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Veracruz Governor Javier Duarte Again at Center of Controversy Involving Death of Journalist

by Carlos Navarro

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A photojournalist who feared for his life because of his coverage of controversial topics involving the administration of Veracruz Gov. Javier Duarte was found executed in Mexico City along with four other victims. Rubén Espinosa Becerril, a photographer who had worked for three news outlets, is the 13th journalist killed under suspicious circumstances during Duarte's tenure. Carlos Lauria of the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said none of the cases has been resolved.

The body of Espinosa Becerril was found alongside that of activist Nadia Vera, also a frequent critic of Duarte, and three other women. Vera was involved in the #yosoy132 movement that organized demonstrations against then candidate Enrique Peña Nieto and the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) on social media and during campaign speeches ([SourceMex, May 23, 2012](#)). Vera joined a movement in Veracruz that criticized Duarte, and she also became the target of harassment and threats. Investigators are working on the theory that Vera was just as much a target as Espinosa Becerril. In a recent video in which she answered questions about dangerous conditions in Veracruz, Vera implied that Duarte was in collusion with the Zetas criminal organization, which runs extensive drug- and human-trafficking operations and extortion schemes in Veracruz.

"Because el narco is who governs this state, el narco is who gives the orders," she said on the video produced by the independent operation RompeViento TV and released two days after the multiple homicides. "The Zetas are literally pulling the strings, governing the entire state; they extort protection money, they charge you to open a bar, they charge you to work; the merchandise here is you. And now is the time to act, before we are annihilated. We have to do something."

Journalist organizations demand answers

The murder of Espinosa Becerril—who took photographs in Veracruz for Agencia Cuartoscuro, AVC Noticias, and the weekly news magazine Proceso—prompted journalist organizations to demand a thorough investigation from Mexico City and federal authorities.

Espinosa was apparently visiting Vera at the time of the incident. Two of Vera's roommates and a domestic employee were also killed by the perpetrators who bound the victims and shot each one in the head.

"The violence of which Espinosa was a victim is publicly known by the authorities charged with protecting journalists in Mexico," said Darío Ramírez, director of Artículo 19 in Mexico City.

"This homicide puts the situation in Veracruz, and the negligence of local authorities in providing protection, sharply into focus.

"Today, Mexico continues to be the most dangerous state for freedom of expression in Latin America," said Artículo 19, an affiliate of the London-based organization Article 19.

"We are deeply shocked and outraged by Rubén Espinosa's murder, which is unfortunately typical of the escalating violence in Mexico," said Emmanuel Colombié, who heads the Americas desk at Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF). "Because of the threats he had been getting in Veracruz, Espinosa travelled to Mexico City at his own expense hoping to find a safe refuge there. He is the eighth journalist to be murdered in Mexico since the start of the year. The authorities must react to the growing death toll by giving journalists better protection and by giving the justice system more resources in order to end the impunity for crimes of violence against media personnel."

"The Committee to Protect Journalists condemns the murder of Mexican photojournalist Rubén Espinosa and calls on authorities to investigate all motives in the killing and ensure the perpetrators are held to account," said the CPJ.

An initial probe from the Procuraduría General de Justicia del Distrito Federal (PGJDF) said each of the victims was shot in the head with a 9 mm weapon. The attackers ransacked the apartment to make it appear that robbery was a motive.

Still, the threats Espinosa Becerril and Vera received during their tenure in Veracruz raised questions about the true motive of the attacks. "This weekly magazine demands that the authorities in the Federal District conduct a thorough investigation, with the central focus on the journalistic work that our colleague was conducting in Veracruz. After receiving threats, he fled to Mexico City, where he thought he had a safe haven, allowing him to continue his journalistic endeavors," Proceso wrote in an editorial.

Did magazine cover irritate governor?

There is no evidence to implicate Duarte directly in the assassination of Espinosa Becerril. However, there is plenty of speculation on a motive if he did indeed target the photojournalist, including comments from Espinosa Becerril in which he suggested that an unflattering photograph that he took for the cover of an issue of Proceso might have angered the governor. "With a blank stare but his eyes wide open, the governor was wearing a white shirt with his name embroidered on the surface and a police cap with the words "Governor," said SinEmbargo, which interviewed Espinosa Becerril earlier this summer. "The title of the feature was "Veracruz a lawless state."

In the interview, Espinosa Becerril said the governor ordered a massive purchase of this particular issue of the magazine to reduce the number of copies in circulation. "I managed to place a photograph of the governor on the cover of Proceso, and that cover seemed to cause him a lot of harm," Espinosa Becerril told SinEmbargo. "They proceeded to buy the issue in bulk."

Authorities at the federal commission in charge of advocating for victims (Comisión Ejecutiva de Atención a Víctimas, CEAV), said its investigators have followed the case closely, but it is waiting on the results of the investigation by the PGJDF before taking any action. The CEAV said the federal government has the power to investigate those cases involving violations of local law against any journalist that violate freedom of expression or the right of the public to know.

The Duarte administration said little about the case, although the governor offered his full cooperation with the PGJDF's investigation. In a message on Twitter, Duarte said he informed Mexico City Mayor Miguel Mancera that the Veracruz state prosecutor would work closely with his counterpart in Mexico City to solve the case.

In a separate Twitter message, Veracruz attorney general Luis Ángel Bravo Contreras said Espinosa Becerril and Vera had not presented complaints to his office regarding threats and harassment, despite reports to the contrary.

Four of the journalists killed thus far in Mexico in 2015—Moisés Sánchez Cerezo, director of the newspaper La Unión; Armando Saldaña Morales, reporter at the radio station La Ke Buena; Juan Mendoza Delgado, director of the online news site Escribiendo la Verdad; and Espinosa Becerril—had worked in Veracruz.

Additionally, Espinosa Becerril is the 15th journalist killed since Gov. Javier Duarte, a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), took office in 2010. The list of journalists murdered during this period includes the high-profile cases of Yolanda Ordaz de la Cruz of the daily newspaper Notiver ([SourceMex, Aug. 3, 2011](#)), Regina Martínez of Proceso ([SourceMex, April 24, 2013](#)), Gregorio Jiménez de la Cruz of NotiSur and Liberal del Sur ([SourceMex, March 12, 2014](#)), and Cerezo ([SourceMex, Jan. 14, 2015](#)).

Human rights organizations are also pressing for a thorough investigation of the circumstances leading to the deaths of Espinosa Becerril, Vera, and the three other victims, who apparently were university students. Luis Raúl González Pérez, president of the Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH), joined the voices urging the PGJDF to conduct a vigorous investigation. "All types of aggression against people and institutions in the communications industry should be viewed as an attempt to suppress freedom of expression," said the ombud.

González Pérez also acknowledged recent legislation to protect human-rights advocates and journalists ([SourceMex, March 21, 2012](#)), but these measure have been insufficient protections for people working in these activities.

The CNDH's local counterpart in Mexico City, the Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal (CDHDF), urged Mexico City authorities to broaden their investigation to include violations of freedom of expression and possible gender-related aggressions, since four of the victims were women.

The estimates for the number of journalists killed in Mexico in recent years vary, depending on criteria used by different organizations to determine who is a journalist and on the time frame used. Because of the increased use of social media to communicate, bloggers and Twitter-based reporters are often listed among victims of crimes against journalists ([SourceMex, Oct. 22, 2014](#)).

In a recent report, the CPF recorded only three murders in 2014 and four in 2015 (including the death of Espinosa Becerril). The CPJ says 31 journalists have been killed in Mexico since 1992.

A report from RSF suggested that eight journalists had been murdered this year, one more than the total reported by the CPF. The Paris-based organization estimated that more than 80 journalists were killed in Mexico between 2003 and 2013 and another 17 disappeared. "Impunity continues to prevail in almost all murders and disappearances of journalists. The police and judicial investigations into these murders are often closed quickly or are paralyzed by cumbersome bureaucratic procedures," said the RSF. "The impunity is also due to collusion between organized crime and the political and administrative authorities, which have been corrupted or even infiltrated by the cartels at all levels."

A call for broad investigation

While there is no evidence to link Duarte directly to any of the killings of the journalists, the suspicions about the Veracruz governor appear to have some basis. "We have to remember that Veracruz is the state with the largest number of journalists murdered in the past five years, with 14 murders and four disappeared, according to some estimates," columnist Antonio Degante wrote in the daily newspaper SDPNoticias. "We also have to remember that Javier Duarte warned journalists during a speech in Poza Rica that they had to behave. He wanted to link them to drug traffickers, which no doubt constitutes a veiled threat."

"A necessary factor to put the situation into context in the investigation of the crime is that Espinosa Becerril carried out his work in Veracruz, where he covered social movements. Two months ago, he left the state because of harassment and threats by state officials," the daily newspaper La Jornada wrote in an editorial.

La Jornada also noted that, because of the threats, the organization Artículo 19 had asked federal and state authorities to safeguard the rights of Espinosa Becerril, but the photojournalist did not receive the requested protection.

"Significantly, Espinosa Becerril's last entry in his Facebook wall just a few hours before his murder was a documentary entitled Muerte en Veracruz, which reviewed the dangers faced by 14 other journalists who had been killed in the state," said La Jornada.

Some columnists cautioned against jumping to conclusions, urging critics to refrain from naming Duarte as the definitive intellectual author of the latest murders. "They are right in pointing out that Veracruz and its governor represent the worst threats against the practice of journalism in Mexico. It is also true that the greatest number of journalists killed in a single state has occurred in Veracruz during the Duarte administration, and many of these cases remain unsolved," columnist Ricardo Alemán wrote in the daily newspaper El Universal. "However, an assumption without proof that photojournalist Rubén Espinosa was killed by mercenaries on the payroll of the governor of Veracruz would be irresponsible."

Others, however, point to the threats that Espinosa Becerril and Vera received as proof of potential involvement in the assassinations. "The answer is obvious. Their lives were threatened because they denounced the corruption of the PRI governor of Veracruz in a very visible manner," Antonio Degante wrote in SDPNoticias.

"I can't put responsibility for his death on the government directly, but we can hold this government responsible for the climate of harassment and impunity that prevails in Veracruz," Jenaro Villamil, an investigative reporter and columnist for Proceso, said in an interview with The New York Times.

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