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Journalists Under Threat in Mexico as Five News Professionals Are Attacked in March

by Carlos Navarro

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Mexico remains one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, particularly those who cover a police beat. Five journalists were attacked in Mexico in March, and three of them died instantly. A fourth journalist remained in critical condition after sustaining bullet wounds. A fifth news professional escaped harm, but a bodyguard was murdered.

The death toll for news professionals so far in 2017 would match the pattern in 2016, when nearly one journalist a month was assassinated during the year. Last year, Mexico ranked third in terms of journalist murders, surpassed only by two countries where conflict prevails: Iraq and Afghanistan, according to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), which is based in Brussels.

Since 2006, 101 journalists have been killed in Mexico, according to Artículo 19, the Mexican affiliate of the British journalists-rights organization Article 19. Last year's death toll was the highest in any year, but 2008 and 2010 came close to that number, with 10 journalists killed in each of those years. A large number of these deaths occurred during the tenure of former President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), who launched an intensive campaign against drug traffickers, exacerbating violence around the country ([SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2007](#)). The killings have continued during the tenure of President Enrique Peña Nieto, with more than 30 death of journalists recorded between the end of 2012 and March 2017, according to Artículo 19.

"We reject the multiple attacks suffered by members of the Mexican press," IFJ secretary-general Anthony Bellanger said at the end of March. "We urge Mexican authorities to put a halt to the wave of violence, which resulted in the death of three journalists over the past month."

According to Bellanger, the violence against journalists in Mexico can only be contained if there is a political and judicial will to do so.

In the majority of the cases, the perpetrators have not been brought to justice, said Artículo 19, pointing out that many of the journalists who were attacked covered a police beat or wrote about corruption. It noted that public officials were behind the attacks in more than half of the cases.

Journalists, particularly those in Veracruz, say threats and attacks sometimes go unreported because of a lack of confidence in authorities. "We cannot denounce an attack or a threat against us because we do not trust any authority," a journalist in Veracruz who asked not to be identified said in an interview with Reuters. "Too often, authorities are in collusion with the criminals who perpetrated these attacks."

Criminal organizations responsible?

The March attacks mostly took place in states where criminal organizations have been active for a long time: Veracruz, Guerrero, Chihuahua, and Baja California Sur, an area where drug activity is increasingly growing.

The first incident occurred on March 2, when two subjects riding on a scooter shot Cecilio Pineda, editorial director of the newspaper *La Voz de Tierra Caliente* in Guerrero state and an occasional collaborator of *La Jornada Guerrero*, as he was washing his truck. Pineda had reported on the close ties between local state representative Saúl Beltrán, a member of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and Raybel Jacobo, the leader of the local drug organization *Los Tequileros*. According to reports written by Pineda, Jacobo was providing protection to Beltrán in exchange for political favors. Jenaro Villamil, a columnist for the weekly news magazine *Proceso*, said state attorney general Xavier Olea botched the case against Beltrán, who is thought to be the intellectual author of the murder, allowing him to escape prosecution.

A few weeks later, on March 19, Ricardo Monlui Cabrera, editorial director of the newspaper *El Politico* in Córdoba, Veracruz, was shot by two individuals on a motorcycle as he emerged from a restaurant with his family. A direct motive for Monlui Cabrera's murder has not been established, but authorities suspect the killing was related to his journalistic work. Monlui Cabrera was also a columnist for *El Sol de Córdoba* and *Diario de Xalapa*.

Veracruz is one of the most dangerous places in Mexico for members of the news media ([SourceMex, Feb. 17, 2016](#), and [Aug. 17, 2016](#)). At least 15 journalists were killed and another three disappeared during the administration of former Gov. Javier Duarte, who went underground to avoid facing charges of corruption and collusion with criminal organizations ([SourceMex, March 1, 2017](#)). Monlui Cabrera's murder is the first in the state under new Gov. Miguel Ángel Yunes Linares.

"Investigators should consider Ricardo Monlui Cabrera's journalism as a possible motive for his murder and bring all those responsible for this heinous crime to justice," said Carlos Lauria, senior program coordinator for the Americas at the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). "Veracruz became the deadliest place in the Western Hemisphere for journalists under former governor Javier Duarte. The government of Miguel Ángel Yunes Linares should oversee a credible investigation in cooperation with federal authorities to prove that he is committed to a different legacy."

Just days after the CPJ and other journalists' rights organizations denounced the murder of Monlui Cabrera, a second journalist was attacked in Veracruz. Assailants shot Armando Arrieta Granados, an editor at *La Opinión de Poza Rica*, as he arrived home on March 30. Arrieta, who is also a professor at Universidad Veracruzana, was immediately transferred to a local hospital, where doctors managed to keep him alive.

"He is in serious condition, as he was shot at close range," said Jorge Morales, executive secretary for the Veracruz state journalists' protection commission (Comisión Estatal para la Atención y Protección de los Periodistas, CEAPP).

The federal attorney general's office (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR) said the federal commission in charge of watching over the rights of journalists (Fiscalía Especial para la Atención de Delitos Cometidos contra la Libertad de Expresión, FEADLE), has launched its own investigation into Arrieta's attack. FEADLE has sent a team of criminologists, ballistics specialists, and other experts to Poza Rica.

The third murder of a journalist during March occurred in Chihuahua state. Miroslava Breach Velducea, who spent 15 years as a correspondent for the Mexico City-based newspaper *La Jornada*, was shot eight times while sitting in her car as she prepared to drive one of her children to school.

She died en route to the hospital. Breach, who also wrote for the daily newspaper Norte de Ciudad Juárez, specialized on issues of security, which might have been why she was targeted, sources said.

Breach had written a series of investigative reports on corrupt activities by collaborators of former Chihuahua Gov. César Duarte, including the perforation of illegal water wells in parts of the state and money-laundering operations. In a piece published in November 2016, Breach wrote that Duarte created a network of friends and family members that extracted billions of pesos from the public treasury ([SourceMex, April 5, 2017](#)).

Breach also received death threats for her coverage of the conflict between drug cartels and local residents over land in the sierras of Chihuahua. The criminal organizations were apparently usurping land from hundreds of families in the area. Criminal organizations are suspected in the murder of Isidro Baldenegro López, an indigenous environmental rights activist recognized for his efforts to protect old-growth forests in the Sierra Tarahumara of western Mexico at the beginning of this year ([SourceMex, Jan. 25, 2017](#)).

Collaborators praised Breach for her complete coverage of issues in Chihuahua. "Miroslava was an exemplary journalist," said El Norte de Ciudad Juárez after her murder. "She was rigorous in her professional duties and held great values."

Only weeks after Breach's murder, El Norte de Ciudad Juárez announced it was ceasing publication for both its print and digital editions. In an interview with the Televisa network, editor and publisher Óscar Cantú Murguía said the decision was based solely on the need to ensure that the newspaper's staff would no longer become a target for criminal organizations. He said financial considerations did not play into the decision to shut down operations. "We are fiscally sound," he said.

Chihuahua Gov. Javier Corral, who was close to Breach, confirmed that she had received threats but did not disclose them to authorities. Corral, who replaced Duarte at the statehouse, vowed to capture the perpetrators. "As governor, I am obligated to seek justice," he said. "We will find the culprits." In the fifth attack against a journalist, the intended target, Julio Omar Gómez, escaped harm but a bodyguard was killed. Gómez, who covered politics and police matters for the online site 911 Noticias in the community of Los Cabos in Baja California Sur, was under the protection of a federal program (Programa de Protección a Periodistas) because of a series of threats against his life. Gómez had announced that he was retiring from journalism before the attack occurred on March 28. The perpetrators set Gómez's home on fire, which prompted the bodyguard to confront the arsonists. The assailants then shot and killed the bodyguard and fled.

This was the third time in the last several months Gómez's home had been targeted in this manner. Attackers set fires at the site in December 2016 and February of this year, causing little damage. The second attempt was what prompted Gómez to end his career as a reporter, said the online news site 24 Horas.

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