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Carlos Navarro

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Journalist Under Government Protection Murdered in Mexico's Veracruz State

by Carlos Navarro

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A news reporter who had been under special protection from the federal government became at least the ninth journalist to be murdered in Mexico this year. Two other journalists received death threats in recent weeks, which raised further concerns about the safety of the members of the Mexican media.

Social activist Cándido Ríos Vásquez, a reporter for the daily newspaper *Diario de Acayucan* in Veracruz state, was shot to death along with two other men while standing at a corner store. One of the two other victims was former local police investigator Víctor Antonio Alegría. This prompted authorities to focus their investigation on whether Ríos Vásquez or Alegría was the intended victim.

Threatened for reporting on corruption

However, circumstances suggest that Ríos Vásquez, who had received numerous threats on his life for reporting about corruption, was the target of the killing. The journalist had posted a video on his Facebook page in mid-August in which he denounced a suspected corruption network in his hometown of Hueyapan de Ocampo. In the posting, he accused several officials of illegally using government money and cheating in past elections.

Ríos Vásquez, who published his own weekly newspaper before going to work full time for *Diario de Acayucan*, had reported threats against his life and was registered on a national program to protect journalists and human rights workers known as the *Mecanismo de Protección para Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas*. The program, which is managed by the interior ministry (*Secretaría de Gobernación, SEGOB*), offers special security measures to reporters, editors, photographers, and human rights workers who have been threatened. In the case of Ríos Vásquez, authorities added an emergency button to his cellphone and installed security cameras in his house, said his editor, Cecilio Pérez Cortés.

The program is open to any journalist or human rights worker who feels threatened because of his or her work. The decision on whether to admit a person to the program is made by a special nine-member council composed of one representative each of SEGOB, the attorney general's office (*Procuraduría General de la República, PGR*), the foreign relations ministry (*Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, SRE*), the public safety ministry (*Secretaría de Seguridad Pública*), the semi-independent human rights commission (*Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, CNDH*), two journalists, and two human rights advocates.

Before and during his time as writer and photographer for the weekly *La Voz de Hueyapan*, Ríos Vásquez organized protests against corruption in Hueyapan de Ocampo.

According to Artículo 19, a nonprofit organization that advocates for media protection in Mexico, 426 threats or attacks were carried out against members of the news media in 2016, including killings, beatings, and torture.

Journalists are more likely to receive threats from politicians or government officials than from criminal organizations, according to the CNDH and Artículo 19.

Ríos Vásquez is at least the ninth journalist killed in Mexico in the first eight months of this year and the third member of the news media targeted in Veracruz in 2017. In March, assailants killed Ricardo Monlui Cabrera, editorial director of the newspaper *El Político* in Córdoba, and seriously wounded Armando Arrieta Granados, an editor at *La Opinión de Poza Rica* ([SourceMex, April 5, 2017](#)). Arrieta Granados survived the attack but continues to undergo physical therapy.

According to several journalists organizations, Veracruz remains 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 the new governor, Miguel Ángel Yunes Linares.

Artículo 19 officials said they are trying to determine what types of protection authorities provided for Ríos Vásquez and the factors that led to his request for protection. "We have documented a series of threats against him in 2012 and 2013. We have also spoken with his colleagues," said Ana Cristina Ruelas, Artículo 19's director for Mexico and Central America.

"It is important to note that Veracruz continues to be one of the most dangerous states for journalism, despite the change in administration," Ruelas said. She added that of 276 acts of aggression in Veracruz between January and June, roughly half were carried out by public officials, and that more than 99% of them were not resolved.

"The state is not investigating itself," she said. "There is a lack of recognition that public officials have to be sanctioned to prevent undue influence over media outlets."

Other journalists have been murdered this year in the states of Tamaulipas, Guerrero, Chihuahua, Michoacán, and Sinaloa ([SourceMex, May 17, 2017](#), and [July 12, 2017](#)).

A spokesperson for the Veracruz attorney general (Fiscalía General del Estado, FGE) said the office was investigating the killing of Ríos but declined to give details over what motivated the attack.

At the federal level, Roberto Campa Cifrián, deputy secretary for human rights at SEGOB, questioned the motive for Ríos Vásquez's murder, suggesting that he was probably not killed because of his journalistic work.

This elicited strong criticisms from some members of the media.

"Where does Campa come up with the theory that he was assassinated for any other motive?" columnist Pablo Hiriart wrote in the daily business newspaper *El Financiero*. "He has no right to insinuate that the victim was responsible for his own murder."

Two other journalists threatened

Two news reporters working in Mexico City were recently the subject of threats because of their coverage of crime. The first threat, reported in mid-August, was directed against veteran journalist Héctor de Mauleón, who has covered criminal organizations as a columnist for the daily newspaper *El Universal* and the news magazine *Nexos* and as an on-air reporter for broadcaster ADN Canal

40. De Mauleón received the threat via a video message posted on Twitter showing a gunman firing several shots at a photograph of the reporter.

The video was accompanied by a message: "Mr. Héctor, the sentence is still to be carried out, death has come for you."

The television station strongly condemned the threat. "Our colleague has dedicated a good part of his efforts to denouncing the actions of organized crime in Mexico City," ADN 40 said in a statement. "Let's not forget that de Mauleón was the one who revealed the Tláhuac cartel's criminal network, as well as the takeover of the Roma and Condesa districts by drug dealers."

De Mauleón has received threats against his life on at least six occasions. According to the magazine Nexos, authorities have offered the journalist round-the-clock protection, to the point that his movements are restricted. "Offering protection is not the same as offering safety," Nexos said.

The magazine argued that protection "is a poor substitute" for what authorities should be doing, which is investigating the threats and punishing the perpetrators.

The CNDH agreed that authorities need to launch a prompt and effective investigation of the threats against de Mauleón, so that those who made the threats can be brought to justice.

Another journalist who was investigating the drug trade was the subject of a physical attack in late August at Mexico's largest university, the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). Humberto Padgett León, who published the award-winning series "Plomo, Plata y Sangre (Lead, Silver and Blood)" in the newsmagazine Sinembargo.mx, was attacked as he investigated the Tláhuac cartel for illicit drug dealing activities on campus. Padgett was beaten and robbed after he went through the motions of acquiring drugs and filming the transaction.

In a recording of the encounter with drug traffickers where he was beaten, Padgett said he was attempting to demonstrate how easy it is to acquire drugs at the university. After beating and robbing him, the drug dealers said they "would spare his life this time."

Padgett said he spent 10 days on the investigation, and on five separate days had easily acquired a variety of drugs at the same site, including marijuana, cocaine, heroin, peyote, hallucinogenic mushrooms, and other substances.

The university immediately called for the PGR to investigate the case. "UNAM condemns the aggression against Humberto Padgett by individuals not associated with the university," said an official statement. "We regret that the attack suffered by the journalist occurred while he was conducting his investigative tasks."

-- End --