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Press Freedom in Latin America  
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While the Latin American press is undoubtedly freer and more vibrant now than during previous decades, journalists in the region continue to face challenges on many fronts. At CPJ we've documented two key trends that represent the greatest challenges for the Latin American press corps: violence and legal harassment.

## **VIOLENCE**

The first and most serious threat to press freedom in the region is without a doubt the rise in violence linked to international organized crime. More than 60,000 Mexicans have been killed since President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa launched a massive military offensive against the drug cartels after taking office in December 2006. Honduras, according to a recent UN study, has the highest homicide rate in the world. It also experienced extensive political violence in the aftermath of the 2009 coup d'état and ouster of President Manuel Zelaya.

It is no coincidence that these two countries are also two of the most dangerous for journalists in the region. Wherever violence is pervasive and particularly where drug cartels battle to control the trafficking routes, managing the flow of information has become an essential component of their efforts to assert dominance.

## **MEXICO**

Mexico holds the unfortunate title of being the most deadly country in the Americas for journalists, and one of the most dangerous for the press worldwide. A total of 54 journalists and media workers have been killed or disappeared during President Calderón's six year term in office.

News outlets have seen their offices attacked with grenades and fired upon and their websites hacked. Journalists are routinely threatened, dozens have been displaced, several have gone into exile, and others have abandoned their profession. Drug-related violence and corruption have devastated the news media and stripped citizens of their right to freedom of expression and access to information. Fear and self-censorship had destroyed the ability of the press to report the news while placing Mexico's future as a democracy at risk.

Compounding the problem of violence is a climate of widespread impunity. Crimes against the Mexican press are almost never solved, not only as a result of negligence and incompetence, but also because of widespread corruption among law enforcement officials, particularly at the state level. Mexico ranked 8<sup>th</sup> in CPJ's global 2012 Impunity Index, which spotlights countries where journalists are murdered and killers go free. The failure of the weak, corrupt, and overburdened justice system to investigate abuses against journalists has encouraged further crimes.

Describing a series of attacks on the offices of his paper *El Siglo de Torreón* in the state of Coahuila, deputy editor Javier Garza wrote on the CPJ blog: "It became clear to us that the impunity with which the first attack was carried out was one of the causes for the second. ...our

assailants knew nothing would happen to them. Impunity is the engine that moves attacks on the press and the violence that has torn Mexico apart in recent years.”

Believing that greater resources and training available at the federal level offer hope for a more effective response in these cases, and that the higher level of scrutiny hopefully serves as a check against the corrupting power of criminal organization, press freedom groups waged a long-term advocacy campaign to encourage the federalization of crimes against the press.

Finally, in March, the Mexican Senate approved a constitutional amendment that federalizes anti-press crimes and transfers investigative powers to national authorities. In June, state legislatures gave the bill final approval, but secondary legislation is still needed before the law can be implemented.

In 2010, President Calderón also introduced the Protection Mechanism, a program that would give immediate help to journalists under threat and potentially protect hundreds of reporters across the country. As of late last year, that program only had eight cases, and its implementation has been ineffective. The office of the special prosecutor for crimes against freedom of expression was also restructured in 2010 in an effort to improve its poor record. Nonetheless, to this date it has obtained zero murder convictions. It is essential that the incoming government that takes office in December reverse this appalling trend and make combatting anti-press crimes a priority of the new administration.

## **HONDURAS**

As noted, political and drug-related violence as well as widespread impunity have made Honduras, a nation of 7.5 million people, one of the most violent countries in the world and one of the most dangerous countries in the region for journalists, CPJ research shows.

At least 14 journalists have been killed since President Porfirio Lobo took office in January 2010. The systematic failure of Honduran authorities to investigate these crimes has frustrated any attempt to solve the murders, CPJ said in a letter sent to President Lobo in December 2011. A 2010 CPJ special report found that the government has been slow and negligent in pursuing journalists' killers. As a result, many journalists fear the murders have been conducted with tacit approval, or outright complicity, of law enforcement, or other authorities.

The climate is so intimidating that reporters told CPJ that they don't dare probe deeply into crucial issues like drug trafficking or government corruption. Many print reporters have removed their bylines from their stories. Some reporters claim the only safe way to tell the truth about Honduras is to write a novel.

Besides damaging the country's democracy, the June 2009 military-backed coup that ousted leftist President Zelaya fractured the national press corps into opposing camps. Local journalists state that when journalists who supported Zelaya are attacked or killed, the news receives scant attention or comment from the media that supported the coup, among them most of the country's major television, radio, and print outlets. By contrast, the May 15 killing of Ángel Alfredo Villatoro, a prominent radio host and close friend of President Lobo, was headline news for days.

Honduras must assign disinterested and trained investigators to these cases and investigations must be transparent and free of conflicts of interest.

## **VENEZUELA**

Moving away from the issue of violence, the second most pressing issue for the Latin American press is the series of judicial and legislative restrictions being placed on the press by democratically elected governments that wish to control the flow of information and stifle dissent. A report published by CPJ in late August found that in his 13 years in power, President Chávez of Venezuela has used an array of legislation, threats, and regulatory measures to gradually break down Venezuela's independent press while building up a state media empire—a complete reversal of the previous landscape. The administration has also blocked critical coverage, closed broadcasters, sued reporters for defamation, excluded those it deems unfriendly from official events, and harassed—with the help of state-run media—critical journalists.

To use just the most prominent example, in 2007, the country's oldest private television station, RCTV, was pulled off the air after 57 years. According to a 2007 [CPJ report](#), the Venezuelan government failed to conduct a fair and transparent review of RCTV's concession renewal in an effort to silence its critical coverage. In 2010, government regulators also [pulled](#) RCTV from cable and satellite for not carrying Chávez's speeches.

Not content just to shut down outlets, Chávez has also built up a huge state media apparatus that functions as a government megaphone and a platform for smearing critical journalists. Independent broadcasters have also been obliged to transmit more than 1,600 hours of presidential addresses known as *cadena*s since 1999. Meanwhile, the independent outlets that still exist, such as Globovisión, have been punished with excessive fines for violating restrictive laws devoted to loosely defined issues such as “social responsibility.”

As the space for critical information has become more limited, many critical journalists have turned to the internet and social media to voice their opinions. Venezuela's internet penetration is among the highest in the region. But attacks have followed online, with many critical journalists seeing their twitter accounts hacked and used to promote pro-government messages by a mysterious group called N33.

As a result vital issues, such as the president's health, rampant violence, water contamination, and the prison crisis, are going uncovered in the wake of Sunday's hotly contested election. Regardless of who prevails at the polls, rolling back a decade of media repression and fostering a climate that is more open and more tolerant will be a key challenge for the next administration.

## **CRIMINAL DEFAMATION**

Venezuela's President Chávez has served as a model to other leaders in the region who share similar ideologies and political aspirations. None has learned the lesson better than Ecuadoran president Rafael Correa, whose policies have transformed the country into one of the hemisphere's most restrictive nations for the press, according to CPJ research. In particular, Correa has made use of archaic criminal defamation laws to silence critical journalists. In

February, an editor and three executives from the Ecuadoran news daily *El Universo* were sentenced to three years in prison and \$40 million in fines for defaming the president in an opinion column. Correa also filed a \$10 million civil defamation lawsuit against investigative journalists Juan Carlos Calderón and Christian Zurita, authors of a book called *Gran Hermano* (Big Brother) on official corruption. The President later pardoned the journalists and executives in both cases.

For more than a decade, courts and legislatures throughout the region have found that civil remedies provide adequate redress in cases of alleged libel and slander. But Correa has not only embraced these archaic rules but has also sought to have other countries adopt his model. CPJ has seen an uptick in the use of criminal defamation laws, particular in the Andean region. For this reason, in May, we launched a campaign called, "Critics Are Not Criminals," to help fight the criminalization of speech in the Americas.

### **ATTACK ON INTER-AMERICAN HUMAN RIGHTS SYSTEM**

Leaders such as Correa and Chávez have taken their assault on a free press beyond their countries' borders. In what might be one of their most devastating legacies, they have launched an attack on one of the region's most prestigious bodies: The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and particularly its Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression.

These governments, along with other sympathetic countries, have launched a campaign to weaken the IACHR and its rapporteur within the framework of the OAS. It has gained surprising traction in the international community with serious consequences for the future of the office. The Ecuadoran government was behind a series of recommendations that were made to the OAS by a Special Working Group with the stated goal of strengthening the human rights system. Instead, the recommendations, which were approved earlier this year, will in effect prevent the Rapporteur from publishing its own report on freedom of expression in the Americas; tighten the office's funding by not allowing it to seek independent financial support; and create a code of conduct to increase states' control.

In July, Venezuela pulled out of the Inter-American human rights system all together.

The weakening and dismantling of this system, long respected in the region and a model for other international organism, would be a serious loss to journalists, and all defenders of human rights in the Americas.