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Americas - Honduras

Tracked and terrorised

Journalists and civil society activists caught up in new wave of threats

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Not a day has passed since the start of the year in Honduras without a journalist, local media owner or social commentator receiving a phone call to say his or her life is in danger. This daily reality of threats and intimidation applies as much in the militarized region of Aguán, scene of a violent land dispute, as in the Copan department which borders Guatemala and acts as a conduit for drug smuggling, and also in the main towns and cities, as recorded by a representative of Reporters Without Borders who was in the country between 17 and 29 February.

The climate of fear that began with the crackdown that followed the coup on 28 June, 2009, was rekindled when police launched a security operation codenamed "[Relámpago](#)" ("Lightning") last November.

It has continued since the tragic fire at Comayagua prison during the night of 14 February, in which 361 inmates were killed. Meanwhile, the murders of 24 journalists over the past decade, [17 of them in the aftermath of the 2009 coup alone](#), remain unsolved and unpunished.

This impunity also extends to the murders in recent years of civil society activists, human rights campaigners, trade unionists and [lawyers](#).

Aguán – Quiet please, crackdown in progress

In response to the 2009 occupation by a peasant coalition under the banner of MUCA , the Unified Peasant Movement of Aguán, of land grabbed illegally by [big landowners](#), the army's intervention turned Aguán virtually into a separate enclave within Honduras.

The small community radio stations that carry the local movements' message are the target of censorship of every kind. The MUCA lost one of its own when [Matías Valle](#), its leader and spokesman, was shot dead on 20 January.

The staging of the International Gathering for Human Rights in Honduras in Tocoa from 17 to 20 February did little to curb the repressive efforts of the army and the communities' foes. On 19 February, about 20 journalists in a convoy of six vehicles were intercepted by troops while they were trying to find out why the occupants of one of the cars, which had a MUCA leader at the wheel, had been detained. According to one of the journalists, **Giorgio Trucchi**, of *Rel-UITA*, the soldiers waved their weapons in their direction.

Our representative reports that Wilfredo Paz, the coordinator of the Permanent Observatory of Human Rights in the Aguán, received two threatening phone calls in less than a week. Both messages were believed to refer to Juan Chinchilla, another MUCA activist. The second message, which offered a large reward for the murder of Chinchilla, was received on 24 February.

On the same day, President Porfirio Lobo visited the region, accompanied by several ministers, to ratify an agreement signed a week earlier with some of the MUCA peasants' collectives aimed at guaranteeing them the right of ownership of the lands they had occupied.

Roberto Hernández and **David Corea**, respectively presenter and reporter for the small local television station *Centro de Noticias in Colon (CNC)*, told us it was almost impossible for journalists in Aguán to carry out their duties. Small local media outlets, financed by advertisers whose sources of ill-gotten cash may include the proceeds of the drugs trade, and run by insecure and unqualified journalists, prefer to exercise self-censorship on sensitive topics.

Comayagua - uncomfortable truths

During the fire at Comayagua prison, were the doors kept locked because of fears of an escape, leaving prisoners at the mercy of the flames? Who fired the shots whose effects were discovered during the autopsies of some of the dead inmates? Why were fire-fighters alerted by neighbours and not by the prison director? Did he hold out the prospect of a way out for some prisoners in exchange for cash, only to renege on his promise?

To these questions can be added the scandal of overcrowding and lack of safety precautions at prisons that have been exposed by the Comayagua tragedy.

The journalist **Luis Rodríguez** and his cameraman **Javier Villalobos** of the local cable television station *Catedral TV*, who investigated these questions, received an unequivocal threat on 22 February: "Stop talking about the fire or we shall set fire to you!"

According to the Committee for Free Expression (C-Libre), a Reporters Without Borders partner organization, a similar warning was received by the station's owner Juan Ramón Flores and Ramón Cabrera, manager of Digicable, the cable contractor for *Catedral TV*.

Haphazard protection

Nor has there been any reduction in the attacks on national media organizations known to have opposed the coup, and on their staff. **Ivis Alvarado**, programme director of *Globo TV* and *Radio Globo*, which were [suspended and had their equipment seized](#) several times at the time of the coup deployed on air on 23 February the targeted theft of two computers from his home a few days earlier, and also reported that his car had been broken into. He is now under protection as a result of persistent threats.

This is still not the case, however, for **Gilda Silvestrucci** and [Itsmania Pineda Platero](#), members of the "Journalism for life and free expression" collective. The collective held a demonstration against impunity, which was violently dispersed by the army and the presidential guard outside the president's palace in Tegucigalpa on 13 December last year.

Reporters Without Borders again demands a response to its request for protection for the two women, and for an investigation of the complaint lodged by the collective after the December demonstration.

Similarly, protection must be given to **Danilo Osmaro Castellanos**, programme director of the station *Canal local 32* and vice-president of C-Libre, who received death threats to himself and his family on 22 February. The journalist, located in Santa Rosa de Copán, recently spoke out about a lack of transparency in the management of the local government, and reported that his editorial management had come under financial pressure to silence him.

There were two other serious developments on 29 February. **Mavis Cruz**, a journalist working for San Pedro Sula-based *Radio Libertad*, said she and her family were the targets of death threats shortly after she had commented on the resignation of Oscar Manuel Arita Aguilar, a senior police officer.

And journalism student **Fabiola Almendárez Borjas**, 22, was found dead with two other persons of her age in Choloma. She had worked on sports programmes on *Canal 30 TV* and *Radio Cadena Voces*. A total of 84 young people have been the victim of execution-style murders in Honduras

since the start of January.

Photo: Fernando Romero
