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Journalists' Organizations Protest Latest Killing In Mexico

by LADB Staff

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Another Mexican journalist was killed in the line of duty in February, continuing the deadly pattern that has plagued members of the media who have covered the drug trade and organized crime. The death of Jean Paul Ibarra Ramirez, a photographer for the daily newspaper El Correo in Iguala, Guerrero state, brought to 46 the number of journalists killed in Mexico since 2000. The situation is also becoming increasingly dangerous for elected officials, with a convoy carrying Chihuahua Gov. Jose Reyes Baeza the target of gunfire from high-powered weapons. One of the governor's bodyguards died during the attack.

Photographer, reporter gunned down in Guerrero state Ibarra and fellow journalist Yenny Yuliana Marchan, a reporter for the regional daily Diario 21, were shot in mid-February as they traveled on a motorcycle to cover a traffic accident. Ibarra was hit in the chest and shoulder and died instantly. Marchan suffered severe wounds and remains in critical condition in a local hospital. The attacks on Ibarra and Marchan brought strong reactions from international and Mexican journalists' rights organizations, which blamed the incident partly on the failure of the federal government to bring to justice the perpetrators of other attacks. "As long as all the murders of journalists continue to go unpunished in Mexico, journalists will continue to fall victim to this bloodshed," said the French-based Reporters Without Borders (RWB).

Several other groups also condemned the attack, including the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the Federacion de Asociaciones de Periodistas de Mexico (FAPERMEX), the Federacion Latinoamericana de Periodistas (FELAP), and the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa (SIP). In a joint letter to President Felipe Calderon, Roberto Pinon of FELAP and Teodoro Renteria of FAPERMEX demanded that the government conduct an exhaustive investigation into the case. They said that Mexican journalists could not practice their profession with total freedom unless these crimes were solved. Similar comments came from SIP president Enrique Santos Calderon, who urged Mexican authorities to "use greater diligence and efficiency to investigate every act of violence against the press."

The CPJ's statement also called for swift action from the Calderon administration. "Mexico must put an end to impunity in crimes against the press," said Carlos Lauria, CPJ's senior program coordinator for the Americas Drug-related violence escalates The attack against Ibarra and Marchan is an example of the extreme violence verging on warfare that prevails in certain regions of the country, especially since President Felipe Calderon launched a major offensive against drug trafficking in 2007. The president's initiative has not only failed to reduce drug-related violence but has contributed to its escalation (SourceMex, January 24, 2007 and May 30, 2007). The attacks on reporters and editors who cover the drug trade precede Calderon's initiative (SourceMex, December 06, 2006), but attacks against journalists have expanded since that time. As a result, many international journalists' organizations have rated Mexico as one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists (SourceMex, January 09, 2008).

The violence against journalists has primarily occurred in states along the US-Mexico border, but an increasing number of incidents are taking place in other states in the interior where drug cartels have increased their presence in recent years (SourceMex, January 09, 2008). And the attacks on journalists have not always been related to coverage of the drug trade. In some instances, journalists have been attacked because of their coverage of corruption and violation of human rights by authorities. This was the case in the murders of two women journalists in Oaxaca in April 2008, who reportedly were killed because of their support of indigenous rights (SourceMex, April 30, 2008).

Under the administration of former President Vicente Fox, the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) appointed a special prosecutor to investigate the deaths of journalists in Mexico (SourceMex, February 15, 2006). That special prosecutor's office has done very little to solve the dozens of attacks on journalists, much less bring any of the perpetrators to justice. More recently, the Chamber of Deputies has proposed legislation to make crimes against free expression a federal offense. The proposal, supported by Calderon, has been welcomed by journalists' organizations, which urged the Congress to move quickly on this matter. "The time has come for congressional leaders to take swift action and ensure that all Mexicans, including journalists, have a better legal framework to protect the basic human right to freedom of expression," said the CPJ's Lauria. Elected officials also targeted Concern is growing that an increasing number of elected officials in Mexico could be victims of drug-related violence. Until now, the drug cartels had primarily been targeting police and military personnel (SourceMex, July 26, 2006 and November 05, 2008).

The attack on Chihuahua Gov. Reyes Baeza's convoy in Chihuahua City in February raised a red flag, prompting concerns that even high-level elected officials could become victims, particularly in states where the drug trade has flourished. Reyes Baeza was not hurt in the attack, but one bodyguard was killed and two others were wounded. Federal Deputy Gerardo Priego said that organized crime is becoming increasingly violent. "From now on, the victims could be politicians and elected officials," said Priego, a member of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). Similar comments came from Deputy Juan Guerra Ochoa, a member of the center-left opposition Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). "Organized crime has absolutely no respect for anything or anyone in its efforts to gain everything," the legislator told the Mexico City daily newspaper El Sol de Mexico. Authorities quickly arrested a former soldier in the attack on Reyes Baeza, but did not immediately disclose the suspect's motivation.

The attacker, who served in the Army between 2001 and 2003, was not acting alone. According to eyewitness accounts, three assailants were involved in the incident, which remains under investigation. Other politicians in Chihuahua are feeling the heat. The drug cartels have threatened to kill Mayor Jose Reyes Ferriz of Ciudad Juarez for offering public support to his law-enforcement personnel in the effort to combat drug-related violence in the city. At the same time, drug traffickers put banners around the city lauding Reyes Ferriz for accepting the resignation of police chief Roberto Orduna Cruz. Before Orduna stepped down on Feb. 20, the drug traffickers had threatened to kill one law-enforcement officer every 48 hours. Reyes Ferriz is so afraid for his life that he has temporarily moved his residence across the border to El Paso, Texas, and commutes daily to his job in Juarez.

El Paso Mayor John Cook confirmed that police officers for that city are helping protect Reyes Ferriz while he is on the US side. "These are difficult days for the mayor, but they are more difficult for the

city of Juarez," the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal said in an editorial. It is not certain which drug-trafficking organization is threatening city officials. Juarez has been caught in a new turf war, with the Sinaloa cartel seeking to fill the void left by the weakening of the Juarez cartel after the death of its leader Amado Carrillo in 1997 (SourceMex, July 16, 1997).

Some analysts say the Gulf cartel, which is in a turf battle with the Sinaloa cartel around the country, reportedly has moved in to help the remnants of the Juarez cartel. President Calderon's efforts criticized Leaders of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) are not mincing words in blaming the Calderon administration for the escalation of drug-related violence. Deputy Cesar Duarte Jaquez accused the Calderon government of failing to develop a "solid response" to the drug violence in Chihuahua state and elsewhere. "There has been no action whatsoever by the administration to help state governments cope with this problem," said Duarte, who is also president of the lower house. "It appears that they are leaving the states to cope on their own in the battle against organized crime."

The inability of governments at all levels to deal with the surge in drug violence has resulted in a war of words between the PRI and the PAN. In comments that incensed the PRI, PAN president German Martinez said the drug trade has thrived because cartels were allowed to grow during PRI-led administrations. Martinez said the policy of accommodation between the PRI and the cartels remains in place, as evidenced by the suggestion by ex-President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) that legalizing drugs could help curb the violence in Mexico. "PAN governments are not going to engage in any experiments, nor risk the health of our citizens," said Martinez. The PAN president's comments drew immediate criticism from PRI officials, who described Martinez's comments as "stupid."

They criticized Martinez for pointing the finger instead of having the Calderon government acknowledge its role in the problem. "The only way we're going to solve this problem is if every one of us admits our responsibility in this situation," said PRI secretary general Jesus Murillo Karam. Other PRI legislators said the PAN has resorted to making such statements because it is concerned about congressional and gubernatorial elections in July 2009. Public-opinion polls show the PRI leading the PAN by double digits ahead of the election. "To try to blame an entire party [for the problem of drug violence] reflects concern about the polls," said PRI Deputy Emilio Gamboa Patron.

Still, the PRI cannot shake the public perception that it is the party most associated with the drug trade, as evidenced by a recent public-opinion survey by the polling organization Consulta Mitofsky (SourceMex, February 18, 2009). PAN attacks have not been limited to the opposition party. In a somewhat surprising statement, Interior Secretary Francisco Gomez Montt suggested that the anti-drug efforts of the administration of ex-President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) also fell short. "Evidently there were omissions in the past, including the period when Vicente Fox was president," the interior secretary said. "That is why we must all come together in this difficult task." Gomez Montt said another complication of the drug war is that organized-crime groups are no longer just fighting for distribution routes in Mexico but are also engaged in battles to control the Mexican market, which has grown significantly in recent years. "The criminal organizations are now in an all-out war for consumers, independent of any efforts by the state to fight them," said Gomez Montt.

At a ceremony commemorating Flag Day at his presidential library, known as Centro Fox, in Guanajuato state, the ex-president declined to comment on Gomez Montt's statements. In his only reference to the fight against drug traffickers, Fox acknowledged that Calderon is making every effort to fight the drug trade but said the battle should be the task of more than just one leader. Still, some reports suggest that Fox was disturbed by Gomez Montt's comments. "No one knows for sure what his reaction was," El Universal said in its Bajo Reserva column, which is written anonymously by some of the newspaper's reporters and editors. "But one source close to the ex-president has assured us that he was not pleased with what was said." Calderon also used the Flag Day commemoration to reinforce his commitment to end impunity in Mexico. "The republic and its government are determined to end these criminal actions once and for all," the president said.

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