

Safety of journalists draws international mission to Mexico

MEXICO CITY, MEXICO: Mexican government measures to ensure greater safety of journalists, along with strategies adopted by media and journalists to continue reporting from highly dangerous parts of the country were examined last week by a delegation from the International Press Institute (IPI) and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA).



The delegation met with a wide variety of interested actors including federal, state, and intergovernmental officials; journalists and publishers; foreign diplomats and representatives of civil society groups in Mexico City.

The delegation, which visited Mexico from 10-13 February, also looked into other issues challenging independent media reporting, such as media dependence on government advertising and concentration of ownership in the broadcasting sector.

"The problems here are horrendous," said delegation leader Roger Parkinson - past president of WAN-IFRA, former publisher, CEO and chairman of Canada's Globe & Mail, and a member of IPI. "Significant parts of the country are not controlled by the state but by narcotic traffickers and organised crime, who torture and kill journalists and intimidate newspapers into self-censorship."

Killers need to be put where they belong - behind bars

He added: "The federal government has made progress in modifying the Constitution, changing the legal structure to prosecute killers and installing a mechanism to protect journalists. But real progress will only be when killers are put behind bars."

IPI Press Freedom Manager Barbara Trionfi said: "For the past six years, Mexico has been among the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. Therefore, journalists' safety was the core concern of the IPI/WAN-IFRA press freedom mission.

"We were disappointed to find out that, in spite of the good will expressed by the Mexican authorities, progress in the development of laws and other mechanisms aimed at stopping attacks against journalists has been slow and the mechanisms have yet to start functioning."

Since 2006, a total of 55 journalists have been killed in Mexico for reasons related to their work. Attacks have also occurred on media buildings and installations, particularly in northern Mexico. Crimes against the media are rarely solved in Mexico, forcing media professionals into self-censorship as their ultimate means of protection.

The government of President Enrique Peña Nieto, who took office in December 2012, has promised to implement the mechanism established by the Law for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists (Spanish: Ley para la Protección de Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas) passed by the previous administration of former president Felipe Calderón Hinojosa and aimed at ensuring a rapid reaction by the authorities when journalists are threatened.

Tardy on approving legislation that will help protect journalists

At the same time, the government has yet to approve legislation necessary to implement an amendment to the Mexican Constitution, passed by the federal Congress in June 2012, which gives authority to the federal government to prosecute crimes against journalists.

"The secondary legislation is a high priority and, if everything goes as expected, the government may be able to pass it within the next five months," Miriam Cárdenas Cantú, president of the Human Rights Committee of the federal Chamber of Deputies, told the delegates.

The reforms will give federal authorities the power to prosecute attacks on journalists and media, which now largely rests with the states, where few prosecutions occur.

In a meeting with Eduardo Sánchez Hernández, deputy secretary for Media Regulation of the Interior Ministry, the delegation expressed its concern for cases such as Veracruz, where state officials have adopted a particularly hostile attitude towards critical journalists.

"The Federal government will use all available legal instruments to make sure the States do not commit abuses, regardless of their political party," Sánchez Hernández said.

The delegation also met with Laura Borbolla, the federal Special Prosecutor for Crimes against Freedom of Expression, who expressed confidence that prosecutions would occur once the new legislation is in place.

'Violence caught us unprepared'

In spite of the recent reforms, all journalists and state representatives who met with the delegation agreed that the safety conditions for journalists reporting from the states where the drugs cartels are powerful - including Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Sinaloa and Veracruz - have continued to deteriorate and, many noted, not only the government but also news outlets have been slow in adopting measures to keep journalists alive.

"The violence caught us unprepared," the editor of one national newspaper told the delegation. "We thought that if we reacted fast enough when journalists are threatened, we would be able to avoid further violence."

Despite the establishment of safety protocols in certain newspapers and the signing of an agreement between 46 media groups in March 2011 providing editorial guidelines on the coverage of violence, some journalists still believe that there is still too little awareness about the danger facing journalists in parts of the country.

A report on the mission will be released in coming weeks.

The delegation included Parkinson, Trionfi, WAN-IFRA Deputy CEO Larry Kilman, IPI Press Freedom Adviser for Latin America and the Caribbean Scott Griffen, and WAN-IFRA Press Freedom Missions Manager Rodrigo Bonilla.

More on the press freedom situation in Mexico can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

IPI, based in Vienna, is a global network of editors, media executives and leading journalists dedicated to the furtherance and safeguarding of press freedom, the protection of freedom of opinion and expression, the promotion of the free flow of news and information, and the improvement of the practices of journalism.

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