline-theft operations in the area.

The news received wide coverage because La Opinion is considered one of the most influential daily newspapers in Veracruz state. "He was never intimidated by threats," said a La Opinion editorial. "On the contrary, when our articles caused strong reactions, he would ask us to explore even deeper those cases of corruption and impunity that make such reporting necessary."

In particular, La Opinion had targeted the violent Gulf cartel, led by notorious drug trafficker Osiel Cardenas. "[Gibb] had written directly about the Gulf cartel...and their entire corrupt network," said Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos, who runs the organized-crime unit (Subprocuraduria de Investigacion Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada, SIEDO) at the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR).

Gibb is the fourth editor targeted by organized crime in less than a year. Those murdered in 2004 were Roberto Javier Mora Garcia, editorial director of El Manana in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas

state, and Francisco Ortiz Franco, an editor with the Tijuana-based weekly newspaper *Semanario Zeta*, (see *SourceMex*, 2004-06-30 and 2004-10-13).

The third victim was Leodegario Aguilera Lucas, editor of the Acapulco-based magazine *Mundo Politico*.

Tamaulipas radio reporter shot nine times

Reporters and columnists have also been targets of the drug cartels, as evidenced by the cold-blooded assault on Garcia Escamilla. A police reporter for Nuevo Laredo radio station XHNOE Stereo 91 in Tamaulipas, Garcia was shot nine times outside the building housing her news operation. She spent two weeks in critical condition at a local hospital, but was unable to survive the impact of the bullet wounds, which had entered her body through her arms, legs, and stomach.

Colleagues said Garcia was targeted because of her reports on a dramatic increase in drug-related crime in her community. Nidia Egremy, an officer with the *Fraternidad de Reporteros de Mexico*, said Garcia might have also angered local officials because of her reports on municipal corruption in Nuevo Laredo. The attacks led XHNOE and other Tamaulipas radio stations to hire guards to protect reporters. "The state of Tamaulipas is the most dangerous one in Mexico if you are independent and critical," said Egremy.

The rapid increase in drug-related violence in Tamaulipas, in part the result of a power struggle between the Gulf and the Sinaloa drug cartels, led US authorities to issue a special warning for Tamaulipas and other states bordering the US (see *SourceMex*, 2005-02-02). The warning created friction between the US and Mexican governments (see *SourceMex*, 2005-03-09).

Immediately after the shooting of Garcia Escamilla, local authorities ordered special police protection for Tamaulipas-based reporters Carlos Figueroa and Santiago Palmeros, who had received death threats over the municipal police department's radio frequency, a common practice used by drug gangs to threaten enemies.

State officials also recommended that any reporters in the state who fear for their lives should start to carry firearms. "You simply fill out a form, then ask SEDENA (Secretaria de Defensa Nacional) for permission to carry a gun," said Tamaulipas Public Safety Secretary Luis Roberto Gutierrez Flores. "Then you receive the permit if you meet all requirements."

Critics dismissed the idea of arming journalists. "That is totally absurd," said *Semanario Zeta* publisher Jesus Blancornelas. "It's a stupid idea. How many cops and federal officers have been killed? And they were armed, right?" Sonora newspaper reporter missing Authorities fear the worst for Jimenez Mota, a reporter who covered the drug trade and organized crime for *El Imparcial* newspaper, based in Hermosillo, Sonora state. Among the recent articles written by Jimenez Mota were reports on how drug cartels were planning to kill government officials. Jimenez, who was on his way to meet a source at the time of his disappearance, is thought to have been abducted by a cell of the Sinaloa cartel, led by brothers Hector and Arturo Beltran Leyva. "We hope that he is alive," said *El Imparcial* general director Juan Fernando Healy Loera.

Asked if Jimenez may have been targeted because of his work, Healy replied, "We think so, and the authorities have said the same." After Jimenez's disappearance, a group of 400 relatives and sympathizers organized a silent march in mid-April to demand action from Sonora and federal authorities. The march is just one of several actions intended to force President Vicente Fox's administration to take notice.

"The government has no campaign to stop these crimes," said Leonarda Reyes, director and founder of the Centro de Periodismo y Etica Publica (CEPET). Even though it's their responsibility to protect the lives of all citizens, it continues to wash its hands by invoking state rights and separation of state and federal jurisdictions. It's a cop-out."

CEPET has launched the Campana Ni Uno Mas (no more violence campaign) to halt attacks on journalists, which could inhibit freedom of expression. The organization said one reason for the escalation in the violence is the administration's ineffectiveness in controlling drug traffickers and organized crime. "The federal government has, plain and simple, lost control of many regions in this country," said Reyes.

The Miami-based Inter-American Press Association (IAPA) has also joined in the criticisms of the Mexican government, urging the Fox administration to "take a greater role in investigating and punishing those responsible" for the attacks on Mexican journalists. "It's incredible," said Ricardo Trotti, director of the IAPA's Press Institute, referring to the growing number of journalists who have been attacked in the last two years.

"The cops don't do a thing. That's why we're seeing more violence against journalists," said Blancornelas, who survived an assassination attempt by the Tijuana cartel in 1997. He called on journalists to organize demonstrations around the country to demand that the government end the violence against journalists. "We should not remain passive," said Blancornelas, who in March became the fourth journalist to receive the Daniel Pearl Award for Courage and Integrity in Journalism. The award is named after Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, who was kidnapped and murdered in Pakistan in 2002.

President, Congress promise action

The protests by the media group appear to have captured the attention of the Fox administration and the Mexican Congress, at least in the near term. In the Chamber of Deputies, the six parties represented in the lower house have committed to create a special commission to investigate the murders and assist the Fox administration to find the perpetrators. A resolution proposed by Deputy Rene Meza Cabrera of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) would designate attacks on journalists as a "serious crime," allowing the courts to sentence perpetrators to the maximum prison sentence of 60 years.

The Senate is also considering legislative measures to deal with the violence against journalists. The issue has been sent to the justice committee (Comision de Justicia) and the human rights committees (Comision de Derechos Humanos), which will offer recommendations to the full Senate. Some senators have joined in the criticism of the Fox administration for what they see as a timid response

to the situation. "There appears to be no political will on the part of the federal government to conduct the appropriate investigations of these murders," said PRI Sen. Sadot Sanchez Carreno, a member of the human rights committee.

The senator also lashed out at the Fox government for the slow progress of those investigations that have been launched. "The administration is not acting with sufficient energy," said Sanchez. In the executive branch, Attorney General Rafael Macedo de la Concha said the PGR has found sufficient cause to take over the investigations of the murders of Gibb Guerrero and Garcia Escamilla.

Macedo said the case involving the disappearance of Jimenez Mota is still under consideration, although President Fox has promised his full support to the family of the El Imparcial reporter. "There has to be justice and we have to be efficient and I offer all my support for this," Fox told Jimenez's father Alfredo Jimenez Martinez.

The Secretaria de Seguridad Publica Federal (SSP) has launched a program to work more closely with state governments to develop a plan to ensure the safety of journalists. "The government is committed to a free press and the freedom of expression," said presidential spokesperson Ruben Aguilar. "We want these freedoms to be exercised without threats to the personal safety of the journalists."

The SSP and PGR will work very closely with the governments of Tamaulipas, Sonora, Sinaloa, Veracruz, and Baja California, the states that have experienced the most drug-related violence, said SIEDO director Santiago Vasconcelos. The violence and threats against reporters extend beyond these states, however.

In Tabasco, unknown assailants kidnapped the 18-year-old daughter of reporter Cecilia Vargas Simon this month. The perpetrators beat the victim and held her for several hours before releasing her. Vargas Simon reported on the incident through a letter in her newspaper, La Verdad del Sureste. "They told her to tell her mother to be careful and not denounce the attack but also to watch what she was saying and writing," Vargas Simon wrote. "Those acting in such a brutal and cowardly way are trying to silence us because they have much to hide. We must not let them succeed." Carlos Ramirez, the publisher of the Mexico City daily political newspaper La Crisis, has also received threats on his life through a number of e-mail messages. (Sources: Reuters, 04/10/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 04/11/05, 04/12/05; The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, 04/12/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 04/11/05, 04/13/05, 04/15/05; The Dallas Morning News, 04/15/05; Associated Press, 03/14/05, 04/15/05, 04/16/05; Notimex, 04/09/05, 04/14/05, 04/18/05; Spanish news service EFE, 04/10/05, 04/12/05, 04/14/05, 04/18/05; La Crisis, 04/12/05, 04/13/05, 04/15/05, 04/19/05; El Universal, 04/12-15/05, 04/19/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 04/08/05, 04/11/05, 04/19/05, 04/20/05; La Jornada, 04/13/05, 04/15/05, 04/20/05)

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