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Mexico Rated Second-Most-Dangerous Country for Journalists

by LADB Staff

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The French-based international organization Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF) is ranking Mexico as the second-most-dangerous country for journalists after war-ravaged Iraq. In late November, RSF, also known as Reporters Without Borders, said nearly two-dozen reporters, editors, and newspaper executives had lost their lives during former President Vicente Fox's six-year term, which ended Nov. 30.

The majority of the victims, including seven in 2006, were murdered because of their coverage of the drug trade in Mexico. The RSF report came just days after Jesus Blancornelas, who covered the drug trade in Mexico, died in Tijuana after a lengthy illness. Blancornelas, a leading advocate for the rights of journalists, survived a murder attempt in 1997 (see SourceMex, 1997-12-17).

Benoit Hervieu, who monitors activities in the Americas for RSF, criticized the Fox administration for its weak and inadequate response to the problem. "You have to put a halt to impunity," Hervieu said in an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. "There haven't been any arrests nor have there been any complete investigations in any of the 20 cases of murdered journalists." Other international entities have raised similar concerns about the violence against journalists in Mexico.

In mid-November, Koichiro Matsuura, director of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), told reporters in Mexico City that the UN was very concerned about the growing violence against Mexican journalists. UNESCO is the UN organization whose duties include defending the rights of freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

Murders continue

Three Mexican journalists were murdered during November, two in Veracruz state and one in Guerrero state. The murdered journalists were Roberto Marcos Garcia, a deputy editor of the weekly newspaper Testimonio; Veracruz-based Televisa reporter Adolfo Sanchez Guzman; and Misael Tamayo, editor of the Guerrero-based El Despertar de la Costa. Marcos Garcia and Tamayo Hernandez are believed to have been victims of organized crime, while Sanchez Guzman apparently died during a botched robbery, authorities said.

Another journalist, editor Jose Antonio Garcia Apac of the Michoacan weekly newspaper Ecos de la Costa, could join the list of victims. Garcia Apac disappeared on Nov. 20, and his whereabouts remained unknown as of early December. Police have received reports that Garcia Apac was kidnapped, but no ransom note has been sent. The statistics do not include the murder of another journalist, US citizen Brad Will, who was killed while filming a documentary on demonstrations in Oaxaca City (see SourceMex, 2006-11-01).

The circumstances around Will's murder have not been clarified. Hervieu acknowledged efforts by the Mexican government and the Congress to address the situation through the creation of a special office to investigate murders of journalists. This office, the Fiscalía Especial para la Investigación de los Crímenes y Atentados Contra Periodistas, was created at the beginning of 2006 (see SourceMex, 2006-02-15). Hervieu noted, however, that the office has been ineffective in its nearly one year of existence because of the government's lack of commitment. "This special prosecutor should be given powers and resources commensurate with the gravity of the problem," the RSF representative said.

Officials at the federal attorney general's office (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR) acknowledged the growing concerns about the dangers for journalists in Mexico. The PGR promised that the special commission created to investigate attacks on journalists would double its efforts to resolve the murders of Tamayo Hernández and Marcos García. "We reiterate our commitment to protect freedom of expression, the right to information, and the freedom of the press," the PGR said in a statement. "We recognize that organized crime is the source of most attacks on journalists, which makes this one of the riskiest professions in our country."

Jesus Blancornelas mourned

RSF and UNESCO voiced their concerns about violence against journalists in Mexico within days of the death of Blancornelas, considered by many the strongest champion of the rights of journalists in Mexico. The Tijuana journalist died of complications from a lung operation, following an extended illness. He also suffered from stomach cancer and diabetes.

Blancornelas, who angered the Tijuana drug cartel and other organized-crime figures with his coverage of their activities in Baja California, received the Daniel Pearl Award from the Los Angeles Press Club for courageous journalism in 2005. "He was the first to name names of the drug mafia and federal forces helping those criminal groups," said Arturo Solís, editor of the Tamaulipas-based online newspaper *Línea Directa*. Blancornelas survived a murder attempt in 1997, but his weekly newspaper *Semanario Zeta* remained a target of organized crime during the years.

In 1998, Hector Félix Miranda, who co-founded *Zeta* with Blancornelas, was shot to death. The alleged gunman was Antonio Vera Palestina, chief of security at the Agua Caliente Racetrack, owned by powerful businessman Jorge Hank Rhon. Hank Rhon, who later went on to become mayor of Tijuana, was said to be displeased with *Zeta's* coverage of activities at Agua Caliente. Authorities were never able or were unwilling to find evidence linking Hank Rhon to Félix Miranda's death.

In 2004, *Zeta* investigative reporter and editor Francisco Ortiz Franco was gunned down as he sat in his vehicle with his two young children. The Ortiz Franco murder was never resolved, although authorities linked the killing to organized crime. Among the possible suspects were drug organizations or Hank Rohn (see SourceMex, 2004-06-30).

The murders of Félix Miranda and Ortiz Franco did not deter *Semanario Zeta* from continuing its intense coverage of drug trafficking and organized crime in northwestern Mexico and other parts of the country. "In the face of these attacks, Blancornelas was able to maintain [his paper's] independent journalism," said syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento. The continuing violence

against members of his profession, including constant death threats, was beginning to take a toll on Blancornelas. He made this clear in an interview with Reuters in 2005. "We continue to carry out investigations to clear up the murders of our colleagues," he said. "But if it wasn't for that, I would be in my house resting. I regret founding Zeta." (Sources: www.rsf.org; El Diario de Mexico, 11/22/06; Diario Transicion, Reuters, Frontera-Tijuana, 11/23/06; Reforma, 11/12/06, 11/24/06; Spanish news service EFE, 11/22/06, 11/24/06; Semanario Zeta, Milenio Diario, 11/24/06; Notimex, 11/16/06, 12/01/06; Associated Press, 11/30/06, 12/04/06; El Universal, 11/24/06, 12/01/06, 12/05/06; The Herald-Mexico City, 12/01/06, 12/05/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 11/23/06, 11/24/06, 12/06/06; La Jornada, 11/24/06, 12/01/06, 12/07/06)

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