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Americas - Mexico

Policy of denial

Threats and censorship at peak in Veracruz, Oaxaca, Michoacán and Zacatecas

30 September 2013

Under the successive presidencies of Vicente Fox (2000-2006) and Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), Mexico joined the ranks of the world's 10 most dangerous countries for journalists and, more broadly, those involved in news and information. Eighty-eight were killed and a further 17 disappeared in a decade, against a background of the collapse of law and order and almost total impunity.

This appalling record includes six victims – four who were murdered and two who disappeared – since the start of the year, after the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) returned to power. The offensive against drug trafficking launched by Calderón, in which 60,000 were killed, officially ended almost a year ago. “Officially”, because terror and impunity still persist, and self-censorship – as well as regular censorship – have gained ground. To protect themselves, or in response to pressure, journalists and the organizations they work for tend to play down violence, which also affects them. These new problems have emerged in interviews with journalists and their families conducted by Reporters Without Borders in four federal states.

Veracruz

Four former journalists stood as candidates in local elections in Veracruz State on 7 July this year. None included the protection of their fellow journalists in their election platforms, despite the fact that nine had been killed and three had disappeared in the state since 2010. Javier Duarte, who was sworn in as governor that year, was bizarrely awarded a prize for “his efforts to guarantee the full exercise of freedom of expression”.

The general silence surrounding such cases is partly explained by the hold the government has over media organizations. Few dare to break it, whether among online newspapers or on social networking sites.

Luz María Rivera, who was assaulted on 18 May this year, regrets the existence of “censorship and self-censorship enforced by fear”. Rivera, the director of the online newspaper *El Mercurio*, has had to move several times to make sure her family is not in danger.

Sergio Landa Rosado, a crime reporter for *Diario Cardel* based in the town of Cardel in the north of the state, has been missing since April.

“In the eyes of the Veracruz media, the disappearance of Sergio Landa never took place,” said his *Diario Cardel* colleague **Jesús Olivares**.

Impunity is encouraged by censorship, inadequacies in police investigations and the slowness of the court system. Those behind the murders of journalist **Miguel Angel López Velasco**, his wife and one of his sons have still not been found after two years of investigation. The authorities maintain there is insufficient proof, yet crucial information is missing from the police report, such as the fact that he had received threats from 2007 up to a few weeks before his death. The report also contains no reference to any of the articles that support the theory that he was killed because of his work.

According to the state justice ministry, the presumed perpetrators were believed to belong to the Los Zetas paramilitary group and were now dead. The investigation has been shelved until new evidence emerges.

Oaxaca

Since Gabino Cue Monteagudo took office as governor of Oaxaca in 2010, the state justice ministry has opened preliminary investigations into more than 50 cases of attacks on journalists and news organizations. Many of them have been blamed on people holding official office, such as police officers or politicians, or on local businessmen whose interests are threatened by certain news reports.

Oaxaca has been less affected by the devastating fall-out from the anti-drugs offensive but security has recently deteriorated as a result of an increase in drug-related crime. This has exposed journalists to greater risks and does little to encourage mutual support, which was already at a low ebb.

In the view of **Ismael San Martín**, managing editor of the newspaper *Noticias*, the murder of reporter [Alberto López Bello](#) "was nothing to do with his job and the newspaper for which he worked (El Imparcial) knew that he was 'involved'." The term "involved" refers to possible links between the victim and the drugs trade, but the managing editor was not specific. However, a former colleague of López who prefers to remain anonymous believes he was killed because of his work "because he knew too much", in particular about the links between the police and drug cartels.

López had pointed the finger at a police officer, Lorenzo Eduardo Lopez, alleging he was implicated in corruption, summary executions and false imprisonment. In an article published on 27 July, *Noticias* explicitly called for an investigation into Jacobo Israel Guzmán Hernández and Fernando García, former heads of the State Investigations Agency (AEI), for alleged involvement in the journalist's murder.

Despite the impact of the murder, the investigation is making no progress and his family, forced to leave Oaxaca temporarily, have been given no assistance. "No one contacted us after Alberto's murder, neither the government nor the *El Imparcial* management, although they had promised to help us," a family member told us.

Oaxaca State, which is dotted with indigenous cultures, is also the scene of persistent social conflicts between communities and local authorities. In these circumstances, crackdowns are often directed against human rights campaigners and those who run [community radio stations](#).

Threats and equipment seizures suffered by the editorial department of *Radio Totopo* in the Juchitán region in March this year illustrate the type of persecution suffered by voluntary and not-for-profit news outlets, many of which have been waiting for years to be granted a broadcasting licence.

In Oaxaca, as in many other Mexican states, community radios have been ruled illegal and have been excluded from the debate on regulation. "In Oaxaca, there is currently a legislative proposal specifically to regulate indigenous and community news outlets," said **Sócrates Vázquez García**, of the Mexican branch of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC). "Community radios must be allowed to take part in the debate. One of the biggest challenges they face is gaining official recognition, and having input into the legislation would be a step in this direction."

In October 2006, US journalist [Brad Will](#), a cameraman for the *Indymedia* agency, was shot dead at the height of a conflict between civil society activists and the administration of the then governor of Oaxaca, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz. He was fatally injured during a demonstration by gunshots that came from the direction of bodyguards employed by Ruiz, a leading member of the PRI. Seven years on, the investigation has made no significant progress.

Michoacán

At dawn on 14 August this year, troops and police arrested 45 alleged members of an armed civilian group in the town of Aquila in the coastal region of Michoacán. Such "self-defence" groups emerged in March this year, officially with the aim of combating organized crime. **Angel Elías Méndez Morales**, managing editor of the local newspaper *Entérese* who also works for various regional news organizations, was present at the roundup.

Although identified to the troops as residents of the town, the journalist and a colleague came under attack from a self-defence group. Stones were thrown at the two men, their vehicle was ransacked and equipment seized. They were prevented from leaving the town and were forced to hide, without food or water, for most of the day. Although alerted by Reporters Without Borders, the authorities were slow to go to their assistance. "After everything that happened, I started thinking about things and I'm convinced I should concentrate on myself and my family from now on," Méndez told Reporters Without Borders philosophically.

The anti-drugs initiative by former President Felipe Calderón was launched in Michoacán, his home state. [Four journalists disappeared](#) in the region between 2006 and 2010. In each case, clues pointed to the police but the investigations hit a brick wall.

Zacatecas

Eight journalists from Zacatecas gathered recently outside the interior ministry in Mexico City to draw attention to the violence prevalent in the state and the attempts at censorship by the state government. One of them, **Horacio Zaldivar Espino**, head of the *ABZ Noticias* agency, pointed out that more than one thousand people had been murdered or kidnapped since the start of the year but the authorities refused to allow information of this type to be published.

He referred to the intimidation to which he and his colleague **Alfredo Valadez Rodríguez** had been subjected after they had exposed the death toll of clashes between criminal groups in the national daily *La Jornada*. The authorities immediately denied the disclosures and launched a hostile campaign against some local journalists. Zalvidar received threatening phone calls, which he established had come from a communications area used by the local government.

Other journalists, who preferred to remain anonymous, confirmed to Reporters Without Borders that they had received threats that advertising would be withheld from their news organizations if they continued to publish stories that damaged the image of Zacatecas state. On 13 March, the government and some local newspapers signed an agreement entitled "For the Sake of our Image" restricting the coverage of bloodshed.

The delegation of Zacatecas journalists questioned the federal government on this matter in view of suspicions that its is playing down the real level of violence in the country.

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