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Americas - Paraguay

Orchestrated impunity?

Growing impunity for alleged instigators of radio journalist's murder

10 January 2012

The probability of radio journalist [Merardo Romero](#)'s murder going unpunished increased on 31 December, when one of the suspected instigators, local official Fidel Duarte (photo), was released on bail on the eve of the January judicial holiday, during which there is a greater danger of pressure being put on witnesses.

His release was all the more unjustified as Paraguay's legislation does not allow anyone accused of a serious crime to be freed on bail, and even more so for a crime of violence. Romero was gunned down last March in Itakyry (in the eastern department of Alto Paraná), where he was community radio La Voz de Itakyry's programme director.

"This is the last straw," Reporters Without Borders said. "Several regional politicians suspected of ordering Romero's execution have from the outset been treated with curious laxity by the police and judicial authorities. The local police have yet to arrest José Valenzuela, a senior member of the Itakyry municipal administration although the prosecutor's office issued a warrant for his arrest on a charge of premeditated homicide.

"Nonetheless, although officially a fugitive from justice, Valenzuela's continuing presence in Itakyry has been confirmed. Former mayor Miguel Angel Soria, for whom Duarte served as a bodyguard, has also never been questioned. How do the judicial authorities explain their deliberate violation of the law they are supposed to implement? Who ordered Duarte's release on bail? Under whose pressure?

"Romero's family has a right to know the truth. It cannot be sacrificed for the sake of political interests. We demand an explanation from Judge Alba de García de Zúñiga and prosecutor Graciela Ortiz, who are supposed to be in charge of the case. Given everything that has happened so far in this case, all the members of the Itakyry administration should be questioned."

Arrested on 10 December by police officers from Asunción, Duarte allegedly acted as an intermediary between the murder's masterminds and the three alleged perpetrators, who were arrested in March. According to phone record, several calls took place on the day of the murder, 3 March, between Duarte and Arnildo Enciso Borja, one of the three detained suspects.

Arcenio López, another alleged instigator, has been a fugitive from justice since 10 December. Prosecutor Ortiz suspects that, with Valenzuela's direct approval, López paid the hit-men 8 million guarani (2,000 dollars) to murder Romero.

A former supporter of the suspected instigators, Romero criticised the municipal government on the air, accusing it of corruption and charging for non-existent employees.
