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Americas - Honduras

Disturbing acquittal

Leading suspect cleared of killing journalist, "clean-up" of police announced

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Reporters Without Borders is astonished to learn that Marco Joel Álvarez Barahona, also known as "El Unicornio" (The Unicorn), was acquitted by a court in the northern city of La Ceiba on 31 October of being the main perpetrator of last year's murder of radio journalist [David Meza Montesinos](#).

Meza was gunned down in La Ceiba on 11 March 2010 after receiving threats in connection with his coverage of drug-trafficking on Honduras' Atlantic coast. He was also a critic of police collusion with organized crime.

Álvarez, whose nickname El Unicornio was attributed to a different suspect in a wanted notice, is the second person to be quickly absolved of Meza's murder after a single hearing, without any proper examination of evidence. Like Álvarez, Mario Roberto Guevara, a businessman, was released by judges in La Ceiba for "lack of evidence" a few days after Álvarez's arrest in September 2010.

"As in any criminal case, the defendant should be acquitted if there are reasonable doubts," Reporters Without Borders said. "But how should this U-turn be interpreted after the public prosecutor claimed to have evidence clearly implicating Álvarez in Meza's murder? Was there a hasty attempt to pin this murder on suspects at random? Was there a danger of embarrassing revelations by the suspects?"

"These hypotheses cannot be ruled out, given the continuing impunity in [the 16 murders of journalists](#) since the start of last year, all but one since President Porfirio Lobo's installation. The same goes for the human rights activists who have been victims of the crackdown that followed the June 2009 coup d'état and who continue to be victims. The clauses of the [Cartagena agreement](#) about the restoration of the rule of law have still not been implemented."

The lack of results in the Meza murder investigation are not in any way offset by the fact that, on the same day that Álvarez was acquitted, several senior police officers were dismissed in a supposed attempt to clean up the force after the escape of four police officers accused of killing two students. Hundreds of policemen and troops have also been deployed on joint patrols in an anti-crime drive dubbed "Operation Lightning." Honduras has one of the world's worst crime rates, with an average of 86 murders per 100,000 inhabitants a year.

"We caution against large-scale security operations which often sacrifice human rights in the name of combating crime," Reporters Without Borders said. "Crime must be combated, but such operations are rarely effective. All that the continuing military deployment in the Aguán region is doing is to crack down on local communities and grass roots movements. The [federal offensive against drug trafficking](#) in Mexico has taken an alarming toll in human lives without solving the problem."
