

# Dangerous Assignments

covering the global press freedom struggle

Fall | Winter 2008



# The Disappeared

Reporters are vanishing in Mexico.  
Who can be trusted to investigate?

Tunisia's Smiling Oppressor

Finding a Killer in Azerbaijan



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The last edition of *Dangerous Assignments* featured a column by Somali reporter Nasteah Dahir Farah. He paid tribute to colleague Hassan Kafi Hared, who was killed in a January explosion that also claimed the lives of two aid workers and a child.

In June, just weeks after you would have received that issue, Farah was killed. Two hooded men armed with pistols followed Farah home from work in Kismayo, called out his name, and then shot him as he turned around. Farah, 27, was survived by his pregnant wife and their 1-year-old son.

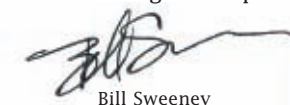
Farah, right, worked primarily as a radio reporter for local and international news organizations. He also served as vice president of the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ), which provides vital help to local journalists covering the years-long conflict in Somalia. A NUSOJ report found that Farah, working in a town controlled by clan militias and Islamic insurgents, was targeted for his reporting. Somalia, which has had no effective central government since 1991, has been particularly dangerous for the press over the past two years. Farah was the ninth Somali journalist killed for his work during that time, according to our research.



I knew Farah only through the e-mails we exchanged as he was preparing and revising his column. He filed an eloquent and detailed piece, along with a beautiful photo of Hared's family. Despite obstacles large and small—from gunfire in the streets to faulty Internet service—Farah was unfailingly cordial and professional. His death, sudden, brutal, and senseless, might lead you to despair.

Here in the United States, a lot of discussion about journalism today involves ideas such as reinventing and right-sizing—concepts that have a lot to do with economic realities but seem distant from reporting on wars, politics, and natural disasters worldwide. A July study by the Pew Research Center found that 46 percent of U.S. newspapers have cut staffing for international news in the last three years. U.S. news media rely, perhaps more than ever, on the information gathered by local journalists on front lines across the world.

In conflict zones such as Somalia, these local reporters go to the scenes of trouble. They interview people in villages where gathering information is considered treason. They shoot photographs in places where carrying a camera makes them targets for people who shoot guns. Farah was among these local professionals, most of them virtually unknown, who report the news at great personal risk. His life's work was timely, skilled, and essential—and that can replenish your faith in being a newsperson.



Bill Sweeney

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**On the cover:** Mexico's missing reporters, clockwise from top left: José Antonio García Apac, Rodolfo Rincón Taracena, Alfredo Jiménez Mota, Gerardo Paredes Pérez, Gamaliel López Candanos, Rafael Ortiz Martínez, and Mauricio Estrada Zamora.

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Mexico has long been one of the world’s deadliest nations for the press, but now reporters are vanishing at an astonishing rate. Most of the missing journalists had explored links between local public officials and criminal gangs. The disappearances, initially handled by local police, were shoddily investigated in the decisive early stages. Who can be trusted to close these cases and stop this ominous trend?

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Tunisia portrays itself as a progressive nation and extends a warm embrace to its friends in the U.S. government. For independent journalists, though, President Ben Ali’s administration offers much different treatment—harassment and imprisonment.



AP/Rafiq Maqbool



AP Photo/Musadeq Sadeg

The scales of justice painted on his prison uniform, 24-year-old Parwez Kambakhsh looks out from his cell (left) in Pul-e-Charki prison outside of Kabul, Afghanistan. A journalist and student at Balkh University in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, Kambakhsh was sentenced to death in January after being convicted of blasphemy for allegedly distributing on campus a text critical of Islam's treatment of women.

Kambakhsh has appealed the conviction (right, in a hearing in Kabul), and the case is pending. He said his confession was coerced, telling The Associated Press that he was "a scapegoat in some political game." Kambakhsh reported for the local daily *Jahan-e-Naw* (New World). His brother, Yaqub Ibrahim, is a correspondent for the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting. Ibrahim told CPJ he believes his own coverage of sensitive regional issues may have helped fuel reprisals against his brother.

Violence in Afghanistan's conflict zones is a well-documented threat to the press. But Rahimullah Samander, head of the Afghan Independent Journalists Association, said local journalists also face politically motivated arrests and harassment because of their reporting. "We are facing threats from different groups, not only from the Taliban," he told CPJ. Hundreds of journalists across the country have signed a declaration calling for Kambakhsh's immediate release. With religious hard-liners pushing for an execution, however, even campaigning for Kambakhsh's release is difficult. Samander said he has received dozens of phone calls pressuring him to drop the case.

Ibrahimi believes his brother will remain in danger "in jail and out of jail, as long as he's in Afghanistan. Psychologically, he is under pressure. ... It is difficult for a student to stay with common criminals." ■

—Sebastian Dettman

## Fadel Shana

*Israel rules that a tank crew was justified in killing a Reuters cameraman in the Gaza Strip.*

**By Alastair Macdonald**

### GAZA, Palestinian Territory

As a talented young Reuters cameraman, Fadel Shana would have appreciated the power of his final footage. He never had that chance. The Israeli tank he filmed in the Gaza Strip fired a shell that unleashed a hail of metal darts, which tore into his body and his camera lens. They shredded his chest and blue flak jacket marked "PRESS" and left the 24-year-old and eight fellow Palestinian civilians, most of them children, dead on a quiet lane.

Fadel's savage death on April 16 shocked us all: It traumatized battle-hardened friends who filmed the aftermath; it stunned editors, who pulled photographers back from the field when they realized the safety guidelines Fadel had followed to the letter were of little account to the Israeli army; and it shocked all of us who recalled our gentle colleague while staring at the bloody work done by the flechettes packed by the thousand in that shell. Fadel had been killed by a weapon widely shunned abroad and questioned in Israel, too, for its indiscriminate kill zone.

Yet more shocks were to come. On

*Alastair Macdonald is bureau chief for Reuters in Israel and the Palestinian territories.*



Fadel Shana at work in the Gaza Strip in February 2008.

August 12, after four months of silence, the army admitted that its tank crew had fired on Fadel without warning but said the crew members were justified because the tripod-mounted camera Fadel operated in full view for several minutes might have been a tripod-mounted antitank missile—a type of weapon never seen in Gaza and which to a trained eye should be hard to mistake.

To reach that "reasonable" decision the troops failed to note "TV" signs plastered over his jeep as it drove, twice, along the road they were monitoring through high-tech sights during the preceding half-hour; they affirmed—questionably—that Fadel's body armor was "common to Palestinian terrorists;" they failed to find the fact he stood in front of them, a mile away, for four minutes an indication that he was not a threat; and they did not consider the 20-odd children playing behind him.

Reuters is seeking a full, independent accounting of what happened

to Fadel, whose parents remember a fond son and favorite uncle to the young nieces and nephews who were his great delight in life. When not with the children, Fadel relished quiet hours watching the sun go down over the sea, dreaming of a future far from war. With others, Reuters is also working to ensure that the Israeli government and army respect their international obligations to protect civilians, including journalists, and enter a serious dialogue to improve media safety.

Some say we should simply stay out of combat zones. Fadel, whose assignment that day was covering an attack that killed several children, would not agree. Neither would a global public that expects us to report when tanks are on the streets, whether in Iraq, or Georgia, or Gaza.

We cannot bring Fadel back. But we know that our shared goal of reporting independently on all sides in any conflict, an ideal for which Fadel Shana gave his life, is in peril if his death changes nothing. ■

# The Witness

*The writer spent months trying to find a colleague secretly jailed in the Gambia. Then he took the witness stand.*

**By Ousman Darboe**

The shock of “Chief” Ebrima Manneh’s arrest set in gradually. We were in our Banjul newsroom on July 7, 2006, working on the next issue of the *Daily Observer*, when two plainclothes officers with the Gambian National Intelligence Agency (NIA) approached Chief. I knew one of the officers as a Corporal Sey. They told Chief, a subeditor and reporter at the paper, that he was needed at the Bakau police station for questioning. He went along voluntarily, leaving his bag behind and saying he was confident he would be back soon. As the hours passed, we called his cell phone, to no avail. Worry set in, and we informed his family.

Chief has been spotted only a handful of times since—and not at all in many months—while the government has officially denied knowledge of his detention. My own reporting on his disappearance took me across much of the country over a period of months. I was able to confirm his location at various times through my sources, but the police shuffled him from place to place, a step ahead of me and the others concerned about his fate.

Though he was never charged with a crime, Chief’s arrest stemmed from his decision to republish a BBC

*Ousman Darboe was news editor and coordinator for the Observer Business Magazine, and later presidential correspondent for the Daily Observer.*

story critical of President Yahya Jammeh’s democratic credentials on the eve of an African Union summit in Banjul. Editors at our pro-government paper overruled Chief’s decision, pulling the printed copies that carried the story and withholding them from distribution.

I worked with Chief for almost eight years, and he had become a good friend. Chief, whose nickname was that of the traditional ruler, started as a freelancer at the *Observer* and rose through the ranks, along the way introducing a popular weekly column called “Crime Watch.” As his absence stretched from days into weeks, journalists throughout the country became concerned. The government maintained an official silence even as police hid Chief from view.

Throughout my reporting, it was difficult to get information. Many people were scared to talk, thinking that they might be the next victim. When I arrived at the offices of possible sources, they would tell me they were busy. “See us again, but don’t call or record us,” they would say. It occurred to me that I could be targeted, too, but I tried to push that to the back of my mind and remember that I had a job to do.

I learned from prison, police, and NIA sources that within the first four weeks of his confinement, Chief was moved from the Bakau station to NIA

headquarters in Banjul, to the nearby Mile Two Central Prison, and then back to the NIA. By September, I had tracked him to a police station in south-central Sibanor, only to be told he had been transferred to Fatoto Prison in far western Gambia.

In mid-December 2006, reporter Yaya Dampha of the opposition daily *Foroyaa* saw Chief briefly in Fatoto Prison. After *Foroyaa* reported the sighting, I learned from an inmate there that Chief had been moved yet again, back to Mile Two, then on to a facility in western Sare Ngai. The press freedom group Media Foundation for West Africa quoted an eyewitness as having seen Chief in July 2007 at Banjul’s Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital, where he was being treated for high blood pressure.

But the trail grew fainter by the month. Chief’s father met with then-Director General Harry Sambou of the NIA and Ousman Sonko, secretary of state for the interior, and was told that the government was not holding his son.

By November 2007, I had become presidential correspondent for the *Observer* and was still pursuing the case when I got a call from a friend in Dakar, Senegal. Come here, he said vaguely, and bring all your personal documents. There was an important opportunity, he suggested. I was confused and put him off, saying that I

couldn’t leave work so suddenly. He was persistent, though, and said he could arrange for me to get some time outside the Gambia. He enlisted a female friend to call my boss, Dida Halake, who was then the paper’s managing director. Pretending to be secretary to the Gambian High Commissioner in Dakar, the woman asked that I be allowed to cover a conference in Senegal. The ruse worked. Halake gave me the green light.

My friend greeted me when I arrived in Dakar on November 23. He wanted a favor: my testimony. The Media Foundation was presenting a case to the Community Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States. The group was asking the regional human rights court to declare Chief’s arrest illegal and to order his immediate release. They needed me to describe the circumstances of his arrest and my subsequent efforts to find him. Kwame Karikari, the Media Foundation’s chief executive, urged me to help. The case, he said, could be dismissed without my testimony.

I was reluctant. I thought of all of the repercussions—for me, my wife, and my two children. I said no. As the meeting went on and the Media Foundation pressed further, I recognized that, as Chief’s friend and colleague, I had an obligation to do anything I could to help set him free. I agreed to be a witness, and we made plans to travel to Abuja, Nigeria, where the court proceedings were being held.

Everything in my life abruptly changed. I called my wife and asked her to come to Dakar with our children. For the next two months, they would stay with my colleague Amie Joof-Cole, a former Radio Gambia broadcaster working in Dakar, while our lives were being rearranged.

On November 26, 2007, I testified before a three-judge panel at the Community Court. For 45 minutes, I detailed Chief’s arrest and described what I had learned about his placement in various prisons and police stations. Yaya Dampha testified as well.

Some good news followed. My family and I reunited in January of this

year, and we resettled in the United States (in a town I keep secret for security reasons). I am homesick and miss my aging father, but we are living happily. In June, the Community Court ordered the Gambian government to release Chief immediately and to pay his family damages of US\$100,000. His arrest, the court determined, was unlawful.

But the Gambian government has ignored the court’s ruling, just as it ignored the inquiries of Chief’s family and friends. Some people suspect Chief may even be dead, given the lack of recent information about his whereabouts and health.

Chief’s disappearance continues to affect me deeply. He was the breadwinner in his family. At the time of his arrest, he was planning to be married and to finish construction of a new home. I would do whatever I could if my actions could reunite him with his family. I would testify again if my words could set him free. ■

*For updates on the Manneh case, visit [www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org).*



In testimony before an African human rights court, Ousman Darboe, top right, described the 2006 arrest of “Chief” Ebrima Manneh, bottom right. Manneh supported a large family, above, before disappearing in government custody.

# Faces of Exile

Hundreds of journalists have fled their homes in the face of violence and harassment. Here are five whose experiences offer a picture of life in exile.

Compiled by Karen Phillips

Since 2001, CPJ has documented the cases of 340 journalists forced into exile after their reporting exposed them to harassment, violence, or imprisonment. They face many difficulties in their new homes, from language and cultural adjustments to emotional and economic hardships. Here are five snapshots of journalists in exile.



Courtesy Dina Yafasova

## UZBEKISTAN

**DINA YAFASOVA**  
Reporter, *Sygeplejersken* (The Nurse)

**Country of origin:** Uzbekistan

**New home:** Denmark

**Date of exile:** 2001

**Reason for leaving:** Yafasova fled after she was threatened with imprisonment during an interrogation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tashkent. She was questioned about a 2001 article in the Danish journal *Sygeplejersken*. Written under a pseudonym, the article described her experiences with government censorship. Two men also assaulted Yafasova on the street, taking her notes, tape recorder, and audiotape.

**Life in exile:** Yafasova won asylum in Denmark in 2002 and was joined by her family. She has continued writing but has suffered the effects of her persecution in Uzbekistan. Eventually, she spent 11 months at the Centre for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims in Copenhagen. Her 2006 book *Diary from Sandholm* describes her experiences in a Danish refugee camp in 2001.

**On the freedom of exile:** "Exile freed me from

*Karen Phillips is CPJ's journalist assistance associate.*

shackles. In exile, I could achieve a much greater degree of human freedom, which never could be achieved under dictatorship in my homeland. And this feeling of being a free person has a much bigger value for me than a feeling of belonging to the place where I was born."



Courtesy Saleem Samad

## BANGLADESH

**SALEEM SAMAD**  
Correspondent, *Bangladesh Observer*

**Country of origin:** Bangladesh

**New home:** Canada

**Date of exile:** 2004

**Reason for leaving:** Samad was under constant surveillance by military security forces following his January 2003 release from prison, where he had spent two months on antistate charges. The accusations stemmed from his work with a documentary crew for Britain's Channel 4 "Unreported World" series. In 2004, security agents raided his home, questioning his family about his whereabouts, and threatening to "greet" him at the airport if he returned from a conference in Canada.

**Life in exile:** Samad opted to remain outside the country and to seek asylum, which he won in January 2005. His family joined him in Canada in 2006, and he has held various non-journalism jobs since—as a security guard, a concierge, and a salesman. Once a prominent voice in Bangladesh, he was met with closed doors when he tried to continue working for Bangladeshi papers while in exile. He now contributes pieces to expatriate news Web sites and runs the pro-democracy blog *Bangladesh Watchdog*.

**On the professional cost of exile:** "After I lost my

steady job with the *Bangladesh Observer*, the international press stopped requesting contributions of articles about the region."



Courtesy Mesfin Tesfaye

## ETHIOPIA

**MESFIN TESFAYE**

Editor-in-Chief, *Abay*

**Country of origin:** Ethiopia

**New home:** Kenya

**Date of exile:** 2007

**Reason for leaving:** Tesfaye fled from the harassment and threats that followed his release from prison in 2007. He had spent 18 months in custody on antistate charges stemming from critical coverage of a flawed 2005 election. After his release, Tesfaye was under regular surveillance and received phone calls warning that if he "acted against the constitution," he would be killed.

**Life in exile:** Tesfaye has spent the past year in Nairobi, awaiting resettlement through the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. In November 2007, Tesfaye and two fellow exiled journalists were assaulted in their apartment by men they believe were Ethiopian government agents. Tesfaye and his exiled colleagues keep a low profile. Unable to find work, they rely on small contributions from international organizations and family members in the diaspora.

**On the hardest part of life in exile:** "Survival. There is no work here in Nairobi. You ask: Where will I get money? You are worried so much. Then you are forced to ask somebody, forced to be a beggar."



Agence France-Presse

## CUBA

**ALEJANDRO GONZÁLEZ RAGA**

Freelance reporter

**Country of origin:** Cuba

**New home:** Spain

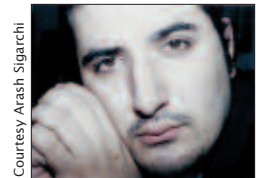
**Date of exile:** 2008

**Reason for leaving:** González Raga boarded a flight to Spain immediately following his February release from prison, where he had served five years of a 14-year sentence on a charge of threatening "the territorial integrity of the state." He was among 29 writers

and editors jailed in the Cuban government's March 2003 crackdown on the independent press. His release, along with that of fellow reporter José Gabriel Ramón Castillo, followed negotiations between the Spanish and Cuban governments. Prior to those talks, CPJ provided the Spanish government with information supporting the reporters' release.

**Life in exile:** González Raga is now publishing his prison writings, and he makes occasional contributions to Spanish media outlets. He struggles to provide for his seven family members in Spain, although he still seeks to have his father and a son, both of whom remain in Cuba, join him as well.

**On the emotional adjustment after prison:** "When you are unjustly imprisoned, when you are taken away from your family, there are no tools to mend the pain."



Courtesy Arash Sigarchi

## IRAN

**ARASH SIGARCHI**

Blogger and editor

**Country of origin:** Iran

**New home:** United States

**Date of exile:** 2008

**Reason for leaving:** Sigarchi escaped to the United States while on medical leave from prison in Rasht, where he was serving a three-year sentence on charges that included espionage, engaging in propaganda against the system, and undermining national security. The charges followed interviews he gave to BBC World Service radio and the U.S. government-funded Radio Farda.

**Life in exile:** Sigarchi lives outside Washington and has applied for political asylum. Unable to get employment while his work permit is being processed, and in need of assistance to cover living and medical expenses (he developed mouth cancer in prison), Sigarchi depends on help from friends and contributions from human rights organizations. He is learning English and hopes to further his media studies and to teach.

**On the decision to go into exile:** "Maybe you expect I'd complain about exile, but I'm satisfied here because this is my choice. I had two options: one, to stay in Iran and be in prison under torture, and two, to be in exile." ■

*To help journalists in exile, go to [www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org) and click on Journalist Assistance.*

## Promoting Healthy Debate

*Egyptian editor Ibrahim Eissa faced up to six months in prison after being convicted of publishing “false news.” Although pardoned in October, Eissa says the government is pushing back against the private press.*

### Interview by Joel Campagna

**Before being granted a pardon, you faced a prison term for publishing “false news” about President Hosni Mubarak in a 2007 story in your newspaper, *Al-Dustour*. Tell us about the case.**

I wasn't the first to write about speculation concerning the president's health and his absence from public view that summer. The first thing we said was that Mubarak's health was excellent. We focused instead on why rumors had spread about his health and why the regime had not refuted them. Suzanne Mubarak [the president's wife] said in a televised interview exactly what we said—that his health was excellent—and then she demanded that journalists who published rumors be held accountable. That was immediately translated into action, and there we were standing trial.

The accusation was that I published false news that harmed the national economy and created panic and chaos and I-don't-know-what. The case was accompanied by extensive coverage in the Egyptian state press, which waged relentless character assassination against me, saying that

*Joel Campagna served as CPJ's program coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa for 11 years. This interview was conducted in Arabic and translated into English.*

Ibrahim Eissa was an opposition figure who attacks the president.

The presidential pardon corrects mistakes that should never have been made in the first place.

#### **Why did they focus on you?**

It has been a year of investigations and lawsuits against me—14 trials in all. Lawyers who belong to the NDP [the ruling National Democratic Party] and other NDP members brought these cases. It seemed that every lawyer passing by court would file a claim accusing me of offending the president. These recurring claims forced me to constantly go from one courtroom to another.

But the “health case,” as it came to be known, was cause for considerable concern because it was filed by the government directly, by the ruling authority in Egypt. It was originally prosecuted in the Supreme State Security Court, whose constitutionality is contested and which specializes in cases like alleged coups.

#### **Give us an idea of the political context that led to the crackdown against you and other independent journalists.**

The regime is under this psychological pressure as private newspapers criticize President Mubarak. The state wants to transfer power definitively,

safely, and quietly to the president's son, Gamal Mubarak. This, of course, implies some great difficulties—one of the biggest being the private media. The media could do what a truly free press does: stimulate and enlighten the public. Therefore, the regime had to eliminate this chronic headache called the private press by warning everyone that it would no longer stand for criticism.

#### **How far has freedom of the press in Egypt regressed?**

The regime's willingness to accept the press has regressed. There was no press freedom in Egypt to begin with. The law in Egypt does not protect journalists. It threatens journalists with prison, with 32 articles in the penal code and in the press regulation law. Any writer, even someone who writes a letter, is threatened. And there is no freedom to publish because this right is subject to state approval.

But the key people in the Egyptian press, those who have fought battles with the regime, still have the same strength and presence. They are ready to pay a price for what they write and publish. That is what's happening now.

#### **What has the private Egyptian press accomplished?**

The first accomplishment was bringing President Mubarak down from the

divine pedestal, as someone who cannot be questioned or held accountable. The press brought him down to the level of an elected president, a public servant and citizen with whom we can differ. The private press has also become the medium for expressing the people's issues and concerns. It is the private press that exclusively reports strikes of workers and employees. These journalists established the idea that the press must be inclusive of all views, and that it cannot hide information or act as a governmental or promotional medium.

The private press has also defended the independence of the judiciary. It has been the main defender of independent judges and has served as

their platform to reach out to the Egyptian public—to the point that reformist judges became national symbols and their cases became popular. Thousands of people marched to the Judges Club in [Alexandria] to express their support for the freedom and independence of judges. It was, perhaps, the purest achievement of the private press. ■

*For updates on the Eissa case, visit [www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org).*



AP/Amr Nabil

# Dates to Remember

*For journalists in Africa, careers are punctuated by time spent in jail.*

By Paul Salopek

## JOHANNESBURG, South Africa

At some point during conversations with African colleagues—say, while relaxing over a beer, or a room-temperature soft drink, or a cup of camel-milk tea—there comes the predictable question of jail time. The run-up usually goes something like this:

“Hey, congrats on that piece about fraud at the Ministry of Education.”

“Thank you.”

*Paul Salopek is the Africa correspondent of the Chicago Tribune based in Johannesburg. He was arrested in the Darfur region of Sudan on August 6, 2006, and set free on September 9 of that year.*

“It must have rattled a few cages.”  
“Yes. They threw me in jail August 4 through November 27.”

It is always that fillip of exact dates at the end that startles: Reeled off like anniversaries or birthdays, the carefully memorized days of arrest and release make African reporters’ shop talk sound eerily like the banter of ex-cons. The details above, by the way, aren’t imaginary. I had that exchange with Maman Abou, the publisher of Niger’s most popular newspaper, *Le Republicain*, who was imprisoned for nearly four months in 2006 after revealing that the Minister of Education had pocketed millions in European aid.

Not all African journalists are such

martyrs for free speech, of course. There are hacks in the thrall (and on the payroll) of political parties, big corporations, and governments, just as there are, albeit under sleeker camouflage, in the United States.

Still, it’s humbling to have worked in the field for several years alongside scores of generally impoverished but gutsy African associates. Nowhere on the planet, I would wager, are the prospects for homegrown journalists so unpredictable, so chaotic, so fraught with disaster and possibility than in sub-Saharan Africa, where 47 young countries appear to be busy either hammering themselves together or tearing themselves apart before your eyes.

It is impossible to generalize about media repression across the world’s vast, complex, and turbulent canvas. Journalists in Colombia and Russia and China face their own set of risks, from violence to arrest. But our African colleagues—at least 20 of whom, by CPJ’s count, are now jailed—certainly toil through a wild and harrowing roller-coaster ride.

Take Zimbabwe.

Thirty years ago—well within the career spans of many local journalists—all independent black voices were banned on pain of arrest or worse in what was then white-ruled Rhodesia. The country was mired in race war.

By 20 years ago the situation had flipped, and Zimbabwe was enjoying halcyon days of post-independence stability and prosperity. The press was free and active, if somewhat docile.

Then, in 1999, it flopped. President Robert Mugabe crushed dissent as his power ebbed. The government forced newspaper offices to shutter, sometimes by hurling petrol bombs into them at night. Independent radio and television stations all but vanished. And security forces began



The author, center, hand on hip, during his own imprisonment in Darfur in 2006.

abducting and brutalizing journalists. The most famous early case was Mark Chavunduka, the editor of the *Standard*; he was tortured with electric shocks and beaten while in army detention. He died not long after, possibly from complications related to his mistreatment. Others have since been killed under murky circumstances.

Sometimes that intimidation was directed at foreign correspondents. I once was chased out of Mugabe’s hometown of Kutama by thugs from the president’s feared Central Intelligence Organization. Yet our Zimbabwean co-workers invariably got it far worse. I escaped with a smashed car windshield. The local reporter who

was assisting me, whose name I even now hesitate to publish for fear of his safety, was pulled aside and socked in the face.

Meanwhile, the pendulum may be swinging again in Zimbabwe. A historic new power-sharing deal signed in September between Mugabe and opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai might herald a new era of freedom for Zimbabwean journalists. For a while.

And so the erratic, relapsing, always dizzying course of Africa’s press freedoms yo-yos on.

Ask Alfred Taban, a leading Sudanese radio and print journalist, how many times he’s been jailed during his long years of reporting in Khartoum, through tectonic shifts between moderate and harsh Islamist regimes, and he will smile and lose count. Over a sweet tea, though, he will recall his most recent arrest and liberation dates.

The same goes for the best of our colleagues from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Or Ethiopia. Or Somalia. The fateful dates spill out. And they make all the media woes back home seem trivial. ■

## Blog Riffs

Highlights from the CPJ Blog

**Nina Ognianova, Europe and Central Asia program coordinator, finds that Russia is using “anti-extremism” laws to silence newspapers and ... animated cartoons.**

Well, that was it for Kenny. Not only does the “South Park” character die (again) in Episode 46, “Mr. Hankey’s Christmas Classics,” he may now be killed altogether from Russian television. On September 3, Moscow prosecutors filed a legal claim against “South Park,” saying the cartoon exhibited

“signs of extremist activity.” ... The charge was made possible by anti-extremist legislation signed into law by Vladimir Putin that expands the term “extremism” to include vaguely defined criticism of state officials and “public justification” of terrorism.

Recently, regional authorities in the southern republic of Dagestan used the law against the editor of an independent weekly that quoted a former guerrilla leader. Nadira Isayeva was charged with making public calls to extremism and inciting interethnic

hatred; she faces up to eight years in prison. In June, the satirical English-language biweekly *The eXile* was forced to close after nervous investors withdrew support in the wake of a politicized content audit. Four officers with the state media regulator conducted the audit, looking for “signs of extremism.”

The “South Park” Web site posted a response to Moscow prosecutors’ move to ban the series. The headline said, “From Russia, With No Love.” That sounds about right.

**Kamel Labidi, CPJ’s Middle East correspondent, describes an editor’s release from a Casablanca prison in August.**

The release of Mustafa Hormatallah, jailed editor of Morocco’s independent weekly *Al-Watan Al An*, prompted a memorable scene outside Akacha Prison in Casablanca. Scores of well-wishers including relatives, friends, and representatives of human rights groups flocked to the notorious prison to greet Hormatallah after his

eight months in captivity. At 9:45 a.m. local time he emerged from the gate of what he called a “cemetery for the living.”

His ordeal began in July 2007 when he and his editor, Abderrahim Ariri, were charged with obtaining classified documents through “criminal means.” Their arrest came only a few days after *Al-Watan Al An* reported that the government had collected evidence of terrorist threats. The paper has a history of publishing stories critical of authorities. ...

Hormatallah says “the strong statements” issued by local and international rights groups provided him with “energy, protection, and a zest for living, even behind bars.”

“You have no idea how your solidarity and action helped make my detention bearable and strengthened my commitment to independent journalism,” Hormatallah told CPJ. ■

*The CPJ Blog is updated regularly at [www.cpj.org/blog](http://www.cpj.org/blog).*



Esperanza Mota holds a snapshot of her son, the reporter Alfredo Jiménez Mota, who vanished in 2005. In the family photo, she and her husband, Alfredo Jiménez, celebrate their son's journalism school graduation.



Zeta

# The Disappeared

*In Mexico, seven reporters have vanished in three years. Many had investigated links between public officials and drug traffickers. Are the crime groups changing tactics, or is a new type of perpetrator at work?*

By Monica Campbell and María Salazar

## VILLAHERMOSA, Mexico

**I**t was nearly 8 p.m. on January 20, 2007, when Rodolfo Rincón Taracena signed off on the final version of his piece detailing a criminal gang preying on cash-machine customers in Villahermosa, capital of the southeastern state of Tabasco. The chain-smoking 54-year-old crime reporter took a call and headed out the door, telling his editor at the state's largest daily, *Tabasco Hoy*, that a

*Monica Campbell is a freelance writer and CPJ's Mexico City-based consultant. María Salazar is CPJ's senior research associate for the Americas.*

source was picking him up. He would be back tomorrow, he said. He never returned.

Rincón is among seven Mexican reporters who have vanished since 2005, a tally nearly unprecedented in 27 years of documentation by CPJ. The ranks of the missing include aggressive young reporters and seasoned veterans, the owner of a tiny biweekly and a crew for a major television broadcaster. Only Russia—where seven journalists disappeared in the mid-1990s while covering an insurgent war in the republic of Chechnya—has experienced a comparable period of disappearances.

Mexico is already one of the world's deadliest nations

for journalists, with 21 killed since 2000, at least seven in direct reprisal for their work. But the spike in disappearances suggests a significant shift in the dangers facing the Mexican press. Throughout much of the decade, journalists in Mexico were shot in broad daylight on city streets or their bodies left in public plazas. Drug traffickers and criminal gangs are believed to have been behind the vast majority of these slayings and their very public message to the press was clear: Beware.

With the rise in disappearances, analysts say, either organized crime groups are changing their tactics or, more



CPJ/Michael Marizco

A soldier guards the offices of the Hermosillo daily *El Imparcial* as editors from throughout the region gather to discuss the disappearance of reporter Jiménez.

likely, a new type of perpetrator is at work. Relatives and colleagues of several victims said in interviews with CPJ that they believe local public officials played a role in the disappearances. In at least five of these cases, CPJ found, the missing reporters had investigated links between local government officials and organized crime in the weeks before they vanished. They include reporter Alfredo Jiménez Mota, who broke major stories about the web of corruption among drug runners, police, local prosecutors, and state officials in the northern city of Hermosillo.

Although the disappearances have occurred in every corner of the country, all have happened in corridors through which billions of dollars in drugs are smuggled into the United States. In these areas, corruption has permeated all levels of society. In the case of a two-man TV Azteca crew that vanished, crime reporter Gamaliel López

Candanosa was publicly accused of having ties to local traffickers—a charge the station disputed. Whatever the motive, cameraman Gerardo Paredes Pérez, a last-minute fill-in, appears to have been an inadvertent victim.

All seven of the disappearances remain unresolved today, and are without any apparent leads. Initially handled by local police, most of the cases appear to have been poorly investigated in the crucial early stages, CPJ found. José Antonio García Apac, for example, an editor in Michoacán state, was widely known to have compiled a list of allegedly corrupt officials before he vanished, yet local police never looked at that angle. Three of the seven cases are now overseen by local offices of the federal attorney general; only one is being investigated by federal authorities based in Mexico City.

Relatives of the journalists live in an emotional and legal limbo, unable to bury their loved ones, delayed in settling estates, prevented from moving on with their lives. Colleagues tone down their investigative work or abandon it altogether as these cases grow cold and fear settles in. The cases include the disappearances of reporters Mauricio Estrada Zamora and Rafael Ortiz Martínez, both of whom dropped out of sight after reporting on crime and corruption.

In a meeting with CPJ in June, President Felipe Calderón promised to support legislation that would make crimes against the press federal offenses. Congress is expected to debate such measures this fall. CPJ submitted specific recommendations that, among other things, would mean the cases of missing journalists would be overseen by federal prosecutors.

"The main source of danger for journalists is organized crime—and the second is the government," said Rep. Gerardo Priego Tapia, who heads a congressional committee



Tabasco Hoy

Rodolfo Rincón Taracena, third from right, behind officer, is seen during one of his last assignments, a police raid involving cash-machine thefts.

on violence against the press and who supports federalization of such crimes. “The worst scenario for journalists is when organized crime and the government become partners. And in many parts of this country, they are completely intertwined.”

**F**orced disappearances have been prevalent throughout Latin America’s modern history, particularly during the 1970s and ’80s, an era marked by right-wing dictatorships and civil war. In Mexico, disappearances have reemerged as a national phenomenon. According to a 2008 investigative series in the Mexico City weekly *Proceso*, at least 600 people have gone missing nationwide since late 2006, when the newly inaugurated Calderón deployed the army and federal police to wage war on organized crime. While many are optimistic that Calderón’s efforts will generate long-term benefits, the campaign has disrupted the social balance, making corrupt officials more vulnerable to exposure and leading to a rise in both violent crime and the number of disappearances. In at least some missing-person cases, *Proceso* found evidence of government involvement.

Rincón was considered one of Tabasco’s more dogged crime reporters. The day before he vanished, the newspaper ran a two-page spread in which the reporter described illicit “drugstores,” or *narcotientas*, run by traffickers. The story, which named several suspects, was accompanied by a map pinpointing these distribution centers and a photograph showing a family allegedly selling drugs. In his cash-machine story, Rincón specified where the criminals’ safe houses were located. “It was his typical exclusive,” said Roberto Cuitláhuac, the paper’s crime editor.

No witnesses ever emerged, and investigators’ one publicized lead—the discovery of human remains at a nearby ranch—did not take them to Rincón.

Olivia Alaniz Cornelio, his longtime girlfriend and a reporter at another Villahermosa daily, told CPJ that Rincón was accustomed to getting threats, but a call about a month before he disappeared had alarmed him. He didn’t offer details, Alaniz said, but he urged her to stay alert.

Alaniz is skeptical that Rincón’s disappearance is the work of drug traffickers alone. “It’s more common for narcos to send a message with their victims,” she said, noting that a decapitated head was once left on the doorstep of the Villahermosa-based *El Correo de Tabasco*. “There is no way that organized crime can become so powerful here and conduct their business without the help of corrupt officials. I think somebody set out to silence Rodolfo without a trace.”

Many of the other reporters who have vanished wrote about the possible links between local authorities and organized crime. In 2005, as drug trafficking swept Mexico’s

northern border states, the editors of *El Imparcial*, a leading daily in Hermosillo, Sonora, recruited a young reporter who had broken stories of organized crime in the neighboring state of Coahuila.

Alfredo Jiménez Mota, a 240-pound one-time boxer, was aggressive and ambitious, said his father, also Alfredo Jiménez. He went for the big names, exposing crime rings and the public officials he said were linked to them. According to his editor, Jorge Morales, he also made plenty of enemies.

Jiménez angered officials at the state attorney general’s office by hounding them about dropped investigations, and he drew the ire of the police chief when he looked into alleged links between the department and local drug traffickers, CPJ found. Morales said he often urged Jiménez to drop his byline for safety reasons, but the reporter was insistent to the point of threatening to sue *El Imparcial* if the newspaper did not credit his work.

In the days before his disappearance, though, Jiménez appeared rattled, and he told several colleagues that he was being followed, Morales said. On the evening of April 2, 2005, he postponed dinner plans with a co-worker so he could meet with a “nervous source,” the editor said. His parents, who have been briefed by authorities, said they were told that Jiménez went to a burger restaurant to meet the deputy director of the local prison, Andrés Montoya García. Montoya told authorities he later gave Jiménez a ride to a convenience store, dropping him off at 10:30 p.m.

That was the last known sighting. *El Imparcial* said it had obtained Jiménez’s cell phone records, which show that he made calls later that night to numbers belonging to the prison official; a local deputy prosecutor named Raúl Fernando Galván Rojas; and a third person the paper could not trace.

Montoya and Galván were investigated and cleared by federal authorities, Morales said. Both resigned shortly after Jiménez disappeared and have dropped from public view. Neither could be located for comment for this story. Officials in the federal attorney general’s kidnapping unit, which has handled the case, did not respond to CPJ’s repeated requests for comment. The case is the only one of the seven that has been directly overseen by the federal attorney general in Mexico City.

The case took a startling turn in June, when Sonoran Gov. Eduardo Bours made public a letter that sought to link his government to the Jiménez case. Allegedly written by one of the captors, the letter details the reporter’s supposed kidnapping, torture, and murder, and implicates several local officials, as well as the governor’s brother.

Bours vehemently denied any involvement in the case

**Calderón has deployed the army to wage war on organized crime. That has made corrupt local officials more vulnerable to exposure.**



AP/Guillermo Arias

and called for a new investigation. Though Morales and Jiménez’s father doubt the letter’s credibility, they do believe that Sonoran authorities could have colluded with local crime groups in the reporter’s disappearance. Jiménez wrote about drug trafficking, Morales said, “but it all led to local authorities.”

One crime analyst notes that the spike in disappearances could simply reflect a change in tactics among crime groups. “The impact of a journalist’s death has a short duration,” says Raúl Fraga Juárez, a journalist and security expert at the Universidad Iberoamericana. “But if a journalist goes missing, uncertainty will always linger.”

Others point a finger more directly at local officials. Samuel González Ruiz, a former organized-crime prosecutor for the federal attorney general’s office and a security adviser to the United Nations, believes the disappearances could reflect the entanglement of local authorities in criminal operations. “There are parts of Mexico where you can’t distinguish between local police and criminals, and it has become very dangerous for journalists who report on this situation,” he said. While proof is scarce, he acknowledged, “I have no doubts that local police are involved in the disappearances of journalists.”

For her series of reports on the overall phenomenon of disappearances, *Proceso* reporter Gloria Leticia Díaz spoke to several people who said their loved ones had been dragged away by uniformed men they believed to be with the military or the police. Officials at the Public Ministry replied by saying that anyone could buy a uniform.



AP/Guillermo Arias

**President Felipe Calderón arrives at a military base in the state of Michoacán in early 2007. Calderón sent thousands of troops there to combat criminal gangs, an effort that may have long-term benefits but has caused a rise in violent crime and disappearances.**

**M**ap out the states and cities where journalists have gone missing and a clear pattern emerges. All worked in states that are key trafficking corridors for smuggling cocaine, heroin, and marijuana from Colombia and Mexico into the United States. Violence in Guerrero, Michoacán, and Nuevo León—three states where journalists have gone missing—has increased as powerful criminal groups, including the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels, fight for turf and retaliate against those who stand in their way, whether they are soldiers, cops, or even the doctors who attend to wounded rivals.

Until recently, Nuevo León and its wealthy capital, Monterrey, were considered safe. But in early 2007, violence spread as the drug gangs, including the Gulf cartel’s enforcement arm, Los Zetas, battled for control of Monterrey and its nearby drug route into Texas. The emergence of well-financed criminal groups brings with it a rise in corruption at many levels of society—including journalism. In

**Map out the places where journalists have gone missing and a clear pattern emerges. All worked in key drug trafficking corridors.**

a 2006 report, CPJ cited numerous professional sources as saying that journalists had accepted bribes, or “chayote,” to skew their reporting or spread drug traffickers’ messages to the press.

When a wave of execution-style murders struck Monterrey, Gamaliel López Candanosa, a correspondent for the national broadcaster TV Azteca, sprang into action. Soon, crime reporters began noticing that López, known locally as “Gama,” always seemed to arrive first at crime scenes. In an April 2007 interview in *Crucero*, a local online publication, López said jealous colleagues had been spreading false rumors that he was complicit with Los Zetas.

On May 10, 2007, López and camera operator Gerardo Paredes Pérez had finished a piece on the birth of conjoined twins at Hospital Universitario in Monterrey and were scheduled to head to their next assignment, a report on abused children. No one has reported seeing the journalists or their Chevy compact, marked with the TV Azteca logo, after they wrapped up the story at the hospital.

Nuevo León Prosecutor Luis Carlos Treviño Berchelman told local legislators in November 2007 that López had gone missing as a result of the reporter’s links to organized crime. Pressed by TV Azteca to present evidence supporting the charge, Treviño retracted his statement and has never again addressed the issue.

A local journalist who spoke on condition of anonymity told CPJ that in the months prior to his disappearance, López purported to be a messenger for Los Zetas, telling reporters what to cover and what to ignore. “He told me not to worry, that these were good people who wanted to work in peace,” said the journalist. “Gamaliel told me to do as they said.”

TV Azteca managers did not return repeated calls from CPJ seeking comment for this story, and relatives of López could not be located for comment. Paredes did not ordinarily work with López, and colleagues do not believe he was a target.

In Mexico, a missing-person case is generally considered a state crime. Typically, local police handle the initial investigation and then hand the case over to the state attorney general’s missing-persons unit. As with homicides, cases can move to the federal level under certain circumstances—if the victim was a public official, if the crime involved military-style weapons, or if the disappearance was linked to organized crime. But investigations can be botched—or, worse, the crimes covered up—in the initial stages, when local police are in charge.

In early 2008, Congress approved several measures designed to overhaul the criminal justice system. Witness

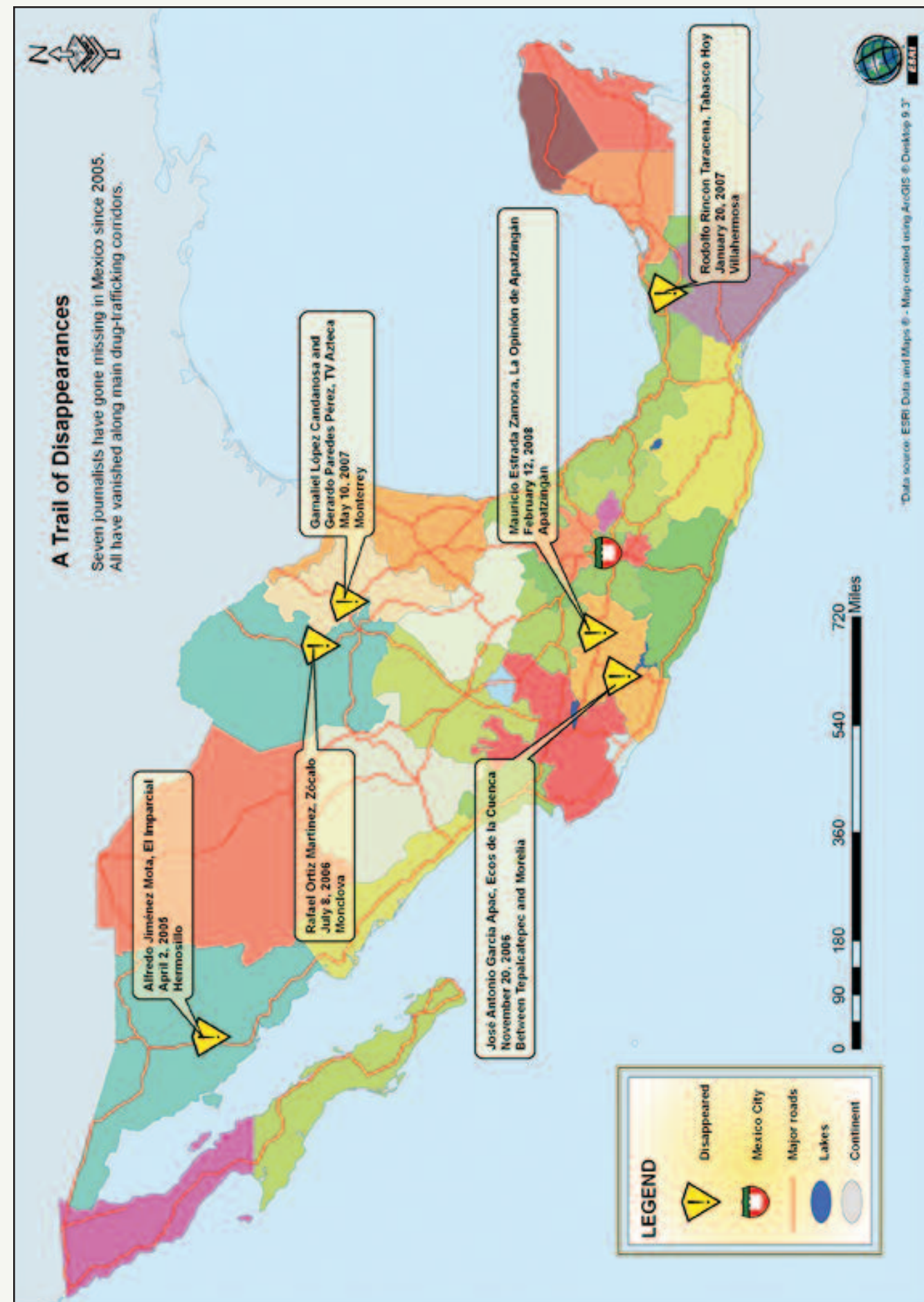
protection programs were created, rules were established to improve the hiring and training of police officers, and forensic equipment was designated for purchase. “These are exactly the type of changes we need,” said Macedonio Vázquez Castro, a criminal law expert at the Mexico City-based Center for Criminal Policy Studies and Penal Sciences. But the system still faces massive problems, among them the fear and intimidation that criminals instill in citizens and law enforcement officials.

Vázquez said conflicts of interest inevitably arise when local police investigate cases that involve organized crime. “The situation law enforcement officials face on the ground can be extremely challenging,” Vázquez noted. “My feeling is that if there are no positive results, if the investigation is clearly going nowhere, then there is a clash of interests somewhere. I mean, what can we expect people to do when there are criminals on the loose with their guns cocked and loaded? Corruption can result from greed—or survival.”

On July 8, 2006, Rafael Ortiz Martínez, a reporter for the daily *Zócalo*, based in the capital city of Monclova in the northern border state of Coahuila, was seen leaving the newsroom at about 1 a.m. He had just finished editing



**Rafael Ortiz Martínez received numerous death threats before he disappeared, colleagues say. At least some threats were related to his coverage of a local politician.**



material for a radio news show he hosted. Somewhere in the three-minute car ride from the paper's offices to his apartment, Ortiz and his company vehicle, a cherry-red Nissan Tsuru sedan, vanished.

Days later, Coahuila Gov. Humberto Moreira Valdés announced that there was enough evidence to believe that drug traffickers had kidnapped Ortiz in retaliation for his work. But two years later, a state police official in Monclova, speaking on condition of anonymity because he is not allowed to comment on investigations, told CPJ, "We have no leads."

Sergio Cisneros, *Zócalo's* editor in 2006, said Ortiz did not ordinarily investigate organized crime or drug trafficking. "For safety concerns, it is the paper's policy not to cover those issues," Cisneros said. But journalists in Monclova told CPJ that Ortiz had recently reported on a conflict between local taxi drivers and Los Zetas.

In Ciudad Acuña—where Ortiz worked as an investigative reporter for Radio Felicidad until six months prior to his disappearance—he detailed labor abuses in nearby mines, described the workings of local prostitution rings, and named regional drug lords, said Osiris Cantú, director of the local daily *Zócalo de Acuña*. Friends of the reporter, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation, said Ortiz received numerous death threats, some related to his criticism of a local council candidate.

Early in the investigation, authorities searched Ortiz's home, reviewed his articles, and attempted to locate his car. But the investigation went cold. The Monclova officer claimed that Ortiz's family and colleagues were unwilling to cooperate with investigators. *Zócalo's* new editor, Pedro Pérez, put it a different way: Interviewed by police once, he said he refused to be interviewed again after the officers in charge of the investigation told him that police had lost the original case files.

Mystery also surrounds the case of Mauricio Estrada Zamora, a crime reporter for the daily *La Opinión de Apatzingán*, located in the western state of Michoacán. He went missing on February 12, 2008, after leaving the paper's offices at about 10 p.m. to head home. The next morning, his car was found parked, its doors open and engine running, in the neighboring municipality of Buena Vista Tomatlán. Estrada's laptop and camera, along with the car's stereo, were missing.

The investigation appeared to get off to a strong start. The Michoacán state kidnapping unit dispatched a search helicopter to Buena Vista Tomatlán. Local police interviewed Estrada's family, including his wife and brother. They spoke to the five members of the newspaper staff working when Estrada left the office. "They asked us if Estrada had ever been threatened and about the last few articles he published," said María de la Luz Uyuela Granado, the paper's editor-in-chief.

Soon after, according to CPJ interviews with editors of *La*

*Opinión de Apatzingán*, Estrada's family learned that the reporter had recently been involved in a disagreement with a Federal Investigations Agency (AFI) operative, someone nicknamed "El Diablo." The investigation, by then in the hands of the local office of the federal attorney general, appeared to slow and eventually come to a halt, the editors said.

Sara Salas, a spokeswoman for the federal attorney general, said investigators could not identify an AFI agent known as "El Diablo" or make a connection between Estrada's disappearance and a federal agent. They dismissed any link at all to a criminal group, she said, before turning the case back to local police.

In several instances, relatives have sought to investigate cases themselves, working with civic groups and organizing friends to distribute leaflets. "Families feel alone and isolated from the authorities. There is often little contact between them," said Coordinator Alma Díaz of the Asociación Esperanza (Hope Association), a group based in the northern state of Baja California that assists families of missing people, including that of Alfredo Jiménez Mota. "The message families get is: no body, no crime," said Díaz. She urges relatives not to stay silent. "They can't let fear overcome them."

## Mexico by the Numbers

- 7** journalists have been slain in direct relation to their work since 2000.
- 14** other journalists have been murdered in unclear circumstances since 2000.
- 16th** worldwide in number of journalists murdered.
- 14** percent of journalist murders have ended in convictions.
- 10th** worldwide in CPJ's Impunity Index, which calculates the number of unsolved journalist murders as a percentage of the population. The higher a nation's ranking, the greater the threat to the press.
- 7** journalists are reported missing. All have vanished since 2005.
- 2nd** worldwide in number of journalists reported missing since 1982. Only Russia—with seven cases in the 1990s and an eighth this decade—has reported more.

For a complete database of journalist deaths in Mexico, visit [www.cpj.org/deadly](http://www.cpj.org/deadly). Capsule reports on all journalists missing worldwide are available at [www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org). Click on *Journalists Missing*.

In the central-western state of Michoacán, Rosa Isela Caballero, wife of missing journalist José Antonio García Apac, is pressing authorities to step up their investigation. García, founder and editor of the Tepalcatepec weekly *Ecos de la Cuenca*, stopped on the way home to call his family in Morelia around 8 p.m. on November 20, 2006. Could he bring home groceries, he asked. While on the phone with his son, García was overheard responding to men asking his identify and then demanding he hang up. Sounds of García being dragged away were heard before the line went dead.

García reported regularly on organized crime in Michoacán, where drug-related violence has soared in recent years. Weeks before his disappearance, *Ecos de la Cuenca* published articles about violence between cartels



Courtesy Rosa Isela Caballero



Rosa Isela Caballero and three sons put together pages of the family newspaper, *Ecos de la Cuenca*, in the dining room of their home in Morelia. On the front page of each issue, inset, is a reminder that García has gone missing.

and collusion among local police and hit men working for drug traffickers.

In an interview with CPJ, Isela, the mother of García's six children, said she has made dozens of trips to the attorney general's office in search of answers. She asked, for example, whether calls could be traced from García's cell phone, which he was using when he was apparently abducted. Salas, the attorney general's spokeswoman, said phone records turned up no leads.

Sylvia Martínez, the García family lawyer, also demanded to know if officials investigated a list García had compiled of Michoacán officials he believed were linked to organized crime. Isela said that her husband took that list to the federal organized crime unit in Mexico City in May 2006 for corroboration—a move other Michoacán reporters considered very risky considering the high level of corruption within Mexican law enforcement agencies.

Isela said that Michoacán state authorities told her that line of investigation was not followed because there was no

record of García's visit to the organized crime office. Salas said federal authorities had no comment on whether the lead was pursued. Based on other, unspecified information, she said, authorities concluded that García's case was not connected to organized crime.

In July, Isela was informed by Michoacán state authorities that García's case had been put on hold. "I don't want them to forget the case," said Isela. "More than anything, I want to know whether or not he is dead."

Isela continues to publish *Ecos de la Cuenca* when she can, although it now runs mostly local government news. No longer are there stories about organized crime or anything else that could trigger controversy. "Only my husband could do that type of work," she said. Her goal is to keep the paper alive in memory of her husband. On the upper right-hand side of each edition, she runs a small black-and-white photo of García, with a caption demanding that authorities solve the case. "This is what he would want me to do," said Isela. She lives on about \$100 a month from the paper, support from her three eldest sons, and funding from the Rory Peck Foundation, a U.K.-based press freedom group.

Bit by bit, Isela is recuperating. After long bouts with insomnia, she is sleeping through the night. She is regaining the weight she lost and is beginning to run again, something she and García did together. She is also surrounded by five sons who live with her in a small house on the outskirts of Morelia, the Michoacán capital. "They are my support network and have gotten me through this," said Isela. One of her remaining wishes is to have a special place for remembering García. She often visits her mother-in-law's grave and imagines that García is there as well.

In other disappearances, colleagues are shaken. At *Tabasco Hoy*, where Rodolfo Rincón Taracena worked, the newspaper's staff has made adjustments. On a recent afternoon, crime editor Cuitláhuac sat in the chair Rincón once used. He and his staff of four crime reporters agreed that Rincón's investigations were dangerous, but they also said that he took precautions. He varied his routine, did not take street cabs, and used the company car whenever possible. Today, the four reporters follow the same safeguards, but they will not follow in Rincón's investigative footsteps.

It's unsafe enough, said Manuel Antonio Ascencio, to be alone in a car, going down some back road. Ascencio refuses to increase the risk by undertaking an investigative piece. Fellow reporter José Angel Cintro Domínguez admitted that he once liked crime reporting because it put him in the "middle of the action." But now he stands back and watches as organized crime in Tabasco goes unreported. "The government is supposedly fighting all of this and we are supposed to cover it," said Cintro. "Are we supposed to just leave everything unreported?"

Cuitláhuac supplied an answer. "That," he said, "is exactly the psychological effect the criminals want." ■



Al-Iraqiya

# A California Dream

*After Jihad Ali's leg was shattered by assailants in Iraq, colleagues raised money, and surgeons in California offered help. Now, Ali has cleared another big hurdle: He's gained permission to enter the United States.*

**By Robert Mahoney**

**Jehad Ali, right, continued to work as he rehabilitated in Amman, Jordan, but he found carrying a camera very difficult. With him is assistant camera operator Ahmed Nedeem.**

**J**ehad Abdulwahid Hannon knows it's remarkable that he is alive. The gunmen who felled the Al-Iraqiya TV cameraman on a south Baghdad street took him for dead. When they realized their mistake, they went looking for him at local hospitals, but he managed to give them the slip.

The 27-year-old journalist, commonly known as Jihad Ali, not only clung to life but vowed to recover from crippling injuries and take up his camera again. His determination to rebuild his strength through swimming led to a chance encounter with a CBS News crew that opened the door to a foreign press community eager to help with money and

**Robert Mahoney, CPJ's deputy director, led a mission to Iraq in May.**

contacts to get him out of Iraq for medical treatment.

Now, having finally gained permission to enter the United States, Ali is hoping for another stroke of good fortune—successful surgery in a California hospital to repair his bullet-shattered right leg.

Ali's story began on the morning of December 27, 2005, when he and a colleague were walking from their Sunni neighborhood to the Al-Iraqiya office. A car sped toward the two men. "I am not sure whether the gunmen fired two or three bullets into my right thigh," Ali told CPJ in Baghdad. "I fell to the ground when they fired the first bullet at me. ... I was conscious but collapsed in pain."

His colleague escaped. An assailant with an AK-47 assault rifle got out of the car and continued to fire on Ali, whose work for Al-Iraqiya, a state-run television station set

**Even those with good prospects of gaining admission to the United States have faced a long and laborious process to secure travel documents.**

up with U.S. aid in 2003, had led to repeated threats against his life. Fliers had been handed out at mosques in several Sunni areas where al-Qaeda was known to be active, saying that it was acceptable "to shed the blood" of Ali and two of his co-workers. Numerous Al-Iraqiya reporters have been targeted because of their work. CPJ research shows that the Iraq Media Network, which includes Al-Iraqiya, has seen 27 of its staffers killed since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, more than any other news organization.

Even after the United States stopped funding Al-Iraqiya in 2005, its employees continued to be targeted for attack because of the station's pro-government line. They are just some of the hundreds of journalists and media support workers associated with Western or Western-funded media companies who have suffered threats or attacks from various militias operating in Iraq.

As sectarian and anti-Western violence raged from 2004 to 2007, many Iraqi reporters with foreign news outlets tried to keep their profession secret to protect themselves. Some moved from their homes into safe houses or lived in the news bureaus where they worked. Their workload and exposure to danger increased during this time because they were deployed in areas that had become unsafe for foreign journalists.

Eventually, the threats and stress became intolerable for many Iraqi staff members, and they turned to their employers for help in resettling in the West. For the first four years following the invasion, however, the United States set security clearance so high for Iraqi refugees that mere hundreds were admitted annually, according to Western journalists working in Iraq and U.S. officials.

Even those with good prospects of gaining admission to the United States have faced a long and laborious process to secure travel documents. Ali, for instance, did not qualify for a U.S. visitor visa because he had no assets in Iraq that would ensure his return home. So he applied instead for humanitarian parole, which would allow him to enter the country for medical treatment. Ali had the help of U.S. lawyers, a guarantee from doctors, and proof of funding for his stay, but his application still took six months to assemble. In August, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—which this year increased the volume and speed of handling Iraqi applications—approved Ali's request to travel to California for medical treatment.

**A**li, a heavy-set young man with a pronounced limp, remained stoic throughout, trusting that the power of his story and the help of his colleagues would eventually move the bureaucracy to action.

Speaking in Arabic with a CBS producer acting as inter-

preter, he patiently recounted the events of that violent December day. After the initial round of shooting, Ali recalled, he flattened himself against the ground only to be struck again repeatedly. He suffered 11 bullet wounds in all, the most serious to his leg, where one round took out an inch-long chunk of his femur.

The attackers did not approach after they stopped firing but instead drove off, in the apparent belief that he was dead. "I lay there for a while, and then people came out and saw I was still alive," said Ali, even now expressing astonishment at the courage of those who, ignoring the possible presence of informers, risked their own safety to help a victim. He was driven to Baghdad's Yarmouk Hospital, where doctors stopped the bleeding in his leg.

But Ali was not yet out of danger. The gunmen had gotten wind of his rescue and were hunting him: "A doctor at the hospital came to ask me to leave, saying that three to



AP/Mahmoud Al-Badri



AP/Robert Spencer

**Ali is rushed to Yarmouk Hospital in December 2005 after being attacked in a south Baghdad neighborhood. CBS correspondent Lara Logan, inset, was moved by Ali's determination and sought help from doctors and journalists.**

four armed men were waiting for me outside." Weak and still in pain, he called Al-Iraqiya, which sent an armored car to take him to another hospital.

Once he'd sufficiently recovered, Ali began the long search for a doctor who might be able to repair his right femur. "I knocked on all doors," he said. "I asked government officials, the Red Crescent—I even asked religious figures to help me. Nobody provided financial assistance or helped me find a place to get treatment."



AP/Bassem Tellawi

**Iraqi refugees in Damascus line up for U.N. food assistance in February 2008. U.S. estimates put the number of Iraqi refugees at 2 million. Only a few hundred were accepted into the United States annually until 2007, when legislation accelerated the effort.**

So Ali helped himself. In order to rebuild his leg muscles and control his weight, he spent a sizable chunk of his modest salary on fees for the use of the swimming pool at the Al-Mansour Melia Hotel. It was there that he ran into a crew from CBS News, which had set up its local bureau in the hotel. Ali asked the crew for help, and they introduced him to the network's chief international correspondent, Lara Logan.

"When I first met him and saw what he needed, my heart sank," Logan told CPJ. "Here was this kid who had taken so many bullets and survived. ... I was just overwhelmed by his personal sense of responsibility. He was sleeping at the [Al-Iraqiya] office because he couldn't go home. ... He would go out after curfew for X-rays, he was going to the pool to get better. You meet a lot of people when you are out on the road who have a feeling of entitlement, as a victim. Jihad was never like that."

Logan contacted Dr. Randolph Sherman, head of plastic and reconstructive surgery at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, whom she had come to know for his humanitarian work with Iraqi surgeons. "I made calls," Sherman told CPJ, "and got hold of the combat support hospital that looked at Jihad." Armed with X-rays and a thorough medical assessment by American doctors in Baghdad, Sherman determined what it would take to help Ali.

Sherman has secured the pro bono services of one of California's top orthopedic surgeons, Dr. Donald Wiss, to treat Ali; a local hospital, the Henry Mayo Newhall Memorial

Hospital in Valencia, has offered a discounted rate for his stay. "After that, he will probably be staying at my house," Sherman added with a laugh.

Logan, who began raising money last year to send Ali to the United States, approached CPJ for help. "I was absolutely astounded by the response," she said. Money poured in from friends, colleagues, and journalists, including big-name news anchors. By late summer, funds stood at around \$50,000. "I was very proud," Logan said. "Someone in Iraq in Jihad's condition didn't normally survive. But he had. He had no big network to take him on ... no one to turn to. So I said, 'Well, he's a journalist and they have organizations....' That's when I contacted CPJ."

Despite Jordan's tightening of visa regulations for Iraqis this year, Ali obtained a temporary permit in July and left Baghdad for the relative safety of Amman to wait out his parole request. While there, he tried to pursue his goal of returning to work as a cameraman by doing some assignments for Al-Iraqiya. He was strong enough to film with a tripod-mounted camera carried by an assistant, but he couldn't walk with a 20-pound-plus Betacam on his shoulder as he once did.

"Now even when I just walk or stand for some time my back hurts and I begin to have a headache," Ali said after his arrival in the Jordanian capital. Just as the prospect of a long and frustrating wait in Amman loomed, the DHS in Washington approved Ali's application.

"First, I am happy because I will get the surgery that will

enable me to work again and live the life I had before I was shot," Ali said in reaction to the news. "And second, I am thrilled that I will finally come to the United States, the developed country that has so much to offer."

Ali is exceptional because of the high-profile media backing his case has attracted. But in one way, he is typical of the many reporters, camera operators, fixers, interpreters, and drivers who have risked their lives by working for foreign or Western-financed news organizations and now want safe passage out of Iraq.

"We unquestionably have a moral obligation to Iraqis at risk because of their association with Americans," said *The New Yorker's* George Packer, who has reported from Iraq and written articles and a play on the United States' debt to Iraqis threatened for their work. "Soldiers, I know, have a code that you don't leave your buddy on the battlefield, and in this case it doesn't matter if that battlefield's an office in the Green Zone or an American news bureau."

For several years after the invasion in 2003, Washington made no special provision to resettle Iraqis, and the backlog of applicants waiting for vetting lengthened as the flood of refugees overwhelmed U.S. missions in the region. "No official in DHS or the State Department wanted to be responsible for letting in the next Mohamed Atta," Packer said, referring to one of the 9/11 hijackers. "There was no professional upside to streamlining the process."

In the fiscal years 2003 to 2006, the annual number of

Iraqis resettled in the United States never exceeded 500. Meanwhile, the number of Iraqi civilians uprooted by the war surged. According to Todd Pierce of the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, some 4.7 million Iraqis have been displaced since 2003, and of those, about 2 million have fled as refugees.

With the increased violence came increased pressure from U.S. humanitarian groups, media, and politicians for an expanded resettlement program, particularly for those Iraqis who had worked for U.S. interests. Media attention and advocacy won results in September 2007, when Congress passed a measure sponsored by Sen. Edward Kennedy and backed by CPJ to help Iraqis under threat for their links to the United States. The Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act (cosponsored by a bipartisan group that included Senators Carl Levin, Sam Brownback, Joseph Lieberman, and Gordon Smith) was signed into law by President George W. Bush in January. It expands the allowable number of visas and speeds up the process for issuing them, and has set a target of receiving 12,000 Iraqi refugees in fiscal year 2008.

First in line under the new legislation are those Iraqis and their families who worked for the U.S. military and government. The act also covers journalists with affiliations to American media. In the spring, the U.S. embassy in Baghdad began accepting in-country refugee applications for the first time.

Word of the new visa program has spread among the local staff of foreign news outlets in Baghdad. "About 70 percent of the workers with me in the bureau applied or are wishing to do so, including journalists, guards, and drivers," said Mudhafer Abbas of *The New York Times*. Despite the improvements, he and other journalists in Baghdad still think they are treated less fairly than others. "It's easier for many other nationalities to get a visa to the States," Abbas told CPJ.

The administration is moving to speed up processing of applications, and the DHS has sent staff on a so-called "circuit rider" program to interview applicants for their security clearance.

Packer said the situation appears to have improved. "Since the Kennedy bill, cases are moving more quickly and more cases are moving," Packer said. "Most of the Iraqis I know who have been trying to get here for the past year have made it. ... I still fault the administration for taking this long, and for continuing to make it difficult, but I want to give credit where credit is due."

For now, Ali can set aside the political obstacles and focus on his health. "All I am thinking of right now is to get the surgery," he said, "and to be able to carry a camera again." ■

*To help an Iraqi journalist in exile, visit [www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org) and click on Journalist Assistance. To learn more about the Iraqi refugee crisis and other ways you can get involved, visit [www.thelistproject.org](http://www.thelistproject.org) and [www.humanrightsfirst.org](http://www.humanrightsfirst.org).*

## Iraq by the Numbers

- 135** journalists and **51** support workers have died in direct connection to their work in Iraq.
- 88** percent of media deaths are Iraqis.
- 70** percent of media deaths were murders; **30** percent were combat-related.
- 79** percent of killings were committed by insurgent forces. U.S. forces were responsible for **12** percent of deaths.
- 62** percent of victims worked for Iraqi news organizations; **38** percent worked for international news organizations.
- 27** employees of Iraq Media Network, which includes Al-Iraqiya and *Al-Sabah* newspaper, have been killed, the highest death toll among news outlets.
- 38** Iraqi journalists have gone into exile due to work-related persecution.

*For a complete database of journalist deaths in Iraq, visit [www.cpj.org/deadly](http://www.cpj.org/deadly).*

# FINDING Elmar's Killers



CPJ/Nina Ognianova

*In Azerbaijan, an editor is jailed after investigating the unsolved murder of a colleague. The case has opened a window into widespread abuses in this tightly controlled nation on the Caspian Sea.*

**By Nina Ognianova**

**A poster of Elmar Huseynov hangs in the office of the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety in Baku.**

## BAKU, Azerbaijan

**Emin Fatullayev is nervous.** His son, the newspaper editor Eynulla Fatullayev, has been in prison for a year, and Emin is convinced the family's ramshackle, one-story brick house on the outskirts of this city is bugged. He leads a visitor to the backyard where, he says, it may be safer to talk. When asked why authorities went to such extremes to prosecute his son, piling up criminal charges from defamation to terrorism and imposing a prison term of eight and half years, Emin lights a cigarette

*Nina Ognianova is CPJ's Europe and Central Asia program coordinator.*

and says it is rooted in a news story—Eynulla's investigation into the 2005 murder of his boss and mentor, the editor Elmar Huseynov.

"Eynulla found Elmar's killers," he whispers, describing his son's reporting trip to Georgia just months before he was arrested.

Huseynov was shot in the stairwell of his apartment building in Baku on March 2, 2005, in what bore the hallmarks of a contract-style murder. The building's entrance light was broken, witnesses told CPJ, and telephone lines in the neighborhood were cut. Huseynov, 37, editor of the newsweekly *Monitor*, was a sharp critic of the administration of President Ilham Aliyev. The weekly closed after his death.

Fatullayev founded the Russian-language weekly *Realny Azerbaijan* as an editorial successor to Huseynov's *Monitor*. He also set out to find his friend's killers. "Until I draw my last breath, I will be investigating this assassination," Fatullayev told the newspaper *Yeni Musavat*.

To mark the second anniversary of Huseynov's murder, Fatullayev published a first-person piece headlined "Lead and Roses," accusing authorities of deliberately obstructing the investigation and ignoring evidence that could lead to the masterminds. He said the assassination was carried out by a criminal group that included several Georgian citizens who had been hired by an unnamed official in Baku. Although Azerbaijani officials publicly claimed to be seeking Georgian citizens in the case, Fatullayev wrote that they had not provided authorities in Georgia with arrest warrants or supporting evidence.

Four days after the piece was published, on March 6, 2007, Fatullayev's mother received an anonymous phone call. As a "wise woman," the caller said, she should "talk sense" into her son or "we will send him to Elmar." Fatullayev reported the threat to police, but it was he who came under intense investigation. Eight months later, he was charged, convicted, and sentenced on four criminal counts—the most serious-sounding a "terrorism" charge based on an article in *Realny Azerbaijan* that analyzed the domestic impact of a U.S. attack on Iran. In the meantime, authorities swept into the paper's offices and its sister publication, the Azeri-language daily *Gündalik Azarbaycan*, and issued citations for fire-code violations that effectively shut down both papers.

The case encapsulates the breadth of press freedom abuses in this oil-rich country on the Caspian Sea. A CPJ investigation has found at least eight other serious violent attacks against reporters and editors in three years, not one of which has resulted in an arrest. The government has jailed at least 11 journalists under false pretenses and has moved in to suspend or close at least four critical news outlets in the last five years.

With Fatullayev behind bars and other journalists under attack, there is virtually no ongoing scrutiny of the Huseynov murder in the press. The secretive official investigation has yielded no arrests, and CPJ found no tangible evidence of progress. While Azerbaijani authorities have repeatedly said that they have enlisted the help of international police in arresting suspects in Huseynov's slaying, the public record does not substantiate those claims.

**I**n a recent meeting with CPJ, Aliyev administration officials said two ethnic Azerbaijani citizens of Georgia—Tair Hubanov and Teymuraz Aliyev—are the main suspects in the Huseynov case. "Azerbaijan remains fully committed to solving this terrible crime," said Arastun Mehdiyev, deputy head of the Department for Public-Political Issues.

But he and Vugar Aliyev, head of the Section on Press and Information Bodies, said Interpol, the international police agency, bears the primary responsibility for apprehending the two men. The officials declined to discuss what Azerbaijani authorities themselves are doing to obtain the arrests, referring questions to domestic investigators at the Ministry of National Security (MNB). The



CPJ/Nina Ognianova

**Baku as seen from the Caspian Sea.**

**One editor is jailed on a series of fabricated charges. Others are under attack. And the Huseynov murder investigation shows no sign of progress.**

MNB did not respond to CPJ's written requests for comment.

When Huseynov was killed, President Aliyev immediately condemned the crime, calling it a barbaric act aimed at destabilizing the country ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled that fall. He pledged the murder would be solved within 40 days and invited the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and Turkish agents to join the probe. He soon characterized the crime as a terrorist act, a categorization that would prove significant in the handling of the case.

Pursuant to the "terror" designation, the MNB took control

of the case from the prosecutor general's office in April 2005. That month, several suspects were briefly detained in Baku but were freed for lack of evidence. In May, authorities publicly named the Georgian citizens Hubanov and Aliyev as the main suspects but gave no information about their purported roles. Aliyev has denied involvement; Hubanov has not been located for comment. In the three years since, the MNB has not released photos of the two wanted suspects or disclosed any information about them or their alleged roles.

Azerbaijan reportedly filed requests for the extradition of Hubanov and Aliyev, but on July 28, 2005, Georgia's prosecutor general said he would not grant any request without being presented with sufficient evidence, the independent news agency Turan reported. Officials in the Georgian prosecutor general's office did not respond to CPJ's written requests for information.

In August 2005, Azerbaijani media reported that Hubanov and Aliyev were being sought by Interpol. In one of President Aliyev's last public statements on the case, he told journalists at a November 2006 press conference that "the murderers are wanted, they have been identified." As reported by the regional news Web site *EurasiaNet*, the president added: "However they are not in the country, which makes it difficult to detain them. We are waiting for Interpol to find them to bring them to justice."

But Interpol's actual involvement is not nearly so clear cut. The agency's public database of wanted fugitives does not list either of the suspects identified by Azerbaijani officials. In a written statement, Interpol said it does not comment on specific cases but noted that it issues notices for



After President Ilham Aliyev called the Huseynov murder a terrorism case, security police took over the probe.

AP/Mindaugas Kubis

wanted fugitives, known as "red notices," only after member countries provide "details of a valid arrest warrant." Interpol also said that while it assists member countries in locating suspects, it does not itself send officers to make arrests.

Interpol said a member country can request that a fugitive notice not be publicized. That would seem unlikely, however, given repeated public statements by Azerbaijani officials identifying the suspects and asserting that Interpol was looking for them.

Domestically, MNB investigators failed to follow up on

basic leads. Huseynov's wife, Rushana, for example, said MNB investigators were uninterested in her description of a man she had seen following the editor before the slaying. When she approached MNB officials, most recently in the fall of 2006, she said that "they refused to record my testimony or follow up on my accounts. They tried to persuade me that I was wrong and to pressure me to not publicize my conversation with them." Rushana Huseynov, growing fearful, fled the country.

Ennulla Fatullayev was becoming frustrated. He decided to travel to the Georgian capital of Tbilisi with three other journalists in October 2006 to look for the suspects identified by Azerbaijani officials. In a press conference after their return, the journalists said they had met with Teymuraz Aliyev, who was living openly in Tbilisi, and had taken his photo, which they distributed.

The MNB soon questioned the journalists about their trip. The agency disputed that the man in the photos was Aliyev and warned the four to stop their investigation, according to local press reports. Fatullayev pressed forward nonetheless, giving a series of interviews to the local media. In a November 17, 2006, interview with the independent daily *Ekho*, Fatullayev cast doubt on the authorities' good faith in solving Huseynov's murder. "Law enforcement structures are behaving quite dubiously," he told the newspaper. "As we uncover something, they try to cover up the tracks."

A month after "Lead and Roses" ran in *Realny Azerbaijan*, Fatullayev was imprisoned. Since then, the lack of investigative progress and the absence of information have opened the case to wide and sometimes head-spinning spec-

ulation. Ibrahim Bayandurlu, a reporter with the independent Russian-language daily *Zerkalo*, accompanied Fatullayev to Georgia but came away with a different theory than his colleague. He believes Russian security services were behind the killing as a way to damage Azerbaijan's image with the West.

Mehman Aliyev, director of the Turan news agency, who has followed the case closely, told CPJ he thinks the murder was organized domestically by would-be coup plotters who served in the presidential guard of the late Heydar Aliyev, father of the current leader. The editor said an MNB official told him that the former guard members were planning to kill prominent journalists and activists to create societal unrest. Elements of this theory have been reported in the local media.

And at one point, in July 2006, an ex-military official even "confessed" to killing Huseynov on the orders of former Economic Development Minister Farkhad Aliyev. The statement was made in open court by Haji Mammadov, a former Ministry of Internal Affairs officer, during his trial on unrelated murder and kidnapping charges. The statement was widely discredited within weeks, though, after the economic minister denied involvement and no evidence emerged to support the assertion. Mammadov has not been charged in the Huseynov case.

It's little wonder then that Huseynov's father, Sabir, appears frustrated when asked about the probe. "What investigation? Three years have passed! What investigation can we talk about?" he says during a visit to his son's grave. "All they do is confuse people."

His daughter-in-law and grandson having left the country in fear for their safety, Sabir Huseynov reminisces about the family he hasn't seen in more than a year and the son he will never see again. "Elmar was not afraid of anything or anyone. He was calling things with their real names. I used to read his magazine and would sometimes tell him: 'Elmar, maybe you should tone this down a bit, huh?' And he would say: 'I can't. It doesn't go this way. I would write it as it is or not at all.' You know, I loved my son, of course. But I loved him twice as much because of *Monitor*."



Arastun Mehdiyev, deputy head of the Department for Public-Political Issues, says his country "remains fully committed" to solving Huseynov's murder.

CPJ/Nina Ognianova



CPJ/Nina Ognianova

A customer at a state-run newspaper kiosk in Baku.

Ilham Aliyev effectively inherited the presidency from his father in 2003 and has since consolidated his position as a supreme executive—maintaining authority over the cabinet, the legislature, the military, and the judiciary. Embattled and fragmented opposition politicians have posed little challenge.

Aliyev is bolstered by his country's strategic importance to the United States and Europe. Oil in the Caspian Sea basin provides an alternative to Russian and Persian Gulf supplies, and Azerbaijan is a hub in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Bordering Iran, Azerbaijan provides the United States with a stable, strategic partner in the region. These interests have tended to mute Western reaction to the administration's human rights abuses.

Domestically, Aliyev's success is built in good part on his clampdown on the

independent media. Television—the most influential news medium in the country—is under the administration's control either directly or through pro-Aliyev owners. The only independent channel with national reach, ANS, has toned down its criticism of the administration since the state media regulator—the National Television and Radio Council—suspended its license in November 2006. Once back on the air five months later, local journalists told CPJ, ANS changed its editorial content; it no longer gives live airtime, for instance, to opposition politicians.

Low-circulation print media have more editorial freedom, but their impact on public opinion is small. And with authorities cracking down on critical journalists, fewer reporters are willing to cover sensitive topics, the most dangerous of which is reporting on Aliyev and his family.

Disgruntled officials use criminal defamation charges frequently, demanding jail time and high damages. The government has resisted persistent calls by international organizations, including the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, to decriminalize libel laws.

The most critical journalists have also been subjected to violence. Since Huseynov was gunned down in early 2005, CPJ has documented abductions, beatings, stabbings, and other physical attacks against eight

## Azerbaijan says Interpol is responsible for arresting suspects in the Huseynov case. The record does not substantiate that claim.



## Fatullayev was convicted of terrorism for a story that analyzed the consequences of a U.S. military strike against Iran.

independent and pro-opposition journalists. The attacks are all unsolved.

Uzeyir Jafarov, who covered military issues for *Gündalik Azarbaycan* before it was shuttered, was attacked by two men who struck him on the head several times with a metal object as he was leaving his office on April 20, 2007. Shortly before the beating, he had written articles about corruption in the Azerbaijani defense ministry. Jafarov sustained serious head injuries, for which he was hospitalized. He said he recognized one of his attackers as an officer from the Yasamal District Police Department in Baku and gave the names of five witnesses to police. The witnesses told him that police never approached them. Instead, Minister of Internal Affairs Ramil Usubov said publicly that Jafarov had injured himself. “How can police investigate when the interior minister himself is practically instructing them not to?” Jafarov said.

In May 2006, five men in Baku abducted and beat Bakhaddin Khaziyev, editor-in-chief of the opposition daily *Bizim Yol*. The assailants drove their car over his legs, leaving him with serious injuries and a lasting limp. There have been no arrests or any apparent developments in the investigation. “When I was attacked, both the president and the minister of internal affairs condemned the crime,” Khaziyev said. “Minister Usubov even said that, for him, solving my case is a matter of honor. But, unfortunately, two years after, there are no results.” Khaziyev said he regularly seeks information from Baku prosecutors and police but gets a standard answer: “The investigation is ongoing.” Shortly before the attack, Khaziyev published articles in *Bizim Yol* criticizing high-ranking MNB officials.

Hakimeldostu Mehdiyev, Nakhchivan correspondent of *Yeni Musavat*, said he was attacked by authorities themselves. On September 22, 2007, several agents with the MNB in Nakhchivan forced him into a sedan, took him to their station in the village of Jalilkand, beat him for seven hours, and warned him to stop his critical reporting, he recounted for CPJ. The next day, police raided his home, arrested him on charges of disobeying law

enforcement officials, and took him to a district judge who immediately ordered him jailed for 15 days. In the weeks before his ordeal, Mehdiyev reported on human rights abuses, economic crimes, and corruption in Nakhchivan. He also did a commentary on economic woes and labor abuses that aired on the Azerbaijani service of the U.S. government-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Convinced that the case cannot be properly addressed on the local level, Mehdiyev sent appeals to President Aliyev, the prosecutor general's office, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the MNB, and the ombudsman for human rights. “They haven't even answered my letters,” Mehdiyev said.

**A**zerbaijani authorities have proved efficient at one thing: jailing journalists who work for independent or opposition media. Over the past two years, CPJ research shows, Azerbaijan became the leading jailer of reporters in Europe and Central Asia. At one time in 2007, at least 10 critical reporters and editors were jailed on trumped-up charges such as defamation, drug possession, hooliganism, and terrorism. President Aliyev pardoned several late last year in the face of an international outcry, but at least four remain in prison today.

The government has sought to isolate and keep them from public view. CPJ's formal requests to visit the jailed journalists were met with a series of vague and evasive responses: a government fax machine was out of paper; the request was forwarded to the wrong mailbox; the official in charge of making the decision was out of town. The requests, while never officially rejected, were effectively rebuffed during CPJ's week-long trip in May.

The brothers Genimet and Sakit Zakhidov—journalists with *Azadlyg* newspaper—are among those in jail. Baku police arrested Sakit Zakhidov, a prominent reporter, poet, and satirist who wrote under the name Mirza Sakit, in June 2006 for alleged heroin possession. Sakit denied the charge and said a police officer placed the drug in his pocket during a staged arrest, but authorities did not question the officer. In October of that year, a Baku court sentenced Sakit to three years in prison.



Sabir Huseynov, at the grave of his son in Baku, says he is frustrated with the investigation. “All they do is confuse people,” he says.

CPJ/Nina Ognianova

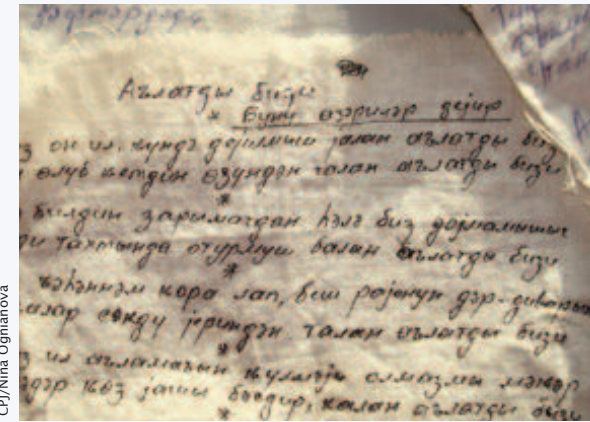
Three days prior to the arrest, Executive Secretary Ali Akhmedov of the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan party publicly urged authorities to silence Sakit. “No government official or member of parliament has avoided his slanders. Someone should put an end to it,” *EurasiaNet* quoted Akhmedov as saying.

Rena Zakhidov, Sakit's wife, said her husband's writing had long angered authorities. His latest book of satirical poems about life in Azerbaijan, titled *Ey Dadi-Bidad!* (Woe Is Me!), is banned in the country. “No bookstore or vendor would carry it, so I keep the copies here,” Rena said, pointing to boxes stacked in her living room. Rena, who lives in poverty with her five children in a dilapidated house outside Baku, told CPJ that her 12-year-old son, Jahandar, has been harassed by school authorities because of his father's work, and that she has been turned down from every job she has sought. “Last week, I applied for a job at a pastry shop; they liked my pastries,” Rena said. “But this week they changed their mind. They told me: ‘You understand, don't you? We just can't [hire you].’” Rena said Sakit continues to write in prison—on pieces of cloth he tears off his bed sheets and pants.

In another strange scenario, authorities arrested Genimet Zakhidov, *Azadlyg's* editor, on November 7, 2007, after a man and a woman assailed him on the street outside his Baku office building. Zakhidov managed to fend them off with the help of passersby, but the pair went on to file a police complaint. On March 7, 2008, a Baku district court sentenced Zakhidov to four years in prison on charges of hooliganism and inflicting bodily harm, despite contradictory statements from prosecution witness and the absence of any documented injuries, Zakhidov's lawyer, Elchin Sadygov, told CPJ. Eyewitnesses for the defense were barred from testifying, he said. Nonetheless, Genimet Zakhidov was sentenced to the maximum penalty under the law.

But the Fatullayev case, in particular, illustrates how far the government is willing to go to silence reporters. Authorities creatively used a wide array of criminal statutes—articles of defamation, incitement of ethnic and religious hatred, terrorism, and tax evasion—to ensure Fatullayev remained in custody for a long time.

The terrorism and ethnic hatred charges, which account for eight years of the sentence, stem from a March 30, 2007, *Realny Azerbaijan* article headlined “The Aliyevs Go to War,” which analyzed possible consequences for Azerbaijan if the United States were to wage war with Iran. The piece sharply criticized President Aliyev's foreign policy. “There were many articles similar to [Fatullayev's] already published in



The writings of Sakit Zakhidov, on torn clothes and bed sheets, have been smuggled out of prison.

CPJ/Nina Ognianova

the Azerbaijani and the Russian press—and we presented them in court,” Fatullayev's defense lawyer, Isakhan Ashurov, told CPJ. “Yet only Eynulla was put on trial.” Ashurov said the terrorism indictment alleged that international businesspeople and diplomatic officials had complained about the story. Flimsy as that assertion might have been, no such witnesses even testified. Instead, Ashurov said, the court based its verdict on the testimony of a series of

government employees who said Fatullayev's article “stirred their emotions” and “frightened” them.

The defamation charge stemmed from an Internet posting attributed to Fatullayev—which the editor denies having written—that said Azerbaijanis were responsible for the 1992 massacre of residents of the Nagorno-Karabakh town of Khodzjali. “No one could prove that he made the statement. How could they? The whole case was bogus,” said Ashurov, pointing out that under the law an entire class of people cannot be libeled in the first place. “The honor and dignity of Azerbaijanis, as a people, are not protected by Azerbaijan's laws.”

Ashurov said the tax evasion charge was not supported by the evidence, either. The case was put together by prosecutors while Fatullayev was jailed on other charges, making it very difficult to collect records to mount a defense. In June, the Supreme Court of Azerbaijan upheld Fatullayev's convictions—an unsurprising result, said Ashurov. “Our courts lack independence. ... The courts in Azerbaijan are nothing but an empty symbol.”

Shut down by the domestic courts, Ashurov and the Fatullayev family have persuaded the Strasbourg-based European Court of Human Rights to review the case. They are asking the court to overturn Fatullayev's convictions and pay him damages. As a member of the Council of Europe and a signer of the European Convention on Human Rights, Azerbaijan is bound by the court's decision. “Strasbourg,” the editor's mother, Gulshan Fatullayeva, said, “is our only hope.”

The Aliyev administration, it seems clear, has little interest in addressing the press crisis created by violence, impunity, and false imprisonment. The troubles, top officials told CPJ, rest with journalists themselves. “One of the main problems of Azerbaijani journalists is that those who enter the profession lack professionalism,” said Mehdiyev, deputy head of the Department for Public-Political Issues. “Most of their problems stem from that.” ■

Hear Nina Ognianova's audio report at [www.cpj.org/elmar/audio](http://www.cpj.org/elmar/audio).



# The Smiling Oppressor

*Tunisia wants you to believe it is a progressive nation that protects human rights. It is, in fact, a police state that aggressively silences anyone who challenges President Ben Ali.*

By Joel Campagna

The capital, Tunis, welcomes tourists and Western delegations with a warm embrace. Critical writers such as Slim Boukhdhir, inset, are harassed and jailed.

## SFAX, Tunisia

**A** large photo of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali smiled assuredly from the whitewashed façade of Sfax Prison, where Slim Boukhdhir was serving a one-year jail term. Officially, the 37-year-old journalist was behind bars for insulting a police officer at a checkpoint

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in Sfax, Tunisia's second largest city. But in the Orwellian reality of this sunny North African nation, Boukhdhir's incarceration had little to do with disrespecting police and everything to do with offending the man in the photo.

Boukhdhir, a one-time arts and culture writer with the pro-government press, did what few Tunisian journalists dare: He criticized Ben Ali and his family members, who dominate political and economic life in Tunisia, a Mediterranean country of 10 million. Boukhdhir's freelance pieces, published online and for foreign publications, accused Ben

## The government uses elaborate measures to stifle dissent while insulating itself from international criticism.

Ali of nepotism such as funneling state money to a private school run by a niece. Boukhdhir quickly attracted the attention of the authorities. He was dismissed from his day job at the newspaper *Akhbar al-Jumhuriyya* under government pressure, was refused a passport, and on one occasion was assaulted by secret police in downtown Tunis shortly after writing an online piece criticizing the business practices of Ben Ali's son-in-law. Undeterred, Boukhdhir kept writing.

So, in November 2007, the Ben Ali government sent him a stronger message. As the journalist headed from Sfax to Tunis after being told he could at last collect his passport, police stopped his cab outside the city and ordered him out of the car. The officers accused Boukhdhir of insulting them—a charge the writer vigorously denied—and then took him to a police station where they punched him repeatedly in the head and accused him of being an American agent, the journalist told CPJ.

The government said Boukhdhir's arrest had nothing to do with journalism. A week later, after a farcical trial, he was convicted of "insulting a public employee" and refusing to hand over identification to a police officer. A witness told Boukhdhir's family that police falsified his statements

CPJ/Joel Campagna

to incriminate the journalist. The judge at Boukhdhir's trial prohibited the government's witnesses from being cross-examined. The one-year sentence was not only the maximum allowed by law, it was unheard of for such an offense, defense lawyers said.

"They sent him to prison in order to terrorize him," said human rights lawyer Mohammed Abbou, himself jailed in 2005 for online articles criticizing Ben Ali. Following an intensive international campaign by journalists and press freedom groups, including CPJ, Tunisian authorities released Boukhdhir in July, citing good behavior, but his imprisonment illustrates the harsh and elaborate measures Tunisia's government uses to stifle media dissent while trying to insulate itself from international criticism.

**K**nown across the world for its stunning beaches and tourist locales, Tunisia quietly operates a police state at home. The print press does not criticize the president and is largely paralyzed by self-censorship. The few critical voices who do write on the Internet, for foreign publications, and for low-circulation opposition weeklies are regularly harassed and marginalized by the Tunisian authorities.

Tunisia's press code outlines an array of coverage restrictions—including outright bans on offending the president, disturbing public order, and publishing what the government deems "false news." While such laws have been used to prosecute journalists over the years, authorities prefer to use more subtle tactics to keep those voices in check, a CPJ investigation found. They control the registration of print media and licensing of broadcasters, refusing permission to critical outlets. They control the distribution of government subsidies and public sector advertising, thus wielding an economic weapon. Outspoken newspapers are subject to confiscation by police. Critical online news sites, those belonging to international rights groups, and the popular video-sharing site YouTube are blocked by the government.

Independent journalists, some of whom double as human rights activists, have also been targets of harassment. Their phone lines are cut, they receive anonymous threats, they are placed under police surveillance, they are denied the right to travel outside the country, and even their movements inside the country have been curtailed. Those who exceed the authorities' acceptable boundaries for criticism are targeted with harsher measures such as imprisonment or violent attack. In one notorious 2005 case, Christophe Boltanski of the French daily *Libération* was pepper sprayed, beaten, and stabbed by four unidentified men in the highly patrolled diplomatic quarter of Tunis. The attack came just days before a U.N.-sponsored summit on the Internet—and right after Boltanski wrote an



A banner of Ben Ali dominates Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis.

CPJ/Joel Campagna

article describing persecution of human rights activists. In strikingly similar circumstances, Tunisian journalist Riad Ben Fadhel was wounded in a 2000 drive-by shooting outside his home in Carthage—a spot within miles of the presidential palace, one of the most secure areas in the country. Days before, he had written an article for *Le Monde* urging Ben Ali to step down after his term expired.

Tunisia and Morocco have jailed more journalists than any other nation in the Arab world since 2002. Tunisian authorities have used charges unrelated to journalism as a way to protect themselves from international scrutiny. (Such charges extend beyond journalism. In February, authorities imprisoned comedian Hedi Ould Baballah on what were widely viewed as trumped-up drug charges after he imitated Ben Ali in an unflattering skit.) “There are a lot of invisible, indirect pressures,” said one veteran Tunisian journalism teacher, who spoke only on condition of anonymity. “There are no official orders to close papers down or jail journalists. But you ask yourself, where is the independent press?”

Internationally, the government employs an aggressive public relations strategy. The regime provides expense-paid junkets to regional journalists to cover official events such as the annual commemoration of the November 1987 coup that brought Ben Ali to power, journalists told CPJ. The Cairo-based Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) reported in 2007 that Egyptian journalists were paid to produce stories praising Ben Ali’s “democratic reforms” and “leadership skills.”

Authorities aggressively counter criticism at international forums by recruiting “spoilers.” In September 2007, one such group sought to dominate the discussion at a Johns Hopkins University event featuring journalist and human rights activist Sihem Bensedrine. When criticism is published in international newspapers, government spokes-



**Dalinda Boukhdhir, wife of the formerly imprisoned writer, and their two children in Sfax.**

people respond swiftly. “Since President Ben Ali’s accession to power in 1987, Tunisia has implemented a progressive but irreversible reform process aiming at anchoring democracy, strengthening the rule of law, and promoting and protecting human rights,” wrote Taoufik Chebbi, press counselor to the Tunisian embassy in Washington, in a letter to the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* that followed a CPJ account of press freedom abuses. Chebbi said reforms have “spectacularly changed” the political landscape.

Those changes, however, do not include direct engagement with those critical of the government’s record. Top officials, from Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi to Interior Minister Rafik Belhaj Kacem, ignored numerous requests from CPJ to meet in Tunisia in June and July to discuss press freedom abuses.

## What Congress Says

**Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali enjoys strong bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress. Here is a sampling of remarks by members of Congress.**

“Mr. President, I rise today to congratulate the people of Tunisia on the 45th anniversary of their nation’s independence. Throughout our long friendship, the United States and Tunisia have shared a mutual commitment to freedom, democracy, and the peaceful resolution of conflict.”

—U.S. Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., March 19, 2001  
*Congressional Record*

“As a friend of Tunisia, I again congratulate the Tunisian people on 47 years of independence and would like to share with my colleagues the insightful words of President Ben Ali, describing the reasons for Tunisia’s success in building a democratic society: ‘Tolerance is at the heart of our social traditions as well as a characteristic of Tunisia’s history. Pluralism, whether religious, cultural, or political, is ingrained in our society.’”

—U.S. Rep. Maurice Hinchey, D-N.Y., March 20, 2003  
*Congressional Record*

Seen as a bulwark against Islamist militancy in North Africa, Ben Ali enjoys strong relations with the United States and Europe. The U.S. State Department and President George W. Bush have occasionally taken the government to task for its human rights record, but Tunisia is a trusted partner in the U.S. war on terrorism and has impressed U.S. supporters with its economic growth, support for women’s rights, and political stability. Many of its U.S. supporters are members of Congress, particularly those serving on the recently formed Tunisia Caucus, which is tasked with boosting bilateral relations. The Tunisian government regularly welcomes Congressional delegations to the sunny capital of Tunis. As members of Congress push for closer U.S.-Tunisian ties, they typically remain silent about Tunisia’s poor human rights and press freedom record while allowing Tunisia’s



**Independent journalist Taoufik Ben Brik says the Tunisian government “murdered the profession.” A critic of Ben Ali, Ben Brik now writes for international news outlets.**

state-controlled press to exploit their visits for propaganda.

In the latest example, U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, a Democrat from Minnesota, praised Tunisia during a July visit as a “voice of moderation and wisdom in the world,” a statement that was trumpeted in the pro-government press. Tunisian journalists and analysts say this type of political support is the foreign assistance the regime wants most.

(In a piece published on *The Hill* Web site, McCollum said she spoke privately with human rights groups but her trip focused “on security cooperation and counterterrorism.”)

Tunisia’s ties with France, its leading trade partner, run deeper still. Like predecessor Jacques Chirac, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has warm relations with Ben Ali, declaring during an April visit to Tunis: “In a country where I come as a friend and I am received as a friend, I do not see why I would take it upon myself to give lessons.” Although the European Union occasionally criticizes Tunisia on human rights, its political and economic interests override concerns about the government’s human rights abuses.

Today, many of Tunisia’s skilled journalists lament the sorry state of their profession, noting the gap between their country and neighbors such as Algeria and Morocco, where a vocal press has taken hold despite severe government repression. In several cases documented by CPJ, prominent Tunisian journalists have left the country to find work with international news organizations.

“They used to assassinate journalists in Algeria, but in Tunisia they murdered the profession,” said Taoufik Ben Brik, a 48-year-old independent journalist, referring to a murderous campaign by armed groups in Algeria in the 1990s. A harsh critic of Ben Ali, Ben Brik now writes for international news outlets.

It was only over the last four years that Slim Boukhdhir, once a veteran of the pro-government press, turned a critical eye

“President Ben Ali has worked tirelessly to ensure a free society, greater democratic openness, and complete respect for human rights in Tunisia. ... Mr. Speaker, I hope my colleagues will join me in recognizing President Ben Ali during his visit as a critical figure in the enhancement of positive global relations with the Middle East.”

—U.S. Rep. Mark Steven Kirk, R-Ill. Member, Tunisia Caucus  
February 10, 2004  
*Congressional Record*

“Mr. Speaker, I would like to extend my most heartfelt welcome to President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, president of Tunisia, on his visit to the U.S. on February 18, 2004. President Ben Ali has been an unstinting friend and ally in the war on terror. ... It has been the hallmark of the honorable Ben Ali’s tenure as president of Tunisia to institute meaningful and lasting reforms in several spheres.”

—U.S. Rep. Nick Rahall II, D-W. Va.  
April 21, 2004  
*Congressional Record*

“Tunisia holds a strategic position between Europe, Africa, and the Middle East and it represents the voice of moderation and wisdom in the world, a voice we must listen to.”

—U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn. Member, Tunisia Caucus  
July 2008  
*Tunis Afrique Presse*

toward the Ben Ali administration. By the time he was jailed, Boukhdhir was writing several times a week for officially banned Web sites such as the popular *Tunisnews*, and occasionally for the opposition weekly *Al-Mawkif* and the London-based daily *Al-Quds al-Arabi*. “Slim represents what they are afraid of,” said long-time independent journalist Neziha Rejiba. “He went from being an ordinary journalist in Tunisia to an independent one. What happened to him is a way [for the government] to teach others.”

Ben Ali has honed this containment strategy over two decades. The modern republic of Tunisia has known only two presidents since its independence from France in 1956. Habib Bourguiba, the nationalist hero and “president for life,” led Tunisia’s modernization and development over the course of 31 years. Under his autocratic hand, the country was hardly a liberal democracy, but he did permit a modest amount of political discourse in opposition and independent newspapers. As Bourguiba’s leadership became more erratic in his final years in power, the leeway for critical debate shrank as closings and censorship of newspapers grew.

When then-Prime Minister Ben Ali deposed Bourguiba, Tunisians felt a sense of optimism as political prisoners were freed and elections were promised. “From 1987 to 1989 there was a kind of [political] spring in Tunisia,” said Rachid Kechana, the editor of Tunisia’s opposition weekly newspaper *Al-Mawkif*. “There were elections coming up and people thought they were experiencing pluralism. But it was a deception. After this, the state became more authoritarian and the press was the first casualty.”

Ben Ali cracked down first on Islamist opposition and then on anyone who disagreed with the regime. Critical independent and opposition newspapers such as *Le Maghreb*, *Badil*, and the Islamist weekly *Al-Fajr* were shuttered outright or forced to close under government pressure. The publisher of *Al-Rai*, for example, closed the independent weekly under pressure after Rejiba wrote a column questioning Ben Ali’s political skills and expressing doubts about his democratic intentions.

Ben Ali’s government has largely succeeded in taking the life out of the country’s journalism. The mainstream print press is dominated by pro-government publications that offer fawning coverage of Ben Ali, praising him as an architect of change and a promoter of liberty. A 2007 U.S. State Department report found that even nominally private media take direction from senior government officials and that “all media were subject to significant governmental pressure over subject matter.” Front pages feature a daily photo of a beneficent Ben Ali, sometimes meeting with a foreign dignitary and sometimes simply in portrait. The inside pages are heavy with social news and sports. The

**The government licenses one private television station and three radio broadcasters. All are owned by business interests close to the regime.**



Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, right, greets French President Nicolas Sarkozy in Tunis in April.

occasional criticism is general and avoids mentioning officials by name or faulting government policies. In June, as Tunisians in the southern town of Redeyef were demonstrating against unemployment and the rising cost of living, front page news in the daily press was dominated by Tunisian students who passed their baccalaureate exams.

The Interior Ministry registers all print media, denying approval to titles perceived as independent. This decade, the government set up the National Frequencies Agency to license private broadcasters, but its approval criteria have never been disclosed, and several independent applicants have never even gotten a response from the agency, CPJ found. The agency has licensed one television station and three radio broadcasters, but all are owned by business interests close to the regime. Even so, the licenses bar the stations from broadcasting any political news except bulletins from the government news agency.

“Always on the minds of journalists is whether the authorities will accept what they write. They never talk about what the readers want. Sometimes there is criticism in the daily press, but it’s not directed at the main decision-makers,” said one senior journalist working for the pro-government press. He spoke on condition he not be identified, citing fear of retribution.

The fear is well-grounded. The government, through the Tunisian External Communication Agency (ATCE), distributes advertising from government agencies and publicly owned companies, and punishes outspoken newspapers by withholding advertising, journalists told CPJ. Private adver-

tisers typically follow suit when the government pulls advertising, these journalists said. The ATCE operates opaquely: It doesn’t disclose guidelines on how it doles out ads, and ATCE Director General Oussama Romdhani did not respond to CPJ’s repeated calls seeking comment.

Despite this long record of hindering the press, Ben Ali frequently issues disingenuous calls for an end to self-censorship. “We have constantly considered freedom of expression as a fundamental human right,” Reuters quoted Ben Ali as saying in May. “We reiterate our call to redouble efforts ... to diversify and enrich spaces of dialogue in the various media to guarantee a developed and audacious national information ... away from all forms of self-censorship and external censorship.”

Raouf Cheikhrouhou, manager of the Dar al-Sabah media company and one of the few pro-government news executives who agreed to meet with CPJ, defended his pub-



A newspaper kiosk on Avenue Habib Bourguiba.

lications and said they were independent. Asked why his newspapers, which include the influential 40,000-circulation daily *Al-Sabah*, do not look into government corruption or criticize high-level officials, he blamed the law. “Here in Tunisia there is a press law and you cannot go outside the law,” he said. “Under the law we cannot offend the president. Tunisia is not Europe. It is an Arab, Muslim country. ... We are going step by step and I think the press is going the right way.”

When pro-government papers do undertake aggressive journalism, it often entails smearing independent reporters and activists. Newspapers such as the leading circulation daily *Echourouk*, the weekly *Assarih*, and the weekly *Al-Hadath* frequently publish baseless personal attacks on journalists, calling them “traitors” and “foreign agents.” Editors from these papers did not respond to CPJ’s calls seeking comment.

At the other end of the spectrum from the well-funded pro-government press are tiny opposition papers and online publications that face enormous obstacles. Collectively, their circulation is about 30,000 copies weekly (the pro-government tabloid daily *Echourouk* reportedly distributes 80,000 alone), they cost more to buy, and they all face limits in their political coverage.

In practice, only two opposition newspapers—the weeklies *Al-Mawkif*, which belongs to the Progressive Democratic Party, and *Mouatinoun*, affiliated with the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties—have what could be considered a consistently aggressive editorial policy. The others depend on government subsidies to the tune of about 90,000 Tunisian dinars (US\$75,000) annually, are handed lucrative advertising from government agencies and public-owned companies, and are politically tame as a result.

Rachid Kechana, the affable editor of *Al-Mawkif*, has been waging a constant battle to publish his weekly since it reappeared on newsstands in 2001 following a seven-year hiatus. Kechana, with the help of five staffers, fills his paper’s pages with stories not found in the rest of the press—reports from human rights groups criticizing the government’s record, articles about questionable land deals by government officials, and stories about rising food prices. He has done it all on a shoestring budget. Unlike most other opposition papers, *Al-Mawkif* doesn’t receive government subsidies (under the law, parties must have active representatives in parliament and his does not), and has been largely blacklisted by advertisers. As a result, the paper survives on its newsstand sales, and Kechana, who doubles as Tunis correspondent for the London-based daily *Al-Hayat*, is unable to take a salary.

Still, the paper has grown from four to 12 pages, its print run has increased tenfold to 10,000 copies, and it has grown bolder in its news coverage. With the paper’s rising influence has come increased government pressure—and that has caused new problems. Dependent on newsstand sales, *Al-Mawkif* can be crippled financially whenever the government decides to interfere. “Every week, we have to calculate the risk. When we choose a headline, we have to think how much it will antagonize the government,” Kechana said.

The paper found out in March, when it ran a series of tough stories on human rights abuses, a questionable deal involving a businessman close to Ben Ali, and the long-shot presidential candidacy of the Progressive Democratic Party’s head, Nejjib Chebbi. Soon after, copies of the newspaper began to disappear from kiosks. Over a four-week period in March and April, vendors reported that secret police scooped up copies in bulk, Kechana said. *Al-Mawkif* also discovered large numbers of copies undistributed in the offices of its circulation contractor, Sotupresse. *Al-Mawkif* records show a drastic drop in sales, reaching a low of 744 copies in one week. Sotupresse Director General

**You can spot the offices of *Kalima* by the security agents planted in plastic chairs opposite the building 24 hours a day.**

Saleh Nouri denied charges of withholding copies, saying his company operates “freely.” Tunisian officials would not meet with CPJ to comment on the case.

At the same time copies were being taken out of circulation, *Al-Mawkif* found itself the target of a 500,000-dinar (US\$415,000) lawsuit brought by five Tunisian cooking oil distributors. The companies claimed the paper published false news in an opinion piece calling for an investigation into news reports that contaminated cooking oil was illegally exported to Algeria. The suit was brought by the companies although they were not named in the article and the commentary was based on a report in the Algerian daily *Al-Khabar*. Hassan al-Thabeet, the lawyer representing the companies, said they contacted him separately to file the suit and had not acted in concert. He declined other comment.

The outspoken weekly *Mouatinoun*, founded in 2007 as the mouthpiece of the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties, faces similar political and economic obstacles. The avuncular party head, Mustafa Ben Jaafar, who is also the paper’s director, publishes with a volunteer staff from a four-room apartment in downtown Tunis, selling about 1,000 copies per issue. He says he can get no advertising from public companies and that newspaper vendors hide his paper in their kiosks. Plainclothes security agents sit outside the apartment building on watch. “They are there 24 hours a day,” Ben Jaafar said. “This is a form of intimidation for ordinary citizens.”

For the image-conscious government, marginalizing these papers is preferable to shutting them down. “The government needs *Al-Mawkif* to show the world that it has an open media—when in reality it is completely restricted,” says Lotfi Hajji, Tunis correspondent for Al-Jazeera.

**Y**ou can spot the offices of *Kalima*, just off of Al-Hurriya Street, by the security agents planted in plastic chairs opposite the building 24 hours a day. Secret police aside, *Kalima* is not your average Tunisian news outlet. Founded in 2000 by the journalist-activist Sihem Bensedrine, *Kalima* publishes biting critiques in Arabic and French of Ben Ali and his family, as well as stories about torture and human rights abuses. Its cramped, poorly lit office also serves as headquarters for the National Council for Liberties in Tunisia (CNLT), a local human rights group, and the press freedom group the Observatory for the Freedom of Press, Publishing, and Creation.

This year, for the fifth time in nine years, Bensedrine sought permission to produce a print edition of *Kalima*, but officials at the Ministry of Interior would not accept her application. *Kalima* still prints a few hundred unauthorized copies on a photocopy machine, but it mainly publishes on

the Internet and by e-mail. The site is blocked in Tunisia, although it is widely read abroad.

*Kalima* is part of a small but growing samizdat electronic media that has emerged beyond the censors’ reach. Its aggressive approach to news and political commentary has made the paper the target of intensive harassment in the form of threats, intimidation, violent attacks, and jail. Bensedrine and Editor-in-Chief Neziha Rejiba say their offices are regularly burglarized; they return to work in the mornings to find computers turned on and files printed out. “They want to show us we are not in a secure environment,” Bensedrine said. As with other independent journalists, their e-mail accounts are infiltrated by malicious programs. Bensedrine’s entire e-mail queue once vanished after she clicked open an e-mail.

Bensedrine was imprisoned for six weeks in 2001 after discussing corruption and human rights abuses during a satellite television interview. She has been the target of



**Rachid Kechana, editor of Tunisia's opposition weekly newspaper *Al-Mawkif*, says government security agents blocked distribution of his paper following several critical stories.**

numerous assaults, such as a 2004 attack in which presumed secret police agents punched her in the face and chest. And Bensedrine has been the target of scathing personal attacks in pro-government newspapers such as *Ashourouq*, *Assarih*, and *Al-Hadath*, which have called her a prostitute, a “creature of the devil,” and a “hateful viper.” One of those leading the attacks, Abdelhamid Riahi of *Ashourouq*, was later decorated by the president for cultural achievements.

Omar Mestiri, a human rights activist and the managing



**Pillars frame the coast north of Tunis.**

editor of *Kalima*, was the target of a spurious 2007 defamation lawsuit brought by Mohammed Baccar, a lawyer with close connections to state authorities. The case stemmed from a September 2006 article in which Mestiri criticized the Tunisian Bar Association’s decision to lift Baccar’s disbarment. The prosecution did not challenge the accuracy of the story but insisted that Mestiri reveal his sources. Baccar finally withdrew his complaint, but just a day later unknown arsonists torched the office of Ayachi Hammami, the human rights lawyer who defended Mestiri.

**E**ven for enterprising Tunisian journalists, several types of stories are out of reach. Violent protests over unemployment and rising food costs rocked the southern mining town of Redeyef in January and continued in the ensuing months, but virtually no coverage followed. Journalists and activists said government forces had cordoned off the city and barred nonresidents and journalists from entering. In June, authorities detained reporter-activist Hadi al-Ridaoui for two days after he took pictures and interviewed wounded demonstrators at the hospital in nearby Gafsa.

“You can write about sports all you want. But issues important to society, like the demonstrations in Redeyef, the press can’t do anything except print what the government wants,” said Al-Jazeera correspondent Hajji.

Hajji’s situation reflects the severe limits the government is willing to place on the international press. The ATCE controls foreign reporters by requiring them to obtain government accreditation and then get explicit per-

mission to cover any official event. As part of the Tunisian government’s longstanding feud with Al-Jazeera over its coverage of Tunisian dissidents, authorities have refused to accredit Hajji since 2004. Hajji has no office and is not authorized to cover the news, although he continues to file stories for Al-Jazeera’s Web site and send reports by e-mail. He said police so often arrive at his meetings and interviews, it’s clear they monitor his phone conversations. In May, as Hajji was traveling to proceedings in the cooking-oil lawsuit against Kechana, police delayed him at a toll road until the hearing was over.

While many independent journalists are still working, others are losing hope. With Ben Ali set to run for a fifth term in 2009, they are bracing for a renewed clampdown designed to ensure the president’s smooth re-election to a new five-year term. “There is no place for an independent media project today,” said the Tunisian journalism teacher. Propaganda work, sure, he says. Business projects, absolutely. There will always be plenty of state money to burnish Tunisia’s international image.

But Hajji’s case—like those of Boukhdhir, Bensedrine, Kechana, and others—illustrates the government’s determination to control the news and to quash free expression. Until that situation changes, until Tunisia’s international allies speak up for change, the opportunity for political freedom will be severely limited. ■

*Hear Joel Campagna's audio report at [www.cpj.org/smiling/audio](http://www.cpj.org/smiling/audio).*

# Letter From Sri Lanka

*A veteran correspondent finds conditions worsening in one of the world's deadliest countries for the press. Defense reporting is slowly being silenced.*

By Amal Jayasinghe

## COLOMBO, Sri Lanka

Reporting here has long been a risky business. Eighteen years ago, when pro-government death squads appeared to be tailing me, my employer, Agence France-Presse, sent me to a safer place—Afghanistan.

Today, it is more dangerous still, and reporting on defense issues is being silenced altogether. It's ironic that after I returned from a midyear stint in Baghdad, I felt less secure back home than during my time covering the war in Iraq. Sri Lanka, swept up in a 25-year-long conflict between the Sinhalese-dominated government and Tamil separatists, is one of the world's deadliest countries for the press.

There is healthy competition in the Sri Lankan media nonetheless, with a number of new publications and electronic media outlets. A scan of the Sunday papers shows liberal criticism of government politicians. Privately owned media have a field day leveling allegations of corruption and shady financial deals, not all of which are substantiated.

The authorities point to the weekly papers and their vituperative reportage as a sign of abundant media freedom. But any studied critique of the government's military campaign is conspicuously absent. A line has been drawn when it comes to coverage of the war and defense issues. As Sri Lanka's Defense Ministry has said, journalists critical of its battle against Tamil rebels are "enemies of the state."

At least 11 journalists have been killed with impunity since 2004. Six more have been abducted, and four of them are still missing. Another half dozen have been arrested and detained. Journalists covering the conflict have taken the brunt of these attacks. One Tamil journalist, J. S. Tis-sainayagam, has been held since March under the govern-

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**There has been no shortage of parliamentary panels and special commissions. But answers have been in short supply.**

ment's emergency regulations of 2005. He became the first journalist indicted under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act when formal charges were filed in August.

The escalation of fighting between government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels has been accompanied by a shrinking of all civil liberties, and it has affected all types of media. Even sports reporters have not been spared. Two visiting Indian journalists covering a Sri Lanka-India test cricket match in the southern port city of Galle were detained by security authorities in August. Although local journalists face the brunt of unwelcome attention, foreign correspondents in Colombo have also been subject to threats, intimidation, and smear campaigns carried out by the protagonists in the Sri Lankan conflict. A French television crew ended up in the cooler for two days last December when it tried to do a story on Tamils visiting their relatives at a detention center in the south of the country.

But one incident finally jolted diplomats in Colombo. Namal Perera, a freelance defense writer, was attacked by men wielding wooden poles and sticks as he traveled in a car with a senior British High Commission (BHC) official on June 30. The motorbike-riding attackers had tailed Perera and his friend, Mahendra Ratnaweera, a BHC political officer, and intercepted their vehicle near an army camp. The men tried to pull Perera out of the car, beating both men severely and fleeing only after a large number of bystanders had gathered. Perera had recently criticized the government's actions in its campaign against Tamil rebels.

International rights organizations have for years pressed Sri Lanka to end a culture of impunity. Since the first high-profile killing of a journalist, in 1990, local and international rights groups have steadily raised the alarm. Richard de Zoysa, a Sri Lankan journalist who worked for the Rome-



A protester holds a placard bearing the photo of Namal Perera, a defense columnist beaten during an abduction attempt in late June. Hundreds gathered in Colombo to call attention to rising violence against the press.

based Inter Press Service, was killed that year by a group of men who abducted him from his home near Colombo. Zoysa's mother identified one of the abductors as a senior police officer, but no one has been held responsible to date.

There has been no shortage of parliamentary panels and special commissions of inquiry to investigate attacks against journalists and media freedom. Opposition legislator Joseph Michael Perera went so far as telling Parliament in July that a unit led by army chief Sarath Fonseka is behind attacks on defense correspondents—a charge the military vehemently denied.

But without exception, none of these panels of inquiry have come up with concrete answers or positively identified wrongdoers for prosecution.

The top defense columnist of Sri Lanka's *Sunday Times*, Iqbal Athas, has nearly stopped writing. When he does, he notes that he is not able to report all he knows for fear of reprisal. Athas has already been branded a traitor by security officials who accuse him of giving details that could be helpful to the enemy, the Tamil Tigers, a charge he has rejected.

The recently established *Nation* newspaper has stopped its weekly defense column after writer Keith Noyahr was abducted in May and thoroughly beaten before being released. Noyahr has since left the country and is said to have sought refuge in neighboring India. His editor, too,

faced death threats but has returned to Sri Lanka after staying abroad for a while.

The pro-opposition *Sunday Leader*, which has been the victim of several arson attacks, says reporters are being targeted partly because of the ineffectiveness of the country's political opposition. "More and more, even as the opposition has fallen mute, independent media institutions have taken on the job of the opposition, serving as a mirror of public opinion," an August 10 commentary in the *Sunday Leader* said. That is why more journalists have been attacked in recent years than have opposition politicians, the paper said.

Access itself is becoming more difficult. Authorities have banned the media from conflict-affected areas, unlike in the past, when reporters were able to get to rebel-held areas after crossing the front lines with help from the Red Cross. Even international nongovernmental organizations are finding it difficult to have free access to those areas, underscoring the problems faced by reporters and cameramen. The Tigers have also been accused of attacking and killing dissidents and objective journalists. However, diplomats note that they expect better from a democratically elected government.

Most foreign correspondents based in Colombo depend on local media for routine coverage of the conflict. Now, as attacks grow and access diminishes, even those reports are getting thinner and thinner. ■

# Into the Ether

*The world watched in horror when Paul Klebnikov was gunned down in Russia. Much was done to solve the case. Then it all came unraveled in a Moscow court.*

By Elisabeth Witchel

Vladimir Putin has often seemed indifferent to violence against the press, but Steve LeVine believes there is one case the Russian leader genuinely wanted solved—the 2004 assassination of *Forbes Russia* editor Paul Klebnikov.

That no convictions have been won in the slaying reflects an embedded culture of impunity rather than a lack of political will, says LeVine, who explored the Klebnikov case and several other high-profile murders in his 2008 book, *Putin's Labyrinth: Spies, Murder, and the Dark Heart of the New Russia*.

“The atmosphere of impunity that Putin has unleashed in his reign is larger than he is. This [case] is proof of that,” says LeVine, a foreign affairs reporter for *BusinessWeek*. Unlike victims in the other cases LeVine examined, Klebnikov was never considered an opponent of the Kremlin. An American of Russian descent, Klebnikov was a tough investigator but was well-known for his optimistic view of Russian society. Putin, then president, pledged to solve the crime.

The Kremlin's political will did translate into an initial investigation that, by most accounts, was vigorous and swift. Police made two arrests within months, and prosecutors presented substantial evidence to a jury when the trial began in early 2006. But the case was derailed by a series of questionable court decisions that tainted the conduct of the trial and its aftermath.

Now, four years after the slaying, no one is charged, no one is in custody, and no progress is being reported in the case. “It seems to have drifted into the ether,” said the editor's brother, Peter Klebnikov.

*Elisabeth Witchel is coordinator of CPJ's Global Campaign Against Impunity. This story is part of “Justice Project,” a Dangerous Assignments series focusing on unsolved journalist slayings, governmental responses, and continuing efforts to seek justice.*

Authorities identified Kazbek Dukuzov, a purported Chechen criminal gang member, as the man who shot Klebnikov nine times from a passing car outside the editor's Moscow office late on the evening of July 9, 2004. Dukuzov was arrested along with Musa Vakhayev, the alleged driver and fellow gang member. Prosecutors claimed Chechen separatist leader Khozh Akhmed Nukhayev ordered the murder in retaliation for Klebnikov's depiction of him in the 2003 book, *Conversation With a Barbarian*. Nukhayev was never arrested and his whereabouts remain unclear.

Moscow City Court Judge Vladimir Usov closed the trial to the public at the request of the prosecution, which said classified information would be presented. Evidence against the two suspects was circumstantial but strong, according to CPJ sources and journalists who followed the case. In *Forbes*, reporter Richard Behar wrote that investigators had gathered cell phone records indicating the defendants were watching Klebnikov for two weeks before the murder. Through a witness, they had identified the vehicle from which the fatal shots were fired and then found Vakhayev's fingerprints in the car. Prosecutors also elicited testimony from an acquaintance of the defendants who recalled them talking about being paid well for a “big job.”



Reuters/Denis Simyakov

**Without explanation, a Moscow court moved the case off its docket. The legal basis for the decision is unclear. So is the status of the case.**

“The evidence was as solid circumstantially as any case that a Western prosecutor would feel confident bringing to a jury,” Behar said in an interview with CPJ. Behar also heads Project Klebnikov, an alliance of journalists working to help solve the killing.

But several sources told CPJ that the jury was left open to intimidation during the trial. The defendants and their representatives made a number of threatening statements in the presence of jurors, who were not sequestered and could be readily approached entering or exiting the courtroom, these sources said. At the same time, Judge Usov imposed a gag order on all of the trial participants, including the jurors.

As the jury returned its verdict in May 2006, more questions arose. Usov left the courtroom three times after receiving—but before announcing—the jury's decision. In each instance the jurors followed him outside the courtroom—beyond even the limited scrutiny of the closed-door proceedings.



AP/Mikhail Metzel

**Peter Klebnikov holds a portrait of his slain brother at a commemorative service in Moscow. The Klebnikovs' uncle, Arkady Nebolsin, stands beside him. Suspect Musa Vakhayev, left, was acquitted after a trial clouded by questionable judicial decisions.**

The verdict: Acquittals for both defendants. Prosecutor Dmitry Shokhin said publicly that “serious violations” of court procedures had led to the verdicts. The prosecution, joined by the Klebnikov family, appealed the verdict to Russia's Supreme Court. In November 2006, the high court overturned the acquittals and ordered a new trial before a new judge.

But Dukuzov, free following his acquittal, had vanished by then. Moscow City Court officials postponed the retrial and then moved the case off the docket entirely in 2007, sending it back to the prosecutor general's office for further investigation. The court never disclosed who made this pivotal decision, which effectively sent the case back to step one.

The prosecution appealed again, but the Supreme Court upheld the lower court—a ruling that has perplexed the Klebnikov family and others. “We've been told by our attorney that the transfer of the case is not according to law,” Peter Klebnikov said. The Supreme Court has not disclosed its reasoning.

“Legal experts say there is no basis in Russian law for the court's decision,” said Behar, who called the development a major setback. “I'm a long-term optimist, but this is not an optimistic season.”

Has the prosecutor general's office truly renewed a vigorous investigation? It's hard to tell. The Klebnikov family sent a letter this summer to President Dmitry Medvedev, who succeeded Putin in May. Officials assured the family that the case is being pursued in earnest with high-level supervision, but they acknowledged there was no concrete progress. “Unfortunately,” Peter Klebnikov said, “the questionable decisions and lack of progress that have been a pattern over the last four years continue to be the norm.”

Petros Garibyan, a senior investigator with the prosecutor general, said in written comments to CPJ that while Dukuzov and Vakhayev remain the primary suspects, his office has begun looking at other possible conspirators. He said authorities have obtained an international arrest warrant for Dukuzov, whom he described as being in hiding. Vakhayev lives openly in Russia, the investigator said.

Throughout Russia, the conviction record in journalist slayings is not encouraging. In 15 murders since 2000, CPJ research shows, prosecutors have obtained convictions in only one case. Locating Dukuzov would be a first step toward conviction number two. ■

*Read about CPJ's Global Campaign Against Impunity at [www.cpj.org/impunity](http://www.cpj.org/impunity).*

# Malaysia's Risk-Takers

*The government's promise not to censor the Internet has allowed blogs more latitude than other news media. Now, with a leading blogger jailed, that freedom is in jeopardy.*

By Shawn W. Crispin

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia

The jailing of Raja Petra Kamarudin, a self-described risk-taker who has led Malaysia's lively blogging culture, has come to symbolize the government's new assault on Internet expression. On September 12, police raided Raja Petra's residence, seized documents, and arrested the popular blogger under the draconian Internal Security Act, which allows for detention without trial.

Two weeks later, Home Minister Syed Hamid Albar ordered the detention extended for two years on vague charges that Raja Petra published seditious and anti-Islamic articles on his blog, *Malaysia Today*. The government, signaling a wider crackdown on dissent, detained a newspaper journalist and an opposition politician the same day.

In the four years since he launched *Malaysia Today*, the 59-year-old Raja Petra has established a reputation for running news and commentary critical of the administration. This year, as the ruling party's influence has slipped, the government has stepped up harassment of the blog's founder. Raja Petra's reporting on a politicized murder case led to several days of detention on sedition charges in May and, later, to three counts of criminal defamation. In August, government regulators ordered domestic Internet service providers to block *Malaysia Today* on grounds that the blog was publishing seditious material. The move also happened to coincide with Raja Petra's plans to post real-time results of a special election eventually won by opposition politician Anwar Ibrahim.

Despite the government's actions, *Malaysia Today* has managed to survive. Raja Petra got around the censorship order by publishing the blog on a mirror site and creating new Internet addresses in foreign countries. His wife, Marina Lee Abdullah, and colleagues have continued to publish since his imprisonment. And in a September 30

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post written and smuggled out of prison, Raja Petra remained defiant as he described his conditions.

That attitude was on display when CPJ interviewed Raja Petra a month before his imprisonment. "I've been charged with everything from insulting Islam, the prime minister, the sultans—every known living thing," he said, relaxing that day in a restaurant in the Bangsar neighborhood. "Islam makes it mandatory to oppose oppression. It's your duty, and it's what I'm doing."

A former businessman turned political activist, Raja Petra started *Malaysia Today* in August 2004 in response to what he considered to be a chronic lack of critical coverage in the state-controlled mainstream media. The site runs commentary and news from three regular, pseudonymous writers. With a steady stream of hard-hitting reports, the site claims a higher daily readership than most Malaysian newspapers.

*Malaysia Today* has been at the forefront of the country's vibrant and proliferating blogosphere, which independent researchers, press freedom advocates, and journalists say has expanded the boundaries of Malaysian press freedom. News-driven blogs like Raja Petra's have taken hard aim at the government and individual politicians, providing a sharp counterpoint to state-led television news and ruling party-influenced newspapers. "We take risks no one else takes," Raja Petra told CPJ in August.

The Malaysian government has long held local newspapers and magazines in check through a renewable licensing system that has also led to arbitrary suspensions. National security laws such as the Internal Security Act, Sedition Act, and Official Secrets Act have instilled a culture of self-censorship at most news publications.

But a government pledge not to censor the Internet, first made in 1996, has allowed bloggers and online news sites to tackle tough issues the mainstream media habitually neglect. The no-censorship policy, developed by then-

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, was designed to lure foreign investment to the Multimedia Super Corridor project, a big ticket, state-led bid to incubate Malaysia's own version of the Silicon Valley.

The country's commitment to an open Internet appears to be in doubt now. With only a clutch of multinational companies in residence, the incubator project has failed to live up to commercial expectations. And as Malaysia's blogosphere has grown in political significance, the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) has seen its own position weakened. In March elections, UMNO lost its two-thirds majority in parliament and control over five of the national federation's 13 states. Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi and others have lashed out with greater frequency against bloggers, claiming they publish false and libelous material.

The government's actions against *Malaysia Today* were the first instances in which the government directly broke its no-censorship pledge, but journalists and human rights lawyers told CPJ that troubling signs had been coming throughout the year. "The government seems to be intent on creating a climate of fear, although with dubious procedures," says Jun-E Tan, a doctoral student at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University who recently co-authored a book on Malaysian blogs and their impact on democratization.

Unconfirmed blog reports, for example, said that a hard-line UMNO faction working alongside the Science Ministry had explored closing YouTube and template blog sites such as Wordpress and Blogspot in the run-up to the March election. Around the same time, reports posted on several blogs said that UMNO's youth wing had compiled a list of 30 local bloggers it considered potential threats to social stability.

Information Minister Ahmad Shabery Cheek would not confirm or deny those reports. In e-mail comments made to CPJ before Raja Petra's arrest, he said "the government encourages the growth of online journalism" and that Malaysia "was one of the freest environments on earth where blogs and bloggers are concerned, even compared with the United States, Britain, and Europe."

"What we stress is accountability. ... The government is, of course, concerned with anyone who is out to undermine the country's peace and stability," said Ahmad Shabery. "If the person who tries to incite racial discord happens to be a blogger, the government will act against him, not because he is a blogger, but because he is out to create trouble."

That's clearly how the government views the likes of Raja Petra. Last year, the blogger ran a 12-part series on corruption among police, particularly alleged links to organized crime syndicates. Before that, he ran a series of investigative reports on alleged nepotism involving Abdullah and son-in-law Khairy Jamaluddin, deputy chief of UMNO's youth wing.

"I have deep throats both inside and outside government," Raja Petra told CPJ before his imprisonment. Yet neither those sources nor his lineage to one of Malaysia's main royal families has shielded him from government harassment. Since launching his blog, Raja Petra says he has been hauled in for police questioning more times than he can remember. He has also received anonymous death threats on his cell phone, although he said he doesn't take the calls too seriously.

"I'm a risk-taker, not a troublemaker," he said in August. "We see how far we can go with what the government considers a crime and see if we can get away with it." Now, as Raja Petra sits in solitary confinement, the Malaysian government appears to have responded. ■



AP/Vincent Thian

**Blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin, inset, says he is no troublemaker. Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, seen here giving an address in Parliament, has lashed out at bloggers for publishing false information.**



AP/Vincent Thian



# The Crime Beat

*Gang-related violence is the biggest story in El Salvador. The press has made great strides in covering the issue, but in-depth reporting is still elusive.*

By Carlos Lauría

## SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador

Jolts came one upon the other. Charred and bullet-ridden bodies of three Salvadoran congressmen were found on a remote Guatemalan road. Four Guatemalan police officers were soon arrested—only to be slain themselves, their throats slit as they sat in a maximum-security prison. The killings exploded in a single horrifying week in February 2007, but developments have unfolded on front pages and television screens here for more than a year and a half.

The story has tested the Salvadoran press, which has struggled to cover a years-long wave of violence related to gangs and organized crime. José Luis Sanz, news editor of one of El Salvador's leading dailies, *La Prensa Gráfica*, looks at coverage of the case and sees improvements from the days not so long ago when crime reporting was covered in gore and shot through with rumors. Still, he says this recent day in his offices in the capital, there is much more to be improved at his paper and other news outlets. Coverage of the February 2007 assassinations, while mainly responsible and fact-based, has been superficial at times and overly reliant on authorities, he says.

"Nobody," Sanz laments, "had sources apart from the official ones."

The slayings are perhaps the most significant example of the biggest ongoing story in El Salvador. Violence related to crime gangs is rampant in this country of 7 million, which has one of the highest murder rates in the Americas. Nearly 3,500 people were murdered in 2007, according to the inter-governmental group Central American Observatory on Violence. Youth gangs known as *maras* have been a main cause of the violence sweeping through the outskirts of San Salvador and spreading to the countryside. But the threat has evolved in recent years as gangs have become more sophisticated, taking on the tactics of organized crime groups.

*Carlos Lauría is CPJ's senior program coordinator for the Americas. CPJ conducts more than a dozen missions every year. This series provides snapshots of that work.*

In the early part of the decade, Salvadoran journalists say, the press covered crime in an aggressive but sensational fashion, showing graphic scenes and trafficking in rumors and unsubstantiated theories. Crime reporting has grown more reliable and less lurid in the last three years—thanks in part to a concerted period of self-reflection—but the press has yet to produce consistent, in-depth reporting on the roots of the violence, or to provide a comprehensive picture of the problem. In August, CPJ conducted a research mission to El Salvador and Guatemala to examine the difficulties in covering gang-related violence. The next steps demand better training and greater security, journalists say, and they will not be easy.

In the 16 years since the end of the Salvadoran civil war, analysts note, the mainstream press has been aligned with the country's ruling conservative party. Media outlets have taken steps to professionalize in recent years—and crime, seen as a less ideological issue than some, is an area where improvements have been made.

Sanz knows the crime issue as well as anyone. In early 2005, *La Prensa Gráfica* editors concluded that they needed a different, more professional approach to crime and security. The paper's editors evaluated crime coverage through the first three months of 2005, launched what Sanz called an "open" newsroom debate, and then began writing a manual on covering violent crime.

The resulting 12-page document includes practical recommendations for journalists on the crime beat. Much of the manual is devoted to the use of sources. It urges reporters to use multiple and diverse sources, to examine the quality of those sources, to verify source information, and to seek out contrasting sources. It also tells journalists to respect victims and their families; to provide context and analysis in their pieces; to avoid explicitly graphic language and images of gory violence; and to use crime data impartially.

"At least for a while, we made a consistent effort to follow the manual's guidelines. And it paid off," Sanz says,



Manuel Castillo, a former Guatemalan lawmaker, is arrested in August in connection with the 2007 murder of three Salvadoran lawmakers. José Luis Sanz, inset, says coverage of the case has been responsible but superficial.

by creating a new culture for crime reporting. Other news outlets adopted similar guidelines, he notes. By January 2007, *La Prensa Gráfica* joined with two other San Salvador-based newspapers, several television stations, and the national association of radio broadcasters to form an alliance spotlighting the issues of crime and violence and promoting peaceful public debate. Among several initiatives, the coalition, called MEUNO (Media United for Peace), produced its own guidelines on covering violence.

Sanz acknowledges that his paper's editors and reporters have not adhered to coverage guidelines as strictly in recent months, something he attributes to the fatigue of covering violent crime on a daily, even hourly, basis.

More pernicious, though, are the safety concerns that cause journalists to censor their own work. CPJ has documented sporadic violence against the Salvadoran press in the last three years: Radio reporter Salvador Sánchez Roque was murdered in 2007 under unclear circumstances, while at least 16 journalists were assaulted.

"We are not afraid of violence, but we will never endanger the life of a journalist," says Ciro Granados, news editor with the San Salvador paper, *El Diario de Hoy*. Granados said his paper, too, has tried to add context and broaden sourcing in its crime reporting. But common sense, he says, has to prevail. For one recent story, he refused to let a reporter spend extended time with members of a criminal gang. The risk, he says, was not worth the inside look the reporter was seeking.

While safety concerns are an impediment to investigative reporting, so is a lack of training, notes Mario Cantarero, a professor of social communication at Francisco Gavidia University in San Salvador. While there are capable Salvadoran jour-

nalists producing solid work, he says, there is no coherent system to train young crime reporters in such fundamentals as maintaining arm's-length relationships with sources. Media companies and higher education institutions, Cantarero says, have never forged the kind of relationships that would promote such training.

By all accounts, there is much to be investigated. The youth gangs of the early part of the decade have developed into highly organized, mob-style groups that pursue extortion and money laundering along with selling drugs, says Jaime López, coordinator for the Foundation for the Study and Application of the Law. This is all "virgin territory" for the Salvadoran press, López says. The roots of this evolution, the ramifications for the future, and the potential damage to El Salvador's political system have yet to be fully explored, he says.

The political system, López says, has already been tainted by the spread of organized crime. The February 2007 killings provide a striking example. A Guatemalan politician was arrested in August of this year on allegations that he plotted the assassinations in concert with drug trafficking groups.

At *La Prensa Gráfica*, editor Sanz looks at his paper's voluminous coverage of the killings and finds some reason to be pleased. The coverage shed light on connections between organized crime and public officials in both countries. But Sanz also sees a vast "information vacuum" when it comes to the more sensitive aspects of this and other crime stories.

"We don't have the capacity, out of fear and [lack of] training, to take a deep look at what's going on inside the gangs," he says. Taking that next step, a big one, is the challenge that lies ahead. ■

**Crime reporting has grown more reliable and less lurid in the last three years, thanks in part to a concerted period of self-reflection.**



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