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LADB Staff

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Human Rights Commission Says Heavy Harassment Of Journalists Continued In 2007

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2008-01-09

Mexico remained as one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists last year, with members of the news media facing various kinds of harassment and threats of violence. In a report released in January, the national human rights commission (Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos, CNDH) said it opened 84 investigations in 2007 of cases where members of the news media or related professions were accosted.

In addition to the reported cases, the commission also noted 88 other instances where aggression against journalists or media workers went unreported to the CNDH. Accounts of those cases were gleaned from media reports. The CNDH report said the aggression against the news media is turning increasingly violent, with at least three journalists murdered last year and three others kidnapped. In addition, three newspaper-distribution workers were killed.

With last year's murders, 35 members of the news media and related professions were killed between 2000 and 2007. Six others disappeared during that span, including the three last year. "The cases reviewed last year indicate that aggression against journalists has multiplied and is now more violent," said the CNDH report. In 2006, the international journalists organization Reporters sans frontieres (RSF, Reporters Without Borders) declared Mexico the second-most-dangerous country for journalists after Iraq (SourceMex December 06, 2006).

Many journalists in Mexico are targeted for their coverage of the drug trade. Among those killed last year was Amado Ramirez Dillanes, a correspondent for the national television network Televisa. Ramirez, who was murdered in April, did a series of reports about activities by drug cartels in Acapulco (SourceMex, May 30, 2007). Also murdered in April was Saul Martinez Ortega, a reporter for the Sonora-based publications Interdiario and Diario de Agua Prieta. Martinez had just concluded an investigation of a kidnapping and murder at the time he was killed.

In December, unknown assailants kidnapped and murdered Gerardo Israel Garcia Pimentel, a reporter for the daily newspaper La Opinion de Michoacan, based in Uruapan, Michoacan state. The motive for Garcia's murder is unknown. Even though Michoacan is one of the Mexican states with the highest rates of drug-related violence, Garcia did not cover the drug trade. "His beat was agriculture and on occasion some police matters," said RSF. In addition to the direct physical attacks, journalists had to endure death threats via telephone, electronic mail, or in person. In two particularly brutal warnings against the press in May, drug cartels deposited severed heads at news outlets in southeastern Mexico.

In the first instance, the head was left at the offices of the Veracruz newspaper Notiver in early May with a warning against columnist Milo Vela. Later that month, drug cartels left the head of a
local politician at the offices of the Villahermosa newspaper Tabasco Hoy, also with a warning to reporters. The CNDH said there were also reports of telephone espionage and theft of materials. Some reporters and editors also reported being stalked or accosted at their homes. "This situation creates a climate of fear among the members of the media, which leads to self-censure and highlights the perception of journalism as a high-risk profession," said the commission.

**Report criticizes government for lack of action**

The CNDH criticized President Felipe Calderon's administration for failing to thoroughly investigate and prosecute the harassment against journalists. "We have not seen any evidence of a willingness of authorities to investigate these aggressions and punish those responsible," said the report. In 2006, then President Vicente Fox created a special unit to investigate and prosecute threats and attacks against journalists (SourceMex, February 15, 2006). But critics say this office, which falls under the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR), has been largely ineffective in its nearly two years of existence. "The information in the CNDH bulletin is alarming and unacceptable for a nation that considers itself a democratic country," the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada said in an editorial. Following the murder of Garcia Pimentel in December, several members of the Mexican Congress called for the administration to take the threats against journalists more seriously. "Journalism is one of the principal manifestations of the freedom of expression," said Sen. Marko Antonio Cortes, a member of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). "Therefore, the state is obligated to guarantee members of all media an opportunity to exercise their profession in a dignified and safe manner."

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