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Questions Arise About Veracruz Governor’s Commitment to Protect Journalists

by Carlos Navarro
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The weekly news magazine Proceso and the administration of Veracruz Gov. Javier Duarte Ochoa are at the center of the latest controversy involving the plight of journalists in Mexico. The controversy began on April 10, when Duarte announced that authorities had detained Jorge Antonio Hernández Silva, who was alleged to have killed Proceso reporter Regina Martínez in the state capital of Xalapa in April 2012. Martínez was strangled and beaten to death.

Veracruz authorities insisted that Martínez’s murder was the result of an armed robbery and not as a consequence of her journalistic work, but Proceso and several international journalism organizations begged to differ with that conclusion.

Under normal circumstances, Hernández Silva’s arrest would be a significant development in a country where authorities at all levels have failed to solve the murders of dozens of journalists (SourceMex, March 21, 2012, and Aug. 1, 2012). At least 82 journalists have been murdered and 18 others have been reported missing since 2005 in Mexico, the semi-independent Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) reported in December 2012.

But a Proceso investigation raised strong questions about the arrest, primarily the inadequate evidence presented against Hernández Silva, a drug addict who was semi-homeless. Judge Beatriz Rivera Hernández sentenced Hernández Silva to 38 years in prison, even though the accused proclaimed his innocence and alleged that the Duarte government forced him to make a false confession.

In an article published in Proceso, reporter Jorge Carrasco Aráizaga was sharply critical of the Duarte government’s handling of the case involving the murder of Regina Martínez. Among other things, the report alleged that the fingerprints found in Martínez’s home following her death in April 2012 did not match those for Silva Hernández.

Carrasco also questioned the state prosecutors’ failure to take into account Martínez’s journalistic work that angered many powerful individuals in Veracruz. While the Duarte administration was bragging about its success in bringing a journalist’s killer to justice when others—including the federal government—had failed to do so, Proceso pointed out that more journalists had been killed or gone missing in Veracruz during Duarte’s watch than in any other state in Mexico.

Nine journalists have been murdered in Veracruz since Duarte, a member of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), took office in December 2010. The casualties include reporters Regina Martínez, Noel López Olguín, Yolanda Ordaz de la Cruz, Miguel Ángel López Velasco, Víctor Manuel Báez Chino, and Misael López Solana, as well as photojournalists Gabriel Huge, Esteban Rodríguez, and Guillermo Luna Varela.
Press association gives governor questionable award

Despite the questions surrounding the Martínez case, the Asociación Mexicana de Editores de Periódicos (AME) presented an award to Duarte on April 2 for his "defense of journalists," in large measure because of the efforts of Veracruz authorities to presumably solve the Regina Martínez case. This prompted strong criticisms from Proceso and several journalism organizations.

"The shameful recognition that the AME gave Duarte Ochoa for being a ‘protector’ of journalists is falling under its own weight," said Proceso. "Not only have a dozen newspapers around the country distanced themselves from the award but criticism also came from the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA)."

Two newspapers affiliated with AME that distanced themselves from the Duarte award were the Veracruz-based dailies Notiver and El Mundo de Córdoba. Three Notiver editorial employees, Yolanda Ordaz de la Cruz, Guillermo Luna Varela, and Misael López Solana, are among the journalists killed in Veracruz during Duarte’s tenure.

The IAPA, which has a close relationship with AME, also issued a statement strongly condemning the award to Duarte. The Miami-based organization said it would take more than an award to the Veracruz governor to mask the violence against journalists in the state. "Since 2010, there have been nine journalists murdered in this state, and another one who has disappeared," said the IAPA. "Many others have elected to leave the state because of frequent pressure or threats, some of which have been attributed to Veracruz authorities."

The journalist who has disappeared in Veracruz is Sergio Landa Rosado, a reporter for Diario Cardel in the small community of Cardel. Landa’s disappearance at the end of January came on his first day back at work after spending a month away recovering from an earlier kidnapping. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has demanded that Mexican authorities find Landa Rosado and bring the kidnappers to justice.

"This award is an example of what is wrong with journalism in Mexico. Nowhere else in the world are authorities recognized for carrying out tasks that are already part of their mandate," said Darío Ramírez, president of Artículo 19, the Mexican affiliate of the London-based Article 19. "This award is a slap in the face to all the journalists who have been killed or have gone missing in Veracruz."

AME defended its decision to present the award to Duarte, saying the governor was recognized for creating a special state commission (Comisión Estatal de Atención y Protección a Periodistas) to protect journalists and investigate attacks against members of the mass media.

"AME's mission has always been to support government institutions that work to defend free speech and to demand that they continue working on this effort," said AME.

The organization also made sure to point out that the award does not conflict with the concerns expressed by members of the media and civil society in Mexico. "Through frequent communiqués, we have condemned the violent acts against journalists and members of the communications media," said AME. "We have urged federal, state, and municipal authorities to act decisively to investigate, resolve, and punish those who are using violence to try to stifle freedom of expression and of the press in our country."
**Reporter Threatened**

The Proceso investigation, and its strong efforts to publicize the criticism from international journalism organizations about the AME prize, apparently ruffled some feathers in the Duarte administration, and some reports emerged that state authorities made death threats against Carrasco.

The reports said that current and former members of Veracruz’s state security apparatus and attorney general’s office (Procuraduría General de Justicia, PGJ) held a secret meeting to plan a trumped-up arrest of Carrasco. In case he resisted, the magazine said, the group decided "to do him harm."

But in a public statement, the state attorney general denied that any threats had been made against Carrasco and called the reports "groundless accusations." The statement signed by state attorney general Felipe Amadeo Flores also emphasized that Veracruz was "committed to the free exercise of the journalistic profession."

But Proceso insisted that the threats were real. "We believe the threats against Jorge are of extreme seriousness," Proceso editor Rafael Rodríguez Castañeda said in an interview with the Los Angeles Times.

The matter was important enough for the magazine to bring the matter to federal authorities, who appeared to take the matter seriously. President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration immediately activated the Mecanismo de Protección de Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas, an emergency measure to provide protection to a journalist who is under threat. The mechanism, created during former President Felipe Calderón’s administration, uses the resources of the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) and the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) to protect journalists.

No details were available on what the protection entails, but indications are that Carrasco has gone into hiding and was given bodyguards.

The threats against Carrasco also brought the intervention of international journalism organizations, including the French-based Reporters sans Frontiers (RSF) and Article 19. "A full explanation must be provided by the Veracruz authorities regarding the serious allegations that the magazine Proceso has leveled against them," RSF said.

"We join Mexico’s freedom of expression organizations in calling on the federal authorities to urgently provide Jorge Carrasco with protection under the Federal Mechanism for the Protection of Journalists that is now in effect," RSF said on its Web site.

Article 19 urged that protections be extended to Carrasco’s family and the editorial staff of Proceso, since this involved a case of "extraordinary risk." The organization also demanded that Duarte not block the investigation and guarantee the "physical integrity of journalists and human rights defenders who continue investigating the case of Regina Martínez."

The Mexico City office of Article 19 was the target of threats from unknown parties. A typewritten letter that was slid under the main office door contained a vague message threatening director Darío Ramírez with bodily harm. The letter said the Article 19 director would be beaten "until his heart stops."
Attacks against journalists continue elsewhere

The attacks against journalists and the media have continued in other areas of Mexico this year.

In mid-April, an unknown assailant shot and killed Alonso de la Colina Sordo in the parking lot of a shopping center in the city of Puebla. De la Colina Sordo, a former host of a news show in Acapulco, was said to have fled to Puebla to escape threats in Guerrero state. De la Colina’s show Hechos en Guerrero aired on the Acapulco affiliate of TV Azteca until mid-February, when the host announced he was leaving to pursue new projects.

Authorities could not determine immediately whether de la Colina was killed because of his journalistic work or whether there was another motive.

An attack was also made on the physical facilities of the daily newspaper Mural in Guadalajara in mid-April. Two grenades were detonated at the facilities of the newspaper, which is affiliated with the Grupo Reforma chain. The attack occurred in the early hours of the morning when the facility was vacant, so there were no injuries. A handful of vehicles were damaged in the newspaper’s parking lot.

No one took responsibility for the attack, but the incident caused significant concern among journalism organizations in Mexico and overseas because newspaper facilities as well as individual journalists have been targets of violence in recent years. In July 2012, attacks were launched against the facilities of the daily newspaper El Norte in Monterrey (SourceMex, Aug. 1, 2012). The newspaper is also affiliated with Grupo Reforma.

The IAPA called for the federal government to assume a leading role in the investigations of recent attacks. "It is essential that authorities act in an urgent manner to determine who is responsible for the threats against journalist Jorge Carrasco of Proceso magazine and the attacks on the facilities of the newspaper Mural," said Claudio Paolillo, who chairs the IAPA’s committee on freedom of the press and freedom of information.

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