

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/colombia-exile-of-journalists-named-in-12-06-2013,44773.html>

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Americas - Colombia

Temporary shelter

## Exile of journalists named in murder plot shows need for plan to combat impunity

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Three journalists targeted in an assassination plot disclosed by the Colombian authorities on 15 May, **Gonzalo Guillen**, **Leon Valencia** (photo) and **Ariel Avila**, have resigned themselves to a period of temporary exile, despite benefitting from official protection at home.

Two of them told Reporters Without Borders that they had reluctantly reached this decision as a compromise between security concerns and their duty to inform the public, which they refuse to forgo. The press freedom organization seeks greater protection in the long term for these journalists and stresses the urgency of bringing those behind the criminal conspiracy against them to justice. They said a fourth colleague, Tadeo Martínez, was also under threat.

"Protection measures will have no effect without a mechanism to fight impunity that is capable of dealing with these circumstances effectively," Reporters Without Borders said. "[Threats](#) and attacks are on the increase against journalists, human rights campaigners, union representatives and community activists, while the ongoing talks in Havana between the FARC guerrilla movement and the Colombian government are discussing the highly sensitive issue of the restitution of land seized by paramilitary groups at the height of the civil war.

"Our concern over the fate of the journalists is heightened by the danger faced by their sources – some of whom have been murdered – in La Guajira department whose governor has been exposed by some of those involved as having links with criminal gangs known as 'Bacrim' and with the illegal drugs trade.

"This shows the urgent need for an effective action plan against impunity which should not spare politicians who may be implicated."

One of the three journalists under threat, Leon Valencia, is a columnist with the news magazine *Semana* and a programme director for the public television station *Canal Capital*. He told Reporters Without Borders: "The assassination plot against us was hatched by Bacrim members linked to the Venezuelan drug gang leader Marcos Figueroa, who himself has close ties to the governor of La Guajira, Juan Francisco 'Kiko' Gomez."

He and Avila, both of whom worked until recently for the NGO Arcoiris Foundation, had disclosed the dangerous associations of Gomez, whose election campaigns have been allegedly supported directly by Bacrim and other armed groups, as have those of 126 other politicians.

Guillen, a reporter for the U.S. newspaper *Miami Herald*, told us his investigation into Gomez began in February this year, after the murder a few months earlier of Yandra Britto, the former mayor of the town of Barrancas in the same department.

"She contacted me to tell me her husband had been murdered, she believed, on the orders of the governor," he said. "The latter had personally threatened her with the same fate, she said. Despite making a complaint on my advice, this woman was never given protection and was herself murdered in August last year."

The information gathered by the journalists was included in a story published in [Semana](#) a few

days before the murder plot came to light, which apparently sparked an attempt to carry it out.

"My sources alerted me to the plan," said Guillen. "They, too, are in great danger. A few days ago, I told the police where they could find the leaders of one of the most dangerous death squads in La Guajira. The person who gave me the information was murdered shortly afterwards. I have also learned that the brother of one of my bodyguards has been shot dead. Finally, sources have told me that Marcos Figueroa's gang in La Guajira has kidnapped two Spanish tourists they suspect of collaborating with me."

Guillen sent a full report on the La Guajira allegations to the state prosecutor's office just before the murder plan targeting him and his colleagues was revealed. Reporters Without Borders has received a copy. Has the submission of the document exposed the journalist to further danger? If so, how? The organization fears that, in these circumstances, spying is widespread as a result of the infiltration of the intelligence apparatus and public services by criminals since the "[DASgate](#)" scandal broke last year.

"A plan to combat impunity must also take this into account," the organization concluded.

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