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Carlos Navarro

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Nuevo León Reporter Becomes First Journalist to Die from Drug Violence in 2012; Journalist Organizations Reiterate Demands for Safety

by Carlos Navarro

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On Jan. 8, Raúl Régulo Garza Quirino, a reporter for the daily newspaper La Última Palabra, was gunned down in a community near Monterrey, becoming the first casualty of 2012 in the seemingly unstoppable violence against journalists in Mexico. Garza was killed in his vehicle on Jan. 8 as he fled a group of assailants who pursued him through the streets of the city of Cadereyta, Nuevo León state. Garza's death was the latest in the string of dozens of murders of editors, reporters, photographers, and publishers in Mexico since 2000. The number of deaths has outraged international journalists organizations, which accuse the Mexican government of promising to take steps to curb the violence against the news media but not actually doing anything to address the problem.

Reporter's death probably a case of mistaken identity

Miguel Óscar Pérez, editor of La Última Palabra, said this might have been a case of mistaken identity, since the assailants returned to Garza's neighborhood the next day and shot another man who drove the exact same model vehicle as the journalist, a black Volkswagen Jetta.

Furthermore, said Pérez, Garza Quirino never had a byline on his articles, and La Última Palabra purposely minimizes its coverage of organized crime. "We have no guarantees regarding our safety," said Pérez, explaining the newspaper's editorial policy.

The Cadereyta newspaper's decision to downplay coverage of organized crime plays into the hands of the criminal organizations, which have created so much fear among the press that coverage is frequently downplayed or simply nonexistent ([SourceMex, May 18, 2011](#)).

While Garza might not have been killed because of his profession, his death nevertheless is the result of Mexico's drug-related violence. The international organization Reporters Without Borders (RWB) speculated that the assailants were associated the ruthless Zetas organization.

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said the mainstream press' silence has given way to another trend, the use of social media to report on drug-cartel activities. "In northern Mexico, as in other parts of the country, organized crime groups have terrorized the local press into silence, leading citizens to begin reporting criminal activities on websites and social media, either anonymously or using pen names," said the CPJ.

The CPJ says professional journalists are also reporting on Twitter, blogs, and other sites using pseudonyms. But even the anonymous use of social media is no guarantee that the author will not be targeted by organized crime. Maria Elizabeth Macías Castro—who used the pseudonym "La NenaDLaredo" (the girl from Laredo)—was killed because of her reports on Twitter and on the Web site "Nuevo Laredo en vivo." Macías' decapitated body was found on a road near the city of Nuevo Laredo. "A note found with the journalist's body said she had been killed for writing on social

media websites and attributed the murder to a criminal group," said the CPJ, adding that this was the first documented case worldwide where a journalist was murdered because of reports published on social media.

Estimates on the number of journalists' deaths from drug-related violence vary according to the criteria used to determine who is a journalist. Some organizations such as the CPJ report only 51 deaths between 2000 and 2011, while Mexico's semi-independent Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) calculates that 74 journalists were killed during that period. The RWB puts the number of victims at 80, adding that another 14 journalists have disappeared.

Regardless of the total, international journalists organizations are outraged at the high number of deaths. The CPJ, the RWB, the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA), the Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de Mexico (FAPERME), the Federación Latinoamericana de Periodistas (FELAP), and other groups have often expressed their concern about the situation to the Mexican government ([SourceMex, Dec. 6, 2006](#), and [Feb. 25, 2009](#)). And yet the violence against journalists continues.

Reporters without Borders demands changes in legal code

A couple of high-profile events were organized in recent months to bring attention to the issue. In December, the RWB and the Centro de Periodismo y Ética Pública (CEPET) organized a rally in Mexico City dubbed "Justicia para los Periodistas Asesinados y Desparecidos" (Justice for Murdered and Disappeared Journalists). The rally, held in front of the monument to prominent journalist and politician Francisco Zarco, took place on Dec. 10, the anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights.

Many who attended the rally were surviving relatives of murdered journalists. Participants demanded justice and answers from the government. "Justice is a form of reparation," said Blanca Martínez, widow of El Diario de Juárez crime reporter Armando Rodríguez Carreón, who was gunned down outside his home in Ciudad Juárez in 2008. "We want justice not as a form of revenge but as a sign that the social pact is functioning."

The Mexican government has taken a few steps to address the problem, including creating an office to specifically investigate and prosecute crimes against journalists ([SourceMex, Feb. 15, 2006](#), and [Feb. 24, 2010](#)). But critics insist that the office, known as the Fiscalía Especial para la Atención de Delitos Cometidos contra la Libertad de Expresión (FEADLE), will remain powerless until Mexico makes more profound changes to its legal system.

"[FEADLE] and its prosecutor Gustavo Salas Chávez have expressed good intentions regarding the plight of journalists," said the RWB. "But these good intentions have to be transformed into a strengthening of this office and an urgent clarification of its role."

Benoît Hervieu, the RWB officer in charge of the Americas, said there are three problems with the Mexican government's approach to addressing the plight of journalists. "First, there is a problem of control, or lack of control, on the part of law-enforcement entities," said Hervieu. "There is no order. Second, the judicial system does not function. And third, there is a bureaucratic system that ties up all the cases."

Hervieu says excessive red tape has prevented authorities from resolving some uncomfortable cases, such as police corruption and the ties of the military to organized crime.

PEN International also urges reforms

PEN Club International, an organization of novelists and other writers, which met in Mexico City in late January, also brought up concerns about ineffective government action on crimes against journalists. One goal of the organization is to promote freedom of expression.

In a full page advertisement in the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal, 170 of the world's most acclaimed writers joined Pen International in condemning attacks on journalists in Mexico, which they say have led to widespread censorship. The writers, which included Noble laureates Mario Vargas Llosa and Toni Morrison, also took the opportunity to express solidarity with all Mexican writers and journalists.

Several PEN members who attended the Mexico City meeting—including John Ralston Saul, Russell Banks, Slovo Gillian, and Hori Takeaki—joined Mexican counterparts Elena Poniatowska, Homero Aridjis, Laura Esquivel, Jennifer Clement, and others in putting together a declaration directed to the Mexican government.

The writers demanded immediate and definitive actions to end the murders of journalists in Mexico. They said the high number of deaths is "an assault on the dignity and the rights of all Mexicans, and a stain on Mexico's reputation at the international level."

"In Mexico, to tell the truth is to put one's life in jeopardy," said Poniatowska, who asked how much longer Mexicans have to wait until authorities take steps to guarantee that journalists can practice their profession freely and safely.

Ralston Saul also led a delegation of PEN International members that brought the concerns directly to Interior Secretary Alejandro Poiré Romero. "Changes to the legal system are needed," said the writer, who blamed corruption for a large part of the problem.

At the meeting, Poiré pointed out that the government has set up some safeguards for journalists, including a special program known as the Mecanismo de Protección a Periodistas, which has provided protection to 11 journalists who faced threats in the past year.

But the meeting with Poiré and public statements in support of journalists by other officials like deputy attorney general Alejandro Ramos Flores left PEN International members dissatisfied. "We are discouraged by the wide gap that exists between rhetoric and action," said Saul, a prominent Canadian essayist.

The writer said the government has met with PEN International and other organizations to brief them on the progress regarding efforts to protect journalists. "And yet, all the journalists that we encounter ask, 'Why don't we feel safer?'" said the Canadian writer.

Saul said PEN International is proposing several actions to address the problem, such as ensuring that the murders of journalists are treated as a federal crime. Additionally, he said agencies such as FEADLE must receive the tools and the authority to conduct a true investigation of each case. And prosecutors should have the liberty to bring each of these cases before the courts, said Saul.

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