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PRESS RELEASE

Honduras: Another Two Journalists Killed as Crackdown on Free Expression Intensifies

ARTICLE 19 expresses its deep concern at the recent killings of two more journalists – José Bayardo Mairena Ramírez and Manuel Juárez – on 27 March in the northern territory of Honduras. This brings the total number of journalists killed in similar circumstances in Honduras to five.

The killings highlight a severe deterioration in the respect and protection for human rights, including freedom of expression, in Honduras since the Presidential coup of June 2009. Journalists, human rights defenders, and opposition activists have been widely targeted throughout the last eight months but the situation appears to have deteriorated further since the beginning of the year and the swearing-in of Porfirio Lobo Sosa as President.

Both journalists worked for two local radio stations in northern Honduras. Bayardo Mairena was a radio talk host, with more than twenty years' experience, while Juárez had worked as his assistant for many years. Opposed to the 2009 coup, Bayardo Mairena was known for his sympathy to the “resistance” movement. He had played a significant role in breaking the information monopoly of the pro-coup media last year. Bayardo Mairena's programmes included a news show “This is Olancho” on Channel 4 RZ, Excelsior Television, where he was also the manager. He was based in Olancho, hometown of ousted President Manuel Zelaya.

According to official reports, the car in which both men were travelling was attacked on the road between Juticalpa and Catacamas, about 200 kilometres east of the capital, Tegucigalpa. Local radio stations reported that Bayardo Mairena's car was shot 21 times.

There have been a number of other events in recent weeks. On 1 March, Joseph Hernandez Ochoa, a journalist based in Tegucigalpa, was shot dead and journalist Karol Cabrera was injured in the same incident. On 11 March, David Meza Montesinos was killed in La Ceiba by a gun shot. On 14 March, in Tocoa Columbus, Nahúm Palacios Arriaga, a journalist and director of Aguan TV Channel 5 was also killed. He had been granted “precautionary measures” by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in August 2009, along with dozens of other Honduran citizens. This is a mechanism to identify individuals at risk in an attempt to prevent them from being further targeted or harmed.

These cases are part of a long list of abuses that have taken place throughout Honduras over the last nine months.

“The similarity in the methods used in these attacks points towards a systemic pattern of repression and is clearly aimed at terrorising those who may be critical of the Government or other powerful players,” comments Dr Agnès Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director.

“We are working under intense pressure [and] our reporters face constant harassment,” explains Johnny Lagos, editor of the opposition newspaper *El Libertador*. *“The opposition press and Hondurans in general are victims of repression and misinformation,”* he adds.

In February 2010, President Lobo endorsed the Chapultepec Declaration on Freedom of Expression. However the persistence of the adverse environment for freedom of expression faced by journalists, as well as the constant harassment against human rights activists and social leaders, demonstrates the absence of effective protection policies implemented by the new government.

Effective legal remedies at national level are lacking and there are numerous obstacles to the implementation of protection measures requested by the Inter American Commission of Human Rights. This helps to create a hostile environment for human rights protection, in general, and freedom of the press, in particular.

An amnesty law, like the one proposed by President Lobo, would almost certainly guarantee impunity for perpetrators of abuse and would undermine any attempts at reconciliation in the country.

“For a genuine and enduring process of reconciliation to take place, the investigation and punishment of all human rights violations during the Coup and its aftermath are essential for establishing a real democratic regimen,” comments Callamard.

ARTICLE 19 expresses condolences to the families of all the journalists who have died or been injured needlessly and offers our solidarity to the journalist community.

ARTICLE 19 calls on the Honduran State to adequately investigate these cases and to bring the perpetrators to justice. These investigations must take into account the concern that these journalists were killed because of their profession and exercise of their right to freedom of expression.

ARTICLE 19 urges the Honduran Government to guarantee the right to freedom of expression and to ensure all the necessary security measures to media workers trying to exercise this right, in accordance with its international human rights obligations

Furthermore, we call on President Lobo to put the investigation and prosecution of human rights violations at the heart of an inclusive dialogue for national reconciliation, and to adopt all necessary measures to guarantee justice for all victims.

Finally, ARTICLE 19 calls upon the international community to urgently address the situation according to international law. The investigation and punishment of all

human rights violations should be a central element for the reincorporation of the Honduran State into the OAS mechanisms.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.