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Journalists Criticize Government Inaction a Year After Reporter Disappeared

by LADB Staff

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The Mexican press is taking President Vicente Fox's administration to task for failing to follow through on its promise to solve the April 2005 disappearance of journalist Alfredo Jimenez Mota in Sonora state. Jimenez Mota was on the staff of the daily newspaper *El Imparcial*, based in the Sonora capital of Hermosillo. He failed to return from a meeting with a source and is presumed dead (see *SourceMex*, 2005-04-20). At the time of Jimenez's disappearance, Fox promised to resolve the case, but few developments have been reported during the past year or so.

The lack of a breakthrough on the case prompted more than 100 newspapers in Mexico, plus several Spanish-language newspapers in the US, to join in publishing a series of articles on the case. Newspapers mark anniversary with special series The purpose of the series, said the organizers, was to bring attention to the failure of authorities to come up with any answers. "The most relevant fact of this story is that a year has passed since the reporter was kidnapped and the attorney general's office has nothing on his whereabouts," said a report published by several newspapers about the initiative, known as *Proyecto Fenix*.

Eight investigative reporters from various newspapers collaborated on the series. The simultaneous publication, said the newspapers, would help protect individual publications from revenge attacks by organized crime. The articles were published almost two months after two masked assailants invaded *El Manana's* news room in Nuevo Laredo and opened fire on staff, apparently in retaliation for the newspaper's coverage of the drug trade (see *SourceMex*, 2006-02-12). In one report, the journalists pointed to evidence that Jimenez's likely abductor was Raul Enriquez Parra, an alleged smuggler whose tortured body was found in November 2005 after being thrown from a plane.

In one of his last articles, Jimenez wrote about a possible link between Enriquez and the former police chief of Sonoyta, which borders Lukeville, Arizona. Journalists criticized the Fox government for failing to resolve the case. "On April 19, 2005, 17 days after Jimenez's disappearance, Fox pledged to use all the resources of the state to find the young journalist and punish those responsible for his kidnapping," said syndicated columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa. "One year after the disappearance, his whereabouts remain unknown."

Granados also attacked Fox for making promises that he knew he might not be able to keep. "There has been no evidence that the government has devoted all its force to resolving the case," said Granados Chapa, whose column is carried in several prominent publications, including the Mexico City daily newspaper *Reforma*. "The lack of correlation between the presidential promise and the results a year later lead us to question whether Fox's words were irresponsible," Granados Chapa went on to say.

One suspect has been arrested in connection with Jimenez's disappearance, but there may be doubt about whether he actually had anything to do with the case. Martin Rojas, who is suspected of leading a fuel-smuggling network known as the Chupaductos, was detained in the US in July 2005 but has yet to be extradited to Mexico.

Case gains international notoriety

The case has gained notoriety beyond Latin America. "Despite President Vicente Fox's repeated promises, the investigators have not come up with any additional clues about Jimenez's disappearance, which was clearly linked to his work as a journalist," said the international journalists organization Reporters Without Borders (RWB), or Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF).

RSF urged the Mexican government to assign the case to the newly created office to investigate attacks against journalists (Fiscalia Especial para la Investigacion de Crimenes y Atentados Contra Periodistas). The office was created shortly after the attack on El Manana newspaper on Feb. 6. "We ask that all the resources necessary be provided to the new special prosecutor to help resolve this case," said RSF, which is based in Paris.

One byproduct of the violence against journalists is the reluctance of newspapers like El Manana to continue covering the drug trade. Other newspapers, however, like Tijuana-based Semanario Zeta, have consistently reported on the drug cartels despite the assassination attempts and murders of some of its editors and columnists (see SourceMex, 1997-12-17 and 2004-06-30). Zeta co-publisher Jesus Blancornelas, who survived an assassination attempt in 1997, recently stepped down from that position, citing health and security concerns.

"These have been many years behind the desk with much responsibility," Blancornelas said in the March 3 edition of Semanario Zeta. "My age and my physical condition are no longer the same." Under Blancornelas' leadership, the newspaper gained recognition for its hard-hitting investigative reports on the drug trade, political corruption, and other issues in Baja California and other parts of Mexico.

In March 2005, Blancornelas received the Daniel Pearl Award for Courage and Integrity in Journalism. The award was named for Daniel Pearl, a Wall Street Journal reporter who was abducted and murdered in Pakistan in 2002. Blancornelas will be succeeded at the leadership of Zeta by his youngest son Rene Blanco Villalon and Adela Navarro Bello, who has been a writer and editor for the newspaper since 1990. "We're not going to change our approach," Navarro said in an interview. "The only style of journalism that we know is what Blancornelas taught us, investigation and analysis of what is happening in Baja California and in the country." (Sources: Semanario Zeta, 03/03/06; Associated Press, 03/14/05, 04/03/06; The San Diego Union-Tribune, La Cronica de Hoy, El Economista, 04/03/06; El Universal, 04/03/06, 04/04/06; Reforma, 04/04/06)

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