Criminal Organizations Target Social-Media Activist in Tamaulipas

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Criminal Organizations Target Social-Media Activist in Tamaulipas

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Criminal organizations have managed to intimidate many journalists and media outlets in Mexico into suppressing coverage of drug-trafficking activities. As part of the intimidation process, the drug-trafficking groups have killed or injured dozens of reporters, editors, photographers, and other members of the print and broadcast media since 2000 (SourceMex, Aug. 1, 2012). Drug traffickers have also targeted citizens using social media, but have not been as successful in their intimidation efforts.

In the same week in February that a coalition of international journalist organizations called on President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration and the Mexican Congress to step up protection for journalists in Mexico, a drug cartel in Tamaulipas offered a bounty on the person or persons who have managed Twitter and Facebook accounts dedicated solely to warning citizens in the state to stay away from areas of risk.

Flyers distributed throughout Tamaulipas offered a hefty reward for information about the organizers of a campaign dubbed Valor por Tamaulipas, which had sent out frequent updates on cartel activities in the state. The source of the flyers was not identified, but suspicions center on the Zetas and the Gulf cartel, the two leading criminal organizations in Tamaulipas.

**Twitter, Facebook used to warn citizens about dangers**

The flyers, which were first distributed in the state capital of Ciudad Victoria and later appeared in other cities, offered a reward of 600,000 pesos (US$47,350) for information about the organizers of the site, so that "we can shut the mouths of these people who think they are heroes." In lieu of direct information about the identity of the social-media activist or activists, informants were offered the opportunity to turn in the names of relatives "whether they are their parents, brothers, children, or spouses." A cell-phone number was given for anyone with information, but callers were warned not to offer false tips "if they value the lives of their loved ones."

This kind of threat has succeeded with traditional news outlets in Tamaulipas. "The media outlets that dared to inform were silenced by bombs or intimidation," said the news organization SIPSE.com. "This happened several times to the Nuevo Laredo newspaper El Mañana, which then decided to suppress any information related to organized crime."

But this has not swayed Valor por Tamaulipas. "I am not a hero; I am just doing what I must as a citizen and a member of society in the face of the threat that organized crime represents to the stability of our state and our nation," said one of the organizers.

With traditional news outlets under siege, organizations such as the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) have noted the growth of social media in Mexico as an alternative medium to inform citizens about the drug trade (SourceMex, Feb. 1, 2012). Often, journalists are the ones...
using the social media as an alternative means of communication. But, in the case of Valor de Tamaulipas, which was conceived in 2012, the organizers are likely private citizens.

The Valor por Tamaulipas Facebook page had 157,000 Likes as of mid-February, a sign that the effort had broad support in Mexico and overseas. "This Facebook page has earned disdain from the Gulf cartel and the Zetas, since organizers have dedicated themselves to alerting the population of at-risk situations in areas where there are frequent shootings, kidnappings, and acts of extortion," said SIPSE.com, quoting local journalists.

Twitter is also used extensively. Here is an example of a Tweet for residents of the border city of Reynosa: "caravan of 10 trucks with armed subjects at the opening at Vista Hermosa near the Guadalajara pharmacy."

The cartels have succeeded in shutting down other efforts to disseminate information via social media. In 2012, journalist María 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 (SourceMex, Aug. 1, 2012).

There have been other instances where criminal organizations have responded to social-media reports. In September 2011, the mutilated bodies of a man and a woman in their mid-20s were found hanging from a bridge in Nuevo Laredo. Next to the corpses was a message from the Zetas threatening the authors of the popular blogs Frontera Al Rojo Vivo and Blog del Narco. The two victims were probably not associated with the blogs, but their murders were intended to send a message to the authors. Both blogs are still active, although the former has changed its formal name to Reynosa Libre and is used to disseminate short messages, in a similar manner as Twitter.

**Journalist organizations renew demand for press protections**

In 2011, the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA) called for authorities to provide social media with the same rights to protection as the traditional media. "It is necessary to defend all types of opinion or expression, whether through traditional communication or via the new technological media," said the IAPA. "This defense should be the obligation of society as well as the press. We have to do this together."

While social media is a growing threat to the cartels, the traditional media remains a larger target because it is more visible, and the reporters, editors, photographers, and publishers are much easier to find than users of social media. The attacks against journalists escalated during the administration of former President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), but the threat has not gone away during the Peña Nieto administration.

On Feb. 14, an international press delegation visiting Mexico called for more protection for journalists who are unable to protect themselves against the constant attacks from organized crime. The delegation, which included members of the International Press Institute (IPI) and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA), said the threats against journalists remain in place even with a change in administration.

"Mexico is facing horrendous problems. An important area of the country is under the control of drug traffickers and organized crime," said delegation spokesperson Roger Parkinson, a former...
president of the Toronto-based Globe & Mail media group. "These organizations torture and murder journalists, obligating them to practice self-censure."

The visitors called on the government to move more quickly to implement protections for journalists that were approved in the past several months. The Congress last year approved reforms to the Mexican Constitution that spell out the federal government’s responsibility to protect journalists. The reforms empower several federal agencies—including the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR), the Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional (CISEN), the Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional (SEDENA), and the Secretaría de Marina (SEMAR)—to address violations against freedom of expression and information (SourceMex, March 21, 2012).

But officials of the visiting journalists’ organizations said the protections for journalists appear to be delayed. "We have immense urgency," said WAN-IFRA representative Rodrigo Bonilla.

Reporters without Borders (Reporters sans frontières, RSF) joined WAN-IFRA in calling for speedier implementation of protections for journalists. "We are aware that several reforms are in process in the Senate and that there is a special mechanism to attend directly to the safety of journalists," RSF representative Babina Flores said in an interview on Radio Fórmula. "But we cannot wait any longer to implement this reform in order to prevent further aggressions."

The CPJ presented a formal report at the UN about the plight of journalists around the world, and Mexico—and in particular Calderón's six-year presidency—was singled out in the presentation. "This was one of the most violent periods that the press has experienced anywhere," said the CPJ.

The CPJ’s chapter on Mexico also noted that Mexican journalists were not only the target of kidnapping but of numerous threats, and several members of the profession were forced to flee from their homes. Many newspaper and broadcast-media buildings were also attacked.

"While the armed forces were fighting against the drug cartels, and the cartels were confronting each other, the press was the target of violence on the part of organized crime and corrupt officials who were seeking to control the flow of information," said the CPJ report.

The CPJ noted that Mexico was at the top of the list of countries where journalists disappeared without a trace in 2012. "No other country has seen so many journalists disappear as Mexico," said the report. By some estimates, more than 25,000 Mexicans disappeared during Calderón's six-year presidency (SourceMex, Jan. 23, 2013).

Mexico was followed by Russia, where the whereabouts of eight journalists have not been determined. Other countries on the list are the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Rwanda, Algeria, Ivory Coast, Egypt, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, and Serbia, all with only one or two disappeared journalists.

The IPI and RSF ranked Mexico as the fourth-most-dangerous country in the world for journalists in 2012, surpassed only by Syria, Somalia, and Pakistan. [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Feb. 20, 2013, reported at 12.67 pesos per US$1.00.]