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Journalists Continue to Face Extreme Danger in Veracruz State

by Carlos Navarro
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2016-02-17

Veracruz state has gained a reputation as one of the most dangerous states for journalists in Mexico, and another member of the news media was killed in that state this month. The latest victim is Anabel Flores Salazar, an investigative reporter for El Sol de Orizaba, the 15th journalist killed since 2010, the year when Gov. Javier Duarte took office. Unknown individuals kidnapped Flores Salazar on Monday morning, Feb. 8, at her home just outside of the city of Orizaba. Her body was later found just across the border in Puebla state, along the Cuacnopalan-Oaxaca highway.

Flores Salazar’s murder again drew attention to the controversial relationship between Veracruz journalists and Gov. Duarte, whom many critics accuse of failing to protect the journalists (SourceMex, Jan. 14, 2015). Duarte 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). There have even been allegations that Gov. Duarte or his cronies ordered some of the murders, as was the case with Veracruz-based photojournalist Rubén Espinosa Becerril, who was murdered in Mexico City in August 2015 (SourceMex, Aug. 5, 2015).

Reporters’ body found on the side of the road

While no one has stepped forward to claim credit for Flores Salazar’s murder, one theory is that the Zetas might have been behind the assassination. In the aftermath of her abduction, journalists and executives from the local newspaper El Buen Tono, which covers the Córdoba-Orizaba region, received death and property threats from the Zetas. One threat warned that the newspaper would be burned down as retaliation for informing about the activities of organized crime.

Prominent national journalists have not been immune from death threats. Just hours after Flores Salazar’s body was found, reporter Álvaro Delgado, of the national weekly magazine Proceso, and columnist Ricardo Alemán, of the daily newspaper El Universal, received a series of death threats on social media.

Journalists’ organizations repeated their criticism of Duarte following the murder of Flores Salazar, pointing to the 15 journalists who have been killed and to three others who have disappeared in the state over the past six years. According to a recent report in Proceso, Duarte has lost his grip on Veracruz, with criminal organizations assuming control of the day-to-day operation of 30 of the state’s 112 municipalities. In those municipalities, the mayor and the police force are at the service of criminal organization, the magazine said.

“Veracruz has become one of the most dangerous regions in the world for the press, crippling citizens’ rights to access vital information about crime and corruption,” said Carlos Lauría, senior program coordinator for the Americas at the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).
The Paris-based organization Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) also issued a strongly worded statement decrying the death of the journalist on the day her body was discovered: “[RSF] is appalled to learn that the body of Anabel Flores Salazar, a crime reporter for the El Sol de Orizaba newspaper, was found on the Cuacnopalan-Oaxaca road in Puebla state yesterday, a day after the 32-year-old mother was abducted from her home in neighboring Veracruz state.”

**Are Veracruz journalists too close to criminal organizations?**

While authorities were still investigating the exact motive for Flores Salazar’s murder, some observers suggested that she had become too close to the organizations that she covered. José Abella, owner of El Buen Tono, said that Flores Salazar, like the vast majority of reporters covering the police beat Veracruz, had developed some sort of understanding with criminal organizations. “Drug traffickers have infiltrated media outlets in Mexico,” Abella said in an interview with broadcaster and columnist Ciro Gómez Leyva on the national Radio Fórmula network. “In all of [Veracruz], the majority of journalists covering crime are involved with the mafia.”

According to Abella, Flores Salazar served as an important liaison with the other crime reporters. “The mafia gave her money so she could bribe the other journalists,” Abella told Gómez Leyva. “She was the one in charge of distributing the money so that they could keep quiet.”

However, Abella did not offer any proof of his allegations during the interview, and Gómez Leyva did not press him to clarify his comments.

A statement from the Veracruz attorney general’s office (Fiscalía del Estado) said state investigators were conducting their probe based on the theory that Flores Salazar had “probable ties” to gang leader Víctor Osorio Santacruz, also known as El Pantera. Osorio Santacruz was recently arrested by the federal Army on charges that he led a criminal organization, presumably a faction of the Zetas.

A group of Veracruz reporters, however, took issue with the focus of the state investigation. In a letter to authorities, they asked that Veracruz officials stop criminalizing the state’s crime reporters. “To criminalize our murdered colleagues is a cowardly strategy on the part of those who are charged with investigating,” said the journalists, who accused authorities of trying to build their case by fabricating facts.

The letter also wondered how the perpetrators had been able to kidnap Flores Salazar so easily under the nose of security personnel who were charged with safeguarding her home. “How many more reporters are going to fall in defense of freedom of expression?” they asked in the letter.

**Broad outcry**

Other national journalists and human rights organizations in Mexico called for the special agency created to investigate crimes against journalists (Fiscalía Especial para la Atención de Delitos cometidos contra la Libertad de Expresión, FEADLE) and the attorney general’s office (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR) to conduct a full inquiry into the murder of Flores Salazar.

The coalition—which includes Artículo 19, Propuesta Cívica, Centro Nacional de Comunicación Social (Cencos), Red Nacional de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos, and Comunicación e Información de la Mujer (CIMAC)—also urged the Mexican news media not to “revictimize” Flores Salazar by publishing photos of her partially nude body, which was found on the side of the road.
International organizations, such as RSF, the CPJ, and Amnesty International (AI) joined in the call for Mexican federal authorities to clarify the Flores Salazar case and to implement significant measures to protect journalists throughout Mexico.

“The message must be clear,” said Erika Guevara-Rosas, director of AI’s Latin America program. “Those who stop at nothing to silence journalists must pay for their crimes.”

“The Mexican federal government must put an end to this cycle of endless violence by bringing the perpetrators of this crime to justice,” noted the CPJ.

And Irina Bokova, director-general of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), said, “This crime has deprived the population of a voice that contributed to the public debate and the free circulation of information. In the name of justice and in the interest of promoting safer working conditions for journalists [in Mexico], I urge authorities to investigate the case and prosecute the guilty parties.”

In response to the outcry from Mexican and international organizations, FEADLE officials announced that the agency would launch an investigation and develop a series of steps to assist other law-enforcement units to conduct the probe.

Additionally, the PGR—which has oversight over FEADLE—noted that it had already asked the secretaries of Defense and the Navy to inform whether members of these institutions had entered the home of the reporter and if so, had required them to provide information about the authority who issued the warrant and the officers involved.

Flores Salazar is the third journalist assassinated in Mexico in 2016. Two other murders occurred in January in Oaxaca state. Reinel Martínez Cerqueda, a broadcaster for the community radio El Manantial, was shot to death in the town of Santiago Laollaga on Jan. 22. A day earlier, Marcos Hernández Bautista, a reporter for the daily newspaper Noticias Voz e Imagen de Oaxaca, was killed in the municipality of San Andrés Huaxpaltepec as he boarded his automobile.

**More than 100 deaths since 2000**

The statistics vary by organization, depending on whether members of the non-traditional media, such as bloggers, are counted among the victims, but the consensus is that more than 100 reporters, editors, photographers and publishers have lost their lives in Mexico since 2000. The numbers began to climb significantly in 2006, the year when President Felipe Calderón launched his intense drug-interdiction campaign ([SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2007](http://www.sourcemex.org/)). One figure, released by Mexico’s semi-independent human rights commission (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, CNDH), put the total number of journalists who were murdered as of November 2015 at 107. The murders of Martínez Cerqueda, Hernández Bautista, and Flores Salazar would bring that total to 110 as of mid-February 2016.

The CNDH report also noted that 20 other journalists have disappeared without a trace between 2005 and 2015. In addition, there were 48 attacks against media facilities between 2006 and 2015.

In a separate report, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) said that 14 journalists were killed in the last two years in Mexico—eight in 2014 and six in 2015—because of their work.
CIMAC, a news organization that covers women’s rights in Mexico, pointed out that female journalists account for a large percentage of the victims nationwide. According to CIMAC, there have been 331 documented cases of violence against women journalists between 2002 and 2015 in Mexico.

Furthermore, said CIMAC, 35 women journalists had been victims of violence in Veracruz during the six-year tenure of the Duarte administration. In addition to Flores Salazar, reporters Yolanda Ordaz de la Cruz, of the daily newspaper Notiver, and Regina Martínez, a correspondent in Veracruz for Proceso, were murdered in Veracruz (SourceMex, Aug. 3, 2011, Aug. 1, 2012, and April 24, 2013).

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