

Follow-up of the conflict in Oaxaca

MEXICO - Community Radio Stations Under Fire

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February 2, 2007 - [IPS](#) - One of the 12 community radio stations operating legally in Mexico has literally come under fire, and its journalists have received death threats and been arrested; another has received warnings for covering the activities of social movements; and a third was closed down at gunpoint by supporters of the local government.

All three cases have been reported to the authorities. The first case, involving the Calenda station in the southern state of Oaxaca, reached the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights Thursday, through a complaint filed by the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC).

Aleida Calleja, who represents AMARC in Mexico, told IPS that the three radio stations, which have limited broadcasting reach and do not respond to commercial interests, are in need of protection.

"Freedom of speech is at stake here," she said.

In January, the mayor of the town of San Antonino Castillo de Velasco, who was overthrown by protests, "opened fire on one of my colleagues, although he missed; another almost lost an eye when stones were thrown at him; and I was arrested and received death threats, and was later forced to sign a document in which I promised not to support subversive activities," Darío Campos, a volunteer reporter at the Calenda station, told IPS.

Since mid-2006, the station, which broadcasts in San Antonino, a town of 4,900 near Oaxaca, the state capital, has been the target of the rage of the town's former mayor, who belongs to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which has governed the state since 1929.

"For giving coverage to the social uprising and airspace to APPO (the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca), which here in our community toppled the mayor, our radio station and its staff (of 10) have been attacked," Campos said by telephone from San Antonino.

In the capital of Oaxaca and several neighbouring towns like Antonino, APPO led a months-long uprising last year against Governor Ulises Ruiz, of the PRI, demanding that he resign or be removed for corruption and for violently squashing dissent.

Along with neighbouring states Chiapas and Guerrero, Oaxaca is one of the poorest states in this country of 104 million. In Oaxaca, 80 percent of the population lacks basic sanitation services, street lighting, piped water and paved streets, according to the Oaxacan Human Rights Network.

The conflict began in June, when APPO, an umbrella group made up of more than 300 social organisations, took shape and its members occupied the centre of the city of Oaxaca.

But thousands of federal police were deployed to the area to break up the protests and seize control of the city in late October, and dozens of activists were arrested. Human rights groups reported numerous human rights abuses.

During the months of protests, around 20 people, mainly demonstrators, were killed when unidentified gunmen opened fire on the protesters. One of those killed was a U.S. journalist.

"We merely give support to the community, which includes providing information and supporting efforts in health, community organisation and other areas," said Campos, a 25-year-old economics student.

Neither Campos nor most of his colleagues receive any pay for their volunteer work at the radio station.

Community radio stations generally enjoy broad local support for the services they offer their communities, such as educational programming, coverage on human rights and health questions, or information and warnings on dangers like natural disasters. In addition, they often broadcast in local dialects, such as indigenous tongues in Mexico.

The AMARC complaint states that the Calenda station is facing threats aimed at "silencing it."

The complaint filed with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights is aimed at getting the regional body to order the Mexican state to take the necessary measures to safeguard the life and physical integrity of the radio station's members, and to guarantee their right to freedom of expression.

Calleja said the Nandia indigenous radio station, which operated in a Mazateca community in the state of Oaxaca, had also suffered reprisals at the hands of PRI supporters during the APPO uprising.

"Nandia was shut down at gunpoint last year and remains closed despite the complaints that we have filed," said Calleja.

Another community station that has had problems is the La Voladora station in Amecameca, a mountainous area in the state of Mexico, near the capital.

The station's staff members have been the targets of death threats and verbal attacks because of their reporting on the indigenous Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) and other social movements.

Of the more than 130 radio stations in Mexico that describe themselves as community stations, only 12 — the ones that are backed by AMARC — have licences to operate. The rest, which include stations run by church groups or trade unions, face a permanent risk of being closed down.

Although the National Chamber of the Radio and Television Industry accuses community radio stations of fomenting piracy and encouraging guerrilla groups like the EZLN, the government of conservative former President Vicente Fox, whose six-year term ended in December, granted operating licences to 12 stations in 2004 and 2005.

The permits, which the local branch of AMARC had been demanding since the 1990s, were issued in a vaguely defined legal framework that gives the state enormous discretionary power over community stations.

AMARC is an international non-governmental organisation serving the community radio movement, with associates in 110 countries. Its goal is "to support and contribute to the development of community and participatory radio along the principles of solidarity and international cooperation."