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Violence Against Journalists Persists in Mexico

by *Carlos Navarro*

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The assassination of members of the news media continues unabated in Mexico, with journalist Leobardo Vázquez Atzin gunned down at his home in the city of Gutiérrez Zamora in northern Veracruz state on March 21. The state-affiliated agency in charge of protecting journalists in Veracruz (Comisión Estatal para la Atención y Protección de los Periodistas, CEAPP) confirmed the homicide.

Vázquez Atzin is at least the third journalist killed in Mexico in 2018 and the 15th since January 2017, according to journalists' rights groups ([SourceMex, Aug. 3, 2016](#), [April 5, 2017](#), [July 12, 2017](#)).

Vázquez Atzin reported on political matters, social conflicts, and crime in Gutiérrez Zamora and the adjacent community of Tecolutla for the newspapers *La Opinión de Poza Rica* and *Vanguardia* and on his online site *Enlace Informativo Regional*. He was previously an editor and designer at the newspaper *Noreste*, was cofounder of the magazine *El Portal*, and served as director of social communication for the Papantla city council in Veracruz.

According to the online news site *Animal Político*, Vázquez Atzin at times published pieces that might have offended authorities, including an article on March 6 about an illegal seizure of land by a private party in Tecolutla. The seizure was presumably endorsed by the city government of Gutiérrez Zamora and by a notary public.

Vázquez Atzin received threats via Facebook after publishing the report. According to the daily newspaper *Noreste*, Vázquez Atzin's Facebook account was blocked for a few days following the threat, and he opened another to keep reporting.

CEAPP president Ana Laura Pérez said Vázquez Atzin informed colleagues of threats from a mayor and a notary public but did not report them to CEAPP.

International press organizations condemned the latest killing.

"The continuation in Mexico of these criminal acts to silence journalists drives us to keep demanding conclusive reactions of the authorities to ensure the safety of members of the press and prevent the criminals from getting away with murder," said Gustavo Mohme, president of the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA).

"This new murder, the third this year, shows the lack of security in Mexico to freely work as a journalist," said Roberto Rock, chairman of the IAPA's Committee on Freedom of the Press and Information and editor of Mexico's online news site *La Silla Rota*.

According to Rock, the issue of violence against journalists in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America will be on the agenda of the upcoming IAPA midyear meeting in Medellín, Colombia, on April 13-15.

In its official communication about the murder, the Veracruz state attorney general (Fiscalía General del Estado de Veracruz, FGEV) said Vázquez Atzin was killed while tending to a business unrelated

to his journalistic work. According to the release, the victim was murdered by unknown assailants while “carrying out activities related to his business of making and selling tacos.”

Four deaths, one disappearance

The first victim this year was columnist Carlos Domínguez, who was stabbed to death in front of his family in mid-January. Domínguez wrote a column about corruption and organized crime in the border city of Nuevo Laredo, which he distributed on social media. He also wrote for the daily newspapers El Horizonte de Tamaulipas and previously worked for El Diario de Nuevo Laredo.

A second victim was Pamika Montenegro, a blogger who used the pseudonym “La Nana Pelucas.” Montenegro, who posted political satire on a multimedia site entitled Denuncias Acapulco Sin Censura, was shot to death in front of a restaurant in Acapulco.

At least one other journalist is known to have been killed, and another one is missing and a possible victim of foul play. Neither was counted in the figures reported by organizations like Artículo 19 and the IAPA.

According to the online news site Tercera Información, José Gerardo Martínez Arriaga, an editor for the syndicated news service provided by the daily newspaper El Universal, was shot several times in the abdomen in January while shopping at an outdoor market in Mexico City. The report did not provide information on whether the murder was related to Martínez Arriaga’s work.

Another journalist, freelance writer Agustín Silva Vásquez, disappeared in the community of Matías Romero in Oaxaca state. His vehicle was found abandoned in the municipality of Asunción Ixtaltepec, which is on the border with Veracruz state. Silva Vásquez, a contributor to the daily newspaper El Sol del Istmo, reportedly rejected pressure from criminal organizations to change the focus of an article, said Jan Jarab, a representative for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) in Mexico.

In a report published in March, Artículo 19 said 41 journalists have been killed since President Enrique Peña Nieto took office in December 2012.

A major complaint is that authorities—including the federal agency in charge of investigating the murders of journalists (Fiscalía Especial para la Atención de Delitos cometidos contra la Libertad de Expresión, FEADLE)—are often unable to identify the perpetrators and the murders often go unpunished ([SourceMex, Oct. 30, 2013](#), and [Feb. 5, 2014](#)).

Veracruz still a danger zone

The Artículo 19 report labeled Veracruz as the most dangerous state in Mexico to work as a journalist. Seventeen journalists were killed in the state during the tenure of Javier Duarte, the governor between 2010 and 2016, but the situation has not improved much with his successor ([SourceMex, March 12, 2014](#), [Jan. 14, 2015](#), [Feb. 17, 2016](#)).

“The change in state government has not managed to decrease the risk for journalists in the state. During the current administration of Miguel Ángel Yunes Linares, four journalists have been killed,” said the report, which was released before the murder of Vázquez Atzin occurred.

As was the case with the earlier murders in Veracruz, the assassination of Vázquez Atzin attracted protests. Journalist Concepción Sánchez, a co-worker of Vázquez Atzin, led a protest at the

Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada plaza in Mexico City to demand justice for her colleague. Sánchez carried signs with the inscriptions #JusticiaParaLeo (Justice for Leo). She had an alternate sign responding to the conclusion of Veracruz authorities that Vázquez Atzin was not killed while performing journalistic duties. The sign read, #PeriodistaActivo (Active Journalist).

While most of the violence against journalists goes unpunished, the perpetrators of at least one case in Veracruz have been brought to justice. In late March, the FGEV announced that two former police officers had been sentenced to 25 years in jail for the 2015 kidnapping and murder of Veracruz journalist Moisés Sánchez ([SourceMex, Jan. 14, 2015](#)).

Sánchez was a writer and community activist who published a weekly journal called La Unión, where he reported on local corruption. He had allegedly been threatened days before his disappearance by Mayor Omar Cruz Reyes.

The two former municipal police officers, who were arrested a few days after the murder, were also ordered to pay more than 330,000 pesos (US \$18,200) in reparations to the survivors of the victim.

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