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Three Journalists Killed in Mexico During July; At Least 10 Reporters, Editors Killed Thus Far In 2010

by Carlos Navarro

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The campaign of aggression against journalists has continued unabated in Mexico during 2010, with three more reporters losing their lives during July, apparently at the hands of organized crime. With the three murders—one each in Michoacán, Chihuahua, and Nuevo León states—at least 10 journalists have been killed in Mexico in 2010. A dozen journalists were murdered in Mexico in 2009 because of their coverage of the drug cartels ([SourceMex, 2010-02-03.](#)) As many as 67 writers, editors, columnists, and others associated with journalism have lost their lives since 2000 because of their coverage of organized crime and drug trafficking. Another 11 journalists have disappeared since 2003.

Murder of writer-editor in Michoacán sparks wide outrage

The most highly publicized of the three recent killings occurred in Michoacán state, home of the infamous drug cartel known as La Familia. The victim was Hugo Olivera Cartas, a correspondent for La Voz de Michoacán newspaper and the Michoacán-based Cuadratín news agency. He was also editor of the regional newspaper El Día de Michoacán.

Olivera's body was found on July 6 inside his pickup truck, parked on the side of a highway connecting the communities of Tepalcatepec and Aguililla. Witnesses said Olivera was last seen the previous night leaving the offices of El Día de Michoacán, which is based in the city of Apatzingán.

Authorities said the body had three bullet wounds, and the victim's wrists showed signs that he had been handcuffed. Police are not ruling robbery as a motive, since his watch, cellular telephone, and rings were missing and his empty wallet was found wedged on a seat inside the vehicle.

Still, the robbery motive appeared to be secondary because other signs pointed to the involvement of organized crime, including the fact that Olivera's office had been ransacked twice. A computer and other important information were stolen.

"The modus operandi points to the involvement of organized crime," said Michoacán Gov. Leonel Godoy Rangel.

Despite Godoy Rangel's assessment, local and state authorities had no suspects more than a week after the murder. There are also no known direct conflicts between Olivera and organized crime, although he had received several threats on his life for his coverage of crime issues.

"There are good reasons to think that [Olivera's] murder was related to his work as a journalist," said the Paris-based international journalists' rights organization Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF).

Olivera did have a run-in with agents of the Policía Federal Preventiva (PFP) in February. At that time, the journalist filed a complaint of police brutality because PFP agents roughed him up as he covered a clash between federal officers and members of organized crime near Apatzingán.

Olivera's murder prompted the semi-independent Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH) to warn that freedom of expression was under siege in Mexico. "In our country we have to eradicate impunity on the part of those who want to suppress freedom of expression," the CNDH said in a statement. "This is the only way in which we can discourage crimes against journalists and create a society that is more open, free, participative, and democratic."

Another semi-independent human rights organization, the Mexico City-based Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal (CDHDF), was more forceful in its criticisms of President Felipe Calderón's government. "It is regrettable that, despite earlier complaints, the Mexican government has not developed more protections," the CDHDF said through its Relatoría para la Libertad de Expresión y Atención a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos. "If [Olivera] had not been deprived of this right, this tragedy might have been avoided."

Similar comments came from New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). "We are very alarmed by the murder of Hugo Olivera, and we urge Mexican authorities to conduct a thorough investigation and bring the perpetrators to justice," said CPJ senior coordinator Carlos Lauría.

The CPJ said the wave of violence that Mexico is experiencing has the effect of "restraining the coverage of the news, creating an environment of intimidation that that leads to self-censure."

Robert Rivard, director of the Inter American Press Association (IAPA)'s committee on freedom of the press, said it was discouraging that coverage of media-related issues in Mexico was so frequently associated with violence. "This is devastating to the right of the public to know," said Rivard, an executive for the San Antonio Express-News in Texas.

Two others killed in northern states

Just days after Olivera's murder, two other murders were reported, one each in the northern states of Nuevo León and Chihuahua.

Marco Aurelio Martínez Tijerina, technical director for the radio news program Informativo 800, was found murdered on July 10, 24 hours after he was abducted by a group of people riding in three pickup trucks. Martínez Tijerina, who worked for Radio La Tremenda XEDD in Montemorelos in Nuevo Leon, died of a bullet wound to the head. His body showed signs of torture. Montemorelos is just southeast of Monterrey.

Guillermo Alcaraz Trejo, a camera operator who managed the video system for the Chihuahua human rights commission (Comisión Estatal de Derechos Humanos, CEDH), was attacked and murdered by a mob as he sat in his automobile after leaving the offices of the OMNIA newspaper in the capital city of Chihuahua. Authorities said Alcaraz died of bullets fired from an AK-47 assault rifle.

"Both murders bore the hallmarks of organized-crime killings and come at a time of mounting violence affecting both journalists and the general population," RSF said of the two incidents, which are still under investigation.

In addition to Olivera, Martínez, and Alcaraz, seven other journalists have been murdered in 2010, including María Elvira Hernández Galeana, Juan Francisco Rodríguez Ríos, Evaristo Pacheco Solís, and Jorge Ochoa Martínez, all killed in Guerrero state. The other murdered journalists are Miguel

Ángel Bueno Méndez (Mexico state), Jorge Rábago Valdez (Tamaulipas), and Valentín Valdés Espinosa (Coahuila).

José Luis Romero, a journalist from Sinaloa state who was kidnapped in December 2009, was found murdered in January 2010.

"As the violence continues to mount in Mexico, journalists now live in constant fear of being kidnapped, tortured, and murdered," said RSF. "The violence is encouraged by the fact that those who kill journalists are almost never punished."

Journalists are also facing obstacles from government entities. On July 12, reporter Abisaí Rubio and camera operator Ricardo Ramírez from Televisión Azteca network and reporter Antonio Neftalí Gómez from radio station Radio Voz de Nuevo Laredo filed a complaint of brutality against the Mexican Army. The journalists were covering a confrontation between soldiers and an armed gang when they were knocked to the ground by Army personnel and beaten repeatedly. A camera belonging to TV Azteca sustained major damage.

The three journalists said they planned to file a formal complaint with appropriate federal authorities and the CNDH.

The publicity about the soldiers' behavior prompted the Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) to do some quick damage control. "We do not condone the conduct of these military personnel against the journalists who were filming the confrontation," said SEDENA. "This incident will be investigated to determine who was responsible, and the participants will be punished according to military laws and regulations."

SEDENA officials said the soldiers managed to confiscate weapons and ammunition from the aggressors, who were apparently linked to an organized-crime group. Three members of the group were killed in the confrontation.

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