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Journalists, Small-Town Mayors Remain Under Siege in Mexico

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Mexico remained a dangerous place for journalists and small-town majors during 2016, with recent killings bringing to light the plight of the two groups. Many more journalists have been killed in Mexico than in any other country, according to a recent report from the international organization Reporters sans Frontières (RSF). Mayors of small communities in Mexico also face extreme peril for standing up to criminal organizations. Four mayors have been murdered since the start of the year, but many more have been threatened with death if they did not cooperate with drug traffickers.

According to a recent report from RSF, nine journalists were murdered in Mexico between Jan. 1, and July 20, the most of any country in the world so far this year. The number of journalist deaths in Mexico represented one-fourth of the total killings reported at the global level. The deaths in Mexico were slightly higher than in warn-torn Syria, where seven murders have been reported. In Latin America, three journalists have been murdered in Brazil, and one each in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, according to RSF.

“Murders of journalists are typically carried out in cold blood, like executions, and almost always go unpunished,” RSF said in its Mexico report. “This impunity accounts for the widespread corruption. Some elected officials are directly linked to organized crime.”

The latest murder occurred in Veracruz, one of the states where members of the news media have been targeted, particularly during the administration of Gov. Javier Duarte (SourceMex, April 24, 2013, March 12, 2014, and Aug. 5, 2015). The latest victim was Pedro Tamayo Rosas, a crime reporter for the daily newspapers Al Calor Político and El Piñero de la Cuenca. Two assailants shot Tamayo Rosas outside his home in Tierra Blanca in Veracruz. The reporter, who had been under police protection in Tijuana after receiving threats in January, renounced the police protection and returned to Veracruz on his own accord.

International reaction

The murder of Tamayo was denounced both in Mexico and overseas. The journalists’ organization Artículo 19 blamed the death on the impunity promoted by the Duarte government in Veracruz. “There is a failure of the rule of law,” said Ana Ruelas, the organization’s director for Mexico and Latin America. “There is a policy in this state designed to discourage the flow of information.”

The estimates of journalists murdered during Duarte’s tenure vary from organization to organization. Some groups put the total deaths at 19, while others say 17 members of the news media have been killed since 2010 in Veracruz. The discrepancy lies in the criteria used to define who is a journalist.

Ruelas expressed hope that the environment would improve under the next administration, which takes office on Dec. 1. Duarte has been governor of Veracruz since 2010.
The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also condemned the murder of Tamayo Rosas. “I call on the authorities to investigate his death and bring the perpetrators to justice,” said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova. “Weapons should not be used to circumscribe the freedom of the press and the freedom of information, which are essential for democracy and the rule of law.”

According to RSF, eight other journalists have been murdered in Mexico in 2016, including Anabel Flores Salazar of El Sol de Orizaba in Veracruz (SourceMex, Feb. 17, 2016). A third journalist killed in Veracruz this year was Manuel Santiago Torres González, who worked for the national network TV Azteca and for Radiover.com.

Other victims worked in Oaxaca state, another area of conflict. Marcos Hernández Bautista of Noticias, Voz de Imagen de Oaxaca and Reinel Martínez Cerqueda of community radio El Manantial were murdered in January, while Elidio Ramos Zárate of the daily El Sur was killed in June.

The three other killings also occurred in states with a high level of conflict. Moisés Dagdug Lützow of Radio XEVX-AM La Grande de Tabasco was murdered at his home in Villahermosa, in the state of Tabasco, in February. Francisco Pacheco Beltrán, who worked for three publications—El Sol de Acapulco, El Faro de Taxco, and Pacheco Digital—was killed in Guerrero state. The final victim was freelance writer Zamira Esther Bautista Luna, who worked in Ciudad Victoria, the capital of Tamaulipas state. According to the online site Clasesdeperiodismo.com, 15 journalists have been murdered in Tamaulipas since 2010, and 17 others have disappeared. Tamaulipas has been a stronghold of the Zetas criminal organization.

The majority of the murders of journalists in Mexico remain unresolved despite pledges from a succession of administrations to protect members of the news media (SourceMex, Feb. 15, 2006, Feb. 24, 2010, and Oct. 30, 2013). One prominent case has attracted special attention: the 2015 killing of Rubén Espinosa Becerril, a photographer who had worked for three news outlets in Veracruz state. Espinosa was murdered in Mexico City, along with human-rights activist Nadia Vera and three other women on July 31, 2015. There was some speculation that Veracruz Gov. Duarte was behind the murders, but authorities in Mexico City found no evidence to corroborate the charges (SourceMex, Aug. 5, 2015). Still, the case remains unresolved, which prompted journalists, human rights advocates, and relatives of the victims to hold a ceremony in Mexico City on July 31, to demand answers.

In a press conference outside the Mexico City attorney general’s office (Procuraduría General de Justicia del Distrito Federal, PGJDF), Espinosa’s sister Alma accused

Mexico City Attorney General Rodolfo Ríos Garza of ignoring important lines of investigation in order to preserve the version of events that city authorities announced in the first weeks of the probe.

The statement also called on Mexico City Mayor Miguel Ángel Mancera to ensure a thorough and transparent investigation.

Espinosa, who contributed to the national magazine Proceso and the photography service Cuartoscuro, had been directly threatened by Veracruz governor Javier Duarte and had denounced the murders of other journalists in the state.
In an interview with the Spanish news service EFE, Espinosa’s other sister, Patricia, said one of the lines of investigation that Ríos Garza failed to pursue was a report that Rubén Espinosa had been the target of an attack in Xalapa, Veracruz, in 2013 “for which a complaint was filed.”

Vera also received threats from Veracruz officials for her activities denouncing human rights violations on the part of Duarte.

The PGJDF did arrest three individuals in connection with the murders, accusing Daniel Pacheco, Omar Martínez, and former Mexico City police officer Abraham Torres of homicide, femicide, and robbery. While the three likely carried out the murders, there is some speculation that someone else ordered the killings.

Espinosa’s family filed an amparo lawsuit, which is a mechanism in Mexico’s legal code designed to ensure that an individual’s constitutional rights are protected. Under the amparo, Espinosa’s relatives demanded that prosecutors respond to 55 requests for information about the case. In its responses, the PGJDF said that it was not responsible for determining the motive, Espinosa’s sisters said.

**Mayors also remain under siege**

Mayors of small communities also continued to be target of criminal organizations, with five municipal leaders murdered since the start of 2016. A total of 79 sitting and former mayors have been assassinated since 2006, according to two associations representing local elected leaders, the Asociación Nacional de Alcaldes (National Mayors Association, ANAC) and the Asociación de Autoridades Locales de México A.C. (Association of Local Authorities of Mexico, AALMAC).

The first victim of the year was Gisela Mota Ocampo, mayor of Temixco in Morelos state, who was murdered just after the new year (SourceMex, Jan. 13, 2016). Since then, four other municipal leaders have been killed. On April 22, assailants murdered Juan Antonio Mayén Saucedo, of Jilotzingo in México state. Mayén Saucedo was killed along with two bodyguards as they traveled on the Naucalpan-Ixtlahuaca highway.

The three other mayors were killed during a recent 10-day period. On July 22, Domingo López González, mayor of San Juan Chamula in Chiapas, was killed while attending a public meeting on the city’s main plaza. The mayor was in conversation with a group of demonstrators when armed assailants shot at the crowd, killing five people. The victims included López González and Vice Mayor Narciso Lunes Hernández. State authorities are investigating the murder in a town beset by conflict between government and indigenous groups. San Juan Chamula is in the heart of the territory once controlled by the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN).

A day after López González’s murder, assailants ambushed and killed Ambrosio Soto Duarte, mayor of Pungarabato in Guerrero state, as he traveled on a highway in Michoacán state. The incident injured four federal police officers who were serving as bodyguards for the mayor.

The fifth victim this year was José Santa María Zavala, mayor of Huehuetlán El Grande in Puebla state. Zavala was ambushed and riddled with bullets from high-caliber weapons as he returned home on a local highway in Puebla.

Observers said criminal organizations would continue to target and kill small-town mayors unless the federal government puts in place a strategy to protect these elected officials.
“This is not an isolated phenomenon. This is a trend that has worsened in recent years,” columnist Jenaro Villamil wrote in the weekly news magazine Proceso. “Organized crime has penetrated the institutional fiber of our country and is targeting the most vulnerable segment of the federation, which are the municipalities.”

According to ANAC, the states that represent the most risk for small-town mayors are also the same ones that are most dangerous for journalists, including Veracruz, Oaxaca, Michoacán, Durango, Tamaulipas, Chihuahua, México, Guerrero, and Nuevo León. The organization said there is a moderate threat for small-town mayors in the states of Coahuila, Morelos, San Luis Potosí, Puebla, and Zacatecas.

ANAC has established a system to classify risk for mayors. Zone A includes the regions where mayors face an extremely high threat, Zone B is a high-risk area, and Zone C refers to areas where mayors face a low threat.

According to the ANAC and the AALMAC, of the 79 mayors killed over the past 13 years, more than half lost their lives while in office. Another 31 were killed after they left office. The remaining victims were killed after winning an election to the post but before they could be sworn in.

The spate of murders has prompted the ANAC to demand that the federal government, and specifically the interior ministry (Secretaría de Gobernación, SEGOB), establish some sort of protocol to guarantee the protection of the mayors who are most at risk.

SEGOB responded to the request by pledging support for the mayors’ association. “Today, we are called to work together to ensure that no local municipal authority falls victim to violence, extortion, or injury on the part of criminal organizations,” Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong told reporters.

While not offering a specific plan of action, Osorio Chong suggested that a solution should be the joint responsibility among authorities at all levels of government. He did advance some concepts that were required to make the partnership work, including the creation of a more egalitarian nation, the support of sustainable development, the creation of new models of governance, and the development of a mechanism where leaders could exchange experiences, ideas, and models of good governance.

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