4-30-2008

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Nongovernmental Organizations Call For Investigation Of Murder Of Two Women Radio Journalists In Oaxaca

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2008-04-30

In the latest incident involving violence against journalists in Mexico, two women reporters from a community radio station in Oaxaca state were murdered in early April, setting off an outcry from advocates of independent journalism in Mexico and from defenders of human rights. The two women, Teresa Bautista Flores and Felicitas Martinez, were on the staff of a station that primarily served the Triqui indigenous community of San Juan Copala.

The Oaxaca government contends that the murders were the result of an internal feud. But some members of the community contend that the killings were carried out by paramilitaries, which led to suspicions that controversial Gov. Ulises Ruiz might have had a hand in the murders. Victims were on staff of indigenous community station Bautista and Martinez, who were in their early 20s, were shot and killed when assailants fired on their vehicle on a rural highway near the village of Putla de Guerrero.

Three others were injured in the attack, including a three-year-old child. The murders of the women are suspicious because of their affiliation with a community radio station known as La Voz que Rompe el Silencio (The Voice that Breaks the Silence) in the Mixtec community of San Juan Copala, 354 km west of the state capital of Oaxaca. Even though the radio station only began broadcasting in both Spanish and Triqui in January of this year, there have been several instances where community operations like this one have been targeted.

The Mexican affiliate of the Asociacion Mundial de Radios Comunitarias (AMARAC) said acts of violence were reported against Radio Nadia in 2006 and Radio Calenda in 2007, both operated by indigenous groups in Oaxaca. Officials at La Voz que Rompe el Silencio acknowledged that the station received several threats in the very short time since it began operations. This is consistent with reports that community stations operated by indigenous communities may be considered a threat to the local political establishments. Like other nearby communities, San Juan Coppola is governed by the principle of customs and practices (usos y costumbres), the traditional indigenous form of government, based around the popular assembly, and Martinez and Bautista had been elected by their community to serve as hosts for the new radio station.

The right to incorporate this principle into their system of governance is one of the concessions that Congress granted to indigenous communities in its diluted indigenous-rights bill approved in 2001 (SourceMex, May 02, 2001). The indigenous-rights movement led by the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) had pushed for a more comprehensive indigenous-rights law (SourceMex, February 21, 1996). Even in the absence of a stronger law, many communities in Oaxaca and elsewhere have taken full advantage of the opportunities created by the 2001 law (SourceMex, February 12, 2004) "The Triqui indigenous people of San Juan Copala in southern Oaxaca saw
their first radio station, La Voz que Rompe el Silencio, as a major victory of their struggle," said independent reporter Sofia Jarrin. "When the community declared itself an autonomous region on January 21, 2007, it vowed to stay independent from any party affiliation or influence, even creating a community police (policia comunitaria) to replace government armed forces in the region." "[This murder] is another act of hostility and aggression against the Triqui community's struggle for autonomy," said Carlos Beas Torres, program coordinator for the Union de Comunidades Indigenas de la Zona Norte del Istmo (Ucizoni). "This is an example of the brutal climate of repression that exists in Oaxaca, with the complicity of both the state and federal governments." "The radio was to serve the Triqui people to promote unity, overcome conflicts, and encourage communication among communities, including those that are not formally members of the autonomous region," said Jarrin. "The radio stressed from the beginning the importance of promoting diversity within the station with the participation of women and particularly, the youth."

**International journalists organizations outraged**

International journalists organizations such as Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF), the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the Red Internacional de Periodistas con Vision de Genero, and the Red Trinacional de Periodistas joined with the Red Nacional de Periodistas de Mexico in demanding that Mexican federal authorities investigate the matter. "We urge state and federal authorities to conduct an exhaustive investigation that will bring all those responsible to justice," said CPJ executive director Joel Simon. "We will be monitoring the investigation closely." "Although there is so far no evidence that these two women were killed because of their work as journalists, their murders will be traumatic for all of Latin America's many community radio stations, which are too often ignored or despised by the rest of the media and by governments," noted RSF.

The Consejo Ciudadano del Premio de Periodismo recognized the two journalists by posthumously awarding them the Premio Nacional de Periodismo in the social-orientation category this year. The council has been giving the award annually since 2001 to journalists whose work exhibits the values of autonomy, independence, impartiality, plurality, and responsibility. Officials at La Voz que Rompe el Silencio said the deaths of Bautista and Martinez leave them more determined than ever to carry on their work. "The blood of our colleagues was not shed in vain," station coordinator Jorge Albino said in an interview. "In fact, it is with their blood that we will continue our work and boost the radio for the betterment of the Triqui community." While most of the recent violence against journalists in Mexico has been linked to their coverage of the drug trade and organized crime (SourceMex, December 06, 2006, April 18, 2007 and January 09, 2008), some instances have occurred of intimidation or violence against reporters, writers, and editors who cover human rights, corruption, or other abuse (SourceMex, April 26, 2006, January 09, 2008).

One of the most prominent cases occurred in Oaxaca, when US citizen Brad Will was killed while filming a documentary on demonstrations in Oaxaca City (SourceMex, November 1, 2006). Will's killer was allegedly a plainclothes police officer. Some critics contend that the Ruiz administration, which has a reputation for repression in Oaxaca, may have played some role in fomenting violence against anyone who opposes his authoritarian practices, including the indigenous communities that are adopting autonomous practices.
Three indigenous leaders Placido Lopez Castro, Lauro Juarez, and Rosalino Diaz were murdered in recent months, and the killings of the two women radio journalists might have been carried out by the same group of people, said a coalition of 26 organizations, which added its voice to the demand for a federal investigation. The coalition includes the autonomous community of San Juan Copala, the Red de Radios Comunitarias Indigenas del Sureste de Mexico, the municipality of Yosotatu, the Centro Orientacion y Asesoría a los Pueblos Indigenas, and the Asociacion Nacional de Abogados Democraticos, among others.

Oaxaca government says victims were not intended targets

The Ruiz administration has conducted its own investigation, with prosecutors contending that the two women were not the actual targets of the assailants. The Procuraduria General de Justicia del Estado de Oaxaca (PGJ) said the killers were actually targeting Faustino Vasquez Martinez, who was driving the car in which the women were killed. Vasquez was one of the three people injured in the attack. The PGJ did not offer a motive but suggested that the incident might have stemmed from a dispute among factions in the Triqui community. This explanation, however, failed to satisfy not only community groups but also the Oaxaca state legislature, the federal Congress, the semi-independent Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNCHR). "This crime cannot remain unresolved," said Herminio Cuevas Chavez, who holds a key leadership role in the Oaxaca state legislature. "We have to guarantee the safety of all our citizens who work as broadcasters."

In the federal Congress, members of the Chamber of Deputies approved a resolution urging the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) to conduct a thorough investigation. The legislators, however, did not issue any statements condemning the incident. The CNDH and the UNHCR also condemned the assassination and called for a thorough investigation of the deaths. CNDH officials traveled to San Juan Copala in mid-April to meet with local residents and to gather information about the incident, said the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma.

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