Human Rights Commission Report Criticizes Government for Failure to Protect Mexican Journalists

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Despite promises by the Mexican Congress and the executive branch to protect the news media against violence by organized crime, journalists remain extremely vulnerable because of the government’s ineffective efforts to prosecute perpetrators. In June, the semi-independent Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) reported that journalists have suffered 126 attacks since 2000, and prosecutions have occurred in only 24 of those cases. Only two of the prosecutions resulted in convictions.

The CNDH said a large majority of the attacks, about 82, resulted in the murder of a reporter, editor, columnist, or photographer. But the number of deaths could be higher, since another 16 journalists have disappeared without a trace. During the 12-year period, 28 attacks on news-media outlets have also been documented.

"The CNDH believes it is extremely important to eradicate impunity, especially since we now have a mechanism to protect human rights defenders and journalists," the commission said in reference to a law approved in 2011 (SourceMex, May 25, 2011).

The commission said investigations into attacks on journalists are often shallow and incomplete. "Impunity prevails in large measure because authorities in charge of investigations do not perform the necessary tasks to collect proof and determine all the facts," said the CNDH.

Several journalists disappeared or murdered in 2012

The commission’s report was released shortly after the disappearance of photographer Miguel Morales Estrada, who was employed by El Diario de Poza Rica and who did freelance work for Diario Tribuna Papanteca and www.gobernantes.com, all in Veracruz state.

Morales is the third journalist to disappear this year. Photographers Federico Manuel García Contreras, employed of the daily newspaper El Punto Crítico in San Luis Potosí, and Nuevo Laredo freelancer journalist Zane Alejandro Plemmons Rosales both disappeared in May of this year while on assignment.

Several other journalists have been killed this year, many in Veracruz state. The first confirmed murder of a journalist occurred in January with the murder of Raúl Régulo Garza Quirino, a reporter for the daily newspaper La Última Palabra, in the community of Cadereyta near Monterrey (SourceMex, Feb. 1, 2012).

Television and multimedia specialist Marco Antonio Ávila García of El Regional de Sonora-Diario de Sonora de la Tarde, René Orta Salgado, a reporter for El Sol de Cuernavaca in Morelos state, and Regina Martínez, a reporter for the news magazine Proceso were all murdered in May. Martínez’s body was found in Xalapa, the capital city of Veracruz state. Two other casualties in Veracruz were photographers Gabriel Huge and Guillermo Luna Varela, whose bodies were found in plastic bags
beside a canal in Boca del Río, a suburb of the port city of Veracruz. They both worked for the online news agency Veracruz News.

In June, Víctor Báez, a crime reporter for the daily newspaper Milenio, was kidnapped and murdered in Xalapa.

Newspaper buildings attacked in Nuevo Laredo, Monterrey

The attacks against journalists are carried out by criminal organizations, primarily drug cartels, which want to intimidate members of the media to reduce coverage. More than two-dozen attacks against media outlets have been reported since 2012, including several incidents in the first half of this year. The assaults have succeeded in their intended purpose, which is to reduce coverage of the drug trade. Some media outlets have chosen to protect their editorial staff and other employees rather than risk further violence.

The daily newspaper El Mañana, which had provided comprehensive coverage of drug-related violence in the border city of Nuevo Laredo, announced earlier this year that it was scaling back on reports about "violent disputes." This decision came shortly after a group of assailants attacked the newspaper building with guns and grenades for a second time this year. The first attack occurred in May and the second in June. None of the newspaper’s staff members was injured in either incident, but the newspaper said it had made the "regrettable decision" to stop covering violence without speculating on the identity of the group responsible for the violence. The newspaper cited the "lack of adequate conditions for freely exercising professional journalism."

A series of attacks was carried out against several offices of El Norte daily newspaper in Monterrey on July 11 and July 29. The perpetrators lobbed grenades through the storefront window of one of the newspaper’s offices before dawn and repeated the violence 12 hours later at a second office. A third attack was carried out against the Monterrey newspaper in late July at an office in the suburb of San Pedro Garza García. This was the fifth attack against El Norte since September 2010.

Grupo Reforma, which also publishes the Mexico City daily Reforma, owns El Norte. The first attack against El Norte appears to be a response to the newspaper’s investigation of a scheme by a criminal organization to buy and resell stolen automobiles. The report said employees of a state agency colluded in the scheme by providing about 200,000 counterfeit license plates.

The first attack in early July occurred immediately after the article was published. A caller identifying himself as a leader of the Zetas drug-trafficking organization, which was probably involved in the scheme, threatened another attack, which occurred later that afternoon at another office of the newspaper.

Officials at Grupo Reforma vowed not to back down despite the attack on the newspaper. But they said that criminal organizations were involved in more than drug trafficking and that the mission of the newspaper was to cover the broad range of criminal activity in Mexico. "Unless we recognize the depth and scope of the problems we are facing…the corrosion will just keep on taking us deeper and deeper into illegality," said Reforma publisher Alejandro Junco.

While there is no conclusive proof linking the Zetas to the attack other than the threatening phone call to El Norte, Monterrey and Nuevo Laredo are in territory controlled by the organization. The Zetas have branched out to a wide range of criminal activities, including fuel smuggling and kidnapping (SourceMex, Jan. 6, 2010).
The newspaper group’s pledge to continue coverage of drug violence in the face of the attacks resulted in another assault on the newspaper at the end of July. This time the perpetrators were more brazen. Rather than simply cause property damage with missiles and gunshots, the attackers invaded a building where El Norte publishes a magazine supplement. "The aggressors, who were wearing masks, sprayed the building with gasoline before setting it on fire," said the Spanish news service EFE.

President Felipe Calderón’s administration strongly condemned the attacks against El Norte and promised to support local authorities conducting the investigations into the incidents. "The federal government promises that these cases will not go unpunished," the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOG) said in a statement. "All our investigative instruments are at the disposal of local authorities so they can bring those responsible to justice."

But journalist organizations believe that the government can do more than support investigations. "We have to halt the terror attacks that inhibit freedom of expression," said Gustavo Mohme, head of the division on freedom of expression at the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA).

The IAPA and other organizations like Reporters without Borders (Reporters sans Frontiers, RSF) have sounded a constant drumbeat about the violence against journalists in Mexico (SourceMex, Dec. 6, 2006, Feb. 25, 2009, and July 14, 2010). In June, RSF, the IAPA, and others reiterated their demands for action by the Mexican government. The organizations used the disappearance of photographer Miguel Morales Estrada to press their demands for greater protection of journalists in Mexico. "We demand strong action on the part of the authorities to find this journalist as soon as possible," RSF said in a statement.

Other international organizations—such as Amnesty International, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), and the UN—have joined the CNDH in condemning the recent attacks on journalists in Mexico. "The murders and threats suffered repeatedly by defenders of human rights and journalists in Mexico have to stop immediately," said the Washington-based IACHR.

Similar comments came from UN officials. "The protocols and the plans of action employed by prosecutors to deal with these types of crime do not take on a sense of urgency," said UN representative Javier Hernández Valencia.

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