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Veracruz Continues to Live Up to Reputation as Dangerous State for Journalists

by Carlos Navarro

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While criminal organizations remain a significant threat to journalists in Mexico, reporters, editors, and photographers are also frequently the subject of intimidation by public officials seeking to silence criticism. A report from Artículo 19, an organization that advocates freedom of the press, said 60% of the 330 aggressions against journalists in 2013 were committed by officials at various levels of government. The acts of aggression ranged from simple threats to arbitrary detentions, kidnappings, and murder.

The aggressions against journalists by criminal organizations and public officials continued during 2014 and into 2015. In January-September of 2014, Artículo 19 documented a total of 222 aggressions against journalists, including 94 physical attacks, 37 direct threats, 23 arbitrary detentions, and three murders. The organization said public officials were responsible for 42% of these aggressions.

Writer-editor abducted in small town in January

The trend appears to be continuing into 2015. On Jan. 2, a group of armed assailants abducted Moisés Sánchez Cerezo, the writer-editor of the weekly newspaper La Unión in the town of Medellín de Bravo in Veracruz state. Family members who witnessed the kidnapping said the assailants confiscated his computer, camera, and telephones.

Sources say Sánchez Cerezo—who has funded the newspaper with proceeds from his taxicab service—was often at odds with Mayor Omar Cruz Reyes, frequently the subject of criticism in the articles published in La Unión. Artículo 19 said Sánchez wrote primarily about local government corruption and violent deaths and published citizen complaints.

The victim's brother, Juan Carlos Sánchez Cerezo, confirmed that the kidnapped journalist had received threats from Cruz Reyes.

Journalist organizations and news outlets also reported on the threats. "Due to his socio-political and journalistic activities Sánchez Cerezo had received threats on several occasions during the past year from the head of the local municipal government and other people he had not been able to identify," said the Inter American Press Association (IAPA)

"According to AGN Veracruz, the journalist work of Sánchez Cerezo has become uncomfortable for Mayor Omar Cruz Reyes," said the daily newspaper SDP Noticias.

Some observers say the criticisms against the mayor, a member of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), were warranted. "Omar Cruz Reyes did not meet his commitments to the people. He neglected the city, left the streets in disrepair, and offered poor services," Mussió Cárdenas Arellano wrote in the online news site Plumas Libres.

"With ink and paper, Moisés Sánchez recorded the chaos. He warned of falsehoods, added Cárdenas Arellano, who noted that Cruz Reyes is a close ally of Gov. Javier Duarte, a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

Despite the allegations against Mayor Cruz Reyes, there is no direct evidence that the mayor was the intellectual author of the kidnapping. In fact, the mayor denied responsibility for the abduction in a statement to reporters.

Even with the criticisms of Cruz Reyes, Cárdenas Arellano is not discounting the possibility that criminal organizations rather than Mayor Cruz Reyes are behind the kidnapping.

"[State attorney general] Luis Ángel Bravo Contreras is sticking to his thesis that journalist José Moisés Sánchez Cerezo disappeared because of a personal conflict with the mayor of Medellín de Bravo," said the columnist. "The modus operandi of the kidnapping operation points to a more lethal perpetrator—organized crime."

Lacking direct evidence against Mayor Reyes, Bravo Contreras on Jan. 6 ordered the arrest of the entire 13-member police force of Medellín de Bravo, with officers accused of physically carrying out the abduction. Authorities are also conducting DNA tests out on two bodies found after Sánchez Cerezo's disappearance.

Journalists demand answers

Several international press organizations condemned Sánchez Cerezo's abduction, with Artículo 19 joining with the semi-independent human rights commission in demanding that the federal attorney general's office (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR) take over the case. In a direct appeal to the special office in charge of protecting journalists (Fiscalía Especial para la Atención de Delitos Cometidos Contra la Libertad de Expresión), the commission was also filing the request with the PGR on behalf of the victim's family.

Mexican journalists organized protests in Veracruz and around the country to demand Sánchez Cerezo's safe return. Protestors at a rally in the Veracruz capital of Jalapa also took the opportunity to criticize the administration of Gov. Javier Duarte for failing to protect journalists. The Veracruz governor has frequently downplayed attacks against journalists in the state and has been accused of attempting to cover up the murders of journalists Regina Martínez ([SourceMex, April 24, 2013](#)) and Gregorio Jiménez de la Cruz ([SourceMex, March 12, 2014](#)).

Gov. Duarte told reporters on the day after the kidnapping that his government would follow all lines of investigation in the case. However, critics said the governor showed his disrespect for journalists by referring to Sánchez as a "taxi driver and neighborhood activist" instead of mentioning his profession as a media worker.

"Veracruz authorities have a history of denigrating the activities of local journalists and a miserable record of impunity in cases of crimes against journalists," said Carlos Lauría, senior program coordinator for the Americas for the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). "Local authorities must immediately find José Moisés Sánchez Cerezo and bring him home safely and ensure his kidnappers are brought to justice."

The danger to journalists in Veracruz precedes Duarte's government. Statistics compiled by Artículo 19 show that a total of 15 journalists have been murdered in Veracruz since 2000 and four others have disappeared without a trace. This means that Veracruz would account for a little less than one-sixth of the estimated 100 journalist deaths recorded in Mexico since 2000.

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