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## **Police Consider Colombian Connection in Killing of Journalist**

*by LADB Staff*

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On July 7, popular radio journalist Parmenio Medina Perez was assassinated near his home by unknown assailants who fired at him several times through the window of his car. The assassination, the first murder of a journalist in Costa Rican history, occurred after Medina had attacked a Catholic Church-sponsored radio station and after he had told police that Colombians had threatened his life. The assassination has revived a general debate on the nation's press laws.

Medina, born in Colombia but a naturalized Costa Rican citizen, had been the producer of a satirical radio program called La Patada for 28 years. Medina's specialty was producing programs exposing corruption and political mischief.

In October 2000, Medina began a series of programs alleging financial misconduct at Radio Maria de Guadalupe, a station run by a priest, Minor de Jesus Calvo. On one program, Medina intimated that Calvo had homosexual affairs and, on another, suggested that Radio Maria was a conduit for laundering Colombian drug money. In April, Radio Monumental, which carried La Patada, tried to shut down Medina's controversial program after receiving threats of lawsuits and the withdrawal of advertising from the station. Medina got an order from the Constitutional Chamber of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) to keep the program on the air.

In late May, church officials fired Calvo and closed Radio Maria, which at the time was deeply in debt despite taking in large sums in donations. The attorney general is investigating Calvo's financial dealings. Medina reported threatening calls Javier Ara, Medina's son-in-law, said that Medina received a phone call offering him a US\$1,500 per month stipend for life if he canceled the series of exposes against Calvo's Radio Maria.

In an interview with the English-language weekly The Tico Times, Ara said that, after turning down the offer, Medina began getting threatening calls. "All the callers were Ticos [Costa Ricans], who warned Medina to leave Radio Maria alone," Ara said. Medina had reported on other occasions that he had received threatening phone calls from someone with a Colombian accent.

In May, assailants fired at Medina's house, but no one was injured. Police said the efficient manner in which Medina was killed indicated that the assassins were hired professionals. Public Security Minister Rogelio Ramos said the assassins had detailed knowledge of Medina's movements. Police are looking for two vehicles, one that might have carried the shooter and another seen in the neighborhood that might have served as a lookout.

Colombian President Andres Pastrana sent two special investigators to join a 15-member task force investigating the assassination. The government had asked Colombian authorities for assistance,

in part because of the suspicion that the assassins might have connections to Colombia. A police spokesperson also said Colombian police had more experience in investigating assassination cases. Attorney General Carlos Arias is reviewing tapes of Medina's radio programs and the telephone threats he received for clues to the identity of those behind the assassination.

Investigators confirmed that five other people, including a member of Medina's staff, also received threats. In an interview with the daily *La Nacion*, Calvo said the assassination had nothing to do with Radio Maria. "I feel very happy to know that I have never lifted and never would have lifted a finger against Parmenio," Calvo said. San Jose Archbishop Roman Arrieta also denied Medina's death had any connection with the Radio Maria affair.

The Comision para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos en Centroamerica (CODEHUCA) condemned the assassination, calling it an attack on freedom of expression. The statement complained of widespread attacks on journalists throughout Central America and criticized Costa Rican authorities for moving slowly to investigate the threats against Medina. The Cruz Roja also came in for criticism as witnesses reported that the ambulance called to treat Medina arrived 20 minutes after it was called with a driver but no paramedic.

### *Press freedom under scrutiny*

Despite Costa Rica's democratic traditions, recent events have suggested freedom of expression is limited. Just one week before Medina's assassination, the Inter American Press Association (IAPA) began a visit in Costa Rica and released a study that showed Costa Rica routinely violates some aspects of press freedom. The study compared Costa Rican practices with the principles of press freedom in the 1994 Declaracion de Chapultepec. It found that Costa Rican law and practice violated at least four of the 10 principles in the declaration. The violations include prior censorship, failure to guarantee free access to public information, and the use of jail terms rather than civil suits to punish excesses committed by the press.

### *Poll indicates extent of pressures on journalists*

On July 1, *La Nacion* published the results of a poll in which journalists were asked about threats to freedom of the press. Fifty-five percent of the 97 respondents said they had received some type of threat in connection with their work. Ninety-four percent said the press laws needed reforms to eliminate such crimes as "desacato," used to prosecute journalists accused of insulting a public official whether their reports are true or not (see *NotiCen*, 2001-02-22). Pressures against journalists included threats of lawsuits, business threats against employers, and physical threats. A majority of respondents also said they had practiced self-censorship. In all, 82% said the laws inhibited their work in one way or another.

Santiago Canton, Organization of American States (OAS) relator on freedom of expression, said he was surprised by the high level of self-censorship the journalists reported. Roberto Cuellar, executive director of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR), said the poll showed that improvement of the human rights of journalists was a job that could not be postponed. In the wake

of Medina's assassination, the Legislative Assembly has voted to set up a committee to review the nation's press laws.

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