

MEXICO - Reporters Targeted by Drug Related Violence in Nuevo Laredo (Diego Cevallos, IPS)

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07/02/06- [IPS](#) - *The most dangerous place in Latin America to work as a journalist is northern Mexico, along the U.S. border, where drug traffickers threaten, kidnap and even murder reporters with impunity, according to the Inter American Press Association (IAPA).*

The latest incident occurred Monday evening, when several masked gunmen stormed the offices of the El Mañana newspaper in the city of Nuevo Laredo, across the border from Laredo, Texas, firing assault rifles and tossing a grenade. One reporter, Jaime Orozco, was seriously injured and is in critical condition.

"What happened in El Mañana went beyond the pale and it is clear that the government is unable or unwilling, or does not know how, to confront this wave of violence against reporters and freedom of the press," Eréndira Cruz, director of the non-governmental National Centre for Social Communication, told IPS.

In its Tuesday edition, the newspaper, whose editorial director was murdered in 2004, stated in an editorial that Monday's attack was "one more page in the violence that reaches the level of terrorism." It added that "the drug trafficking problem has gotten completely out of the hands of the authorities."

The attack on El Mañana occurred in the midst of a turf war between drug trafficking gangs that has left more than 100 dead so far this year and claimed around 1,500 victims in 2005.

Twenty reporters have been murdered in Mexico since 2000, when President Vicente Fox took office, according to the Federation of Associations of Mexican Journalists and the Federation of Latin American Journalists. Nineteen journalists were killed during the term of Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), and 57 under the administration of Carlos Salinas (1988-1994).

As on previous occasions, Fox administration spokespersons condemned the latest attack on press workers, offered support for the victims, and promised to launch an in-depth investigation.

"But it has become clear that the government is not addressing the problem and that its promises have merely remained on paper," said Cruz.

Government officials have met with representatives of journalists' associations several times in the last few years, promising to put safeguards in place. But the threats and attacks on reporters and the media have continued, especially in the area along the U.S. border.

According to IAPA, an association of newspaper owners from Latin America and the Caribbean, the most dangerous area in the region to be a reporter today is along the U.S-Mexican border.

Most journalists and media outlets in that area, including El Mañana, admit that the threats and the fear have led them to censor themselves on drug trafficking-related issues.

Many news reports on incidents involving drug gangs in border areas that are published in the capital no longer appear in local newspapers.

Like the overwhelming majority of crimes committed by the drug gangs, most attacks on journalists go unsolved and unpunished.

Global organisations like the International Committee for the Protection of Journalists and Reporters Without Borders warn that it is extremely dangerous to work as a journalist in Mexico today.

Representatives of 40 Mexican newspapers met in Nuevo Laredo in January and agreed to work together to clarify crimes against press workers and to continue the murdered reporters' investigations into drug trafficking and other issues. The government applauded the initiative and promised to cooperate.

Journalists' associations have called for the crimes to be investigated by federal law enforcement authorities, rather than the local and state police.

The Fox administration, which is widely recognised as respectful of freedom of speech, did assign several cases to federal prosecutors. But it says the country's laws limit federal jurisdiction in criminal investigations.

Mexican drug traffickers, who work in coordination with cartels in Colombia and other drug-producing nations, are responsible for smuggling 70 percent of the cocaine consumed in the United States, the world's biggest market for drugs, as well as significant quantities of heroin, methamphetamines and marijuana.

The government and observers say the current explosion of violence is a result of drug gangs fighting over the lucrative smuggling routes into the United States, prompted by the vacuum of power left by the arrests of several kingpins.

The government, whose success in capturing the heads of several cartels is recognised, has deployed hundreds of soldiers and police officers to the areas hit hardest by the violence and has announced strategies to combat the phenomenon, but has so far failed to stem the violence.

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