Regional Analysis

Drug Trade, Violent Gangs Pose Grave Danger

Powerful drug traffickers in Mexico, gangsters in Brazilian slums, paramilitaries in Colombia, and violent street gangs in El Salvador and Guatemala are terrorizing the press. Self-censorship is widespread. By Carlos Lauría

APAs criminal organizations have expanded their power over the last decade, the spread of violence has undermined political stability and threatened democracy in Latin America. Journalists and media outlets covering crime and the drug trade have become targets: The press provides key details about criminal activities—names, routes, prices—that can damage operations. The gangs retaliate. And the growing number of killings, attacks, disappearances, and threats are decimating investigative journalism.

Vast areas are affected. Powerful drug traffickers fighting for turf in Mexico, paramilitary gangsters in Brazilian slums, guerrillas and paramilitaries in strife-ridden areas of Colombia, and violent street gangs in El Salvador and Guatemala are terrorizing the press. Weakened by widespread corruption and dysfunctional judiciaries, governments are increasingly unable to provide safety guarantees, creating a lack of accountability that further endangers news media.

An October report by the Organization of American States (OAS) found that crime in Latin America claims more than 100,000 lives a year, making it one of the world's most violent areas. The economic cost of crime is equally drastic, corresponding to 15 percent of the region's combined annual gross domestic product, according to estimates by the Inter-American Development Bank. "It is an epidemic, a plague on our continent that kills more people than AIDS. The integrity of the democratic institutions in our region is seriously at risk," warned OAS Secretary-General José Miguel Insulza during an October meeting of public security ministers of the Americas in Mexico City.

Nowhere is that more evident than in Mexico, where more than 5,000 people had been slain in drug-related murders by December, according to the Mexican attorney general's office.Growing violence associated with criminal organizations has made Mexico one of the world's deadliest countries for reporters. Since 2000, at least 24 journalists have been killed, eight in direct reprisal for their work. Seven other journalists have disappeared since 2005.

Drug cartels have brazenly confronted state authority. In October, the Mexican press revealed that one of the country's major cartels had infiltrated top positions at the organized crime division of the attorney general's office. Five officials were detained on allegations that they worked as informants for the Beltrán Leyva brothers, an arm of the Sinaloa cartel, and had received payments of $150,000 to $450,000. Local journalists said that the arrests may have implications for the press because the organized crime division had taken over several investigations of murdered and disappeared journalists. In two emblematic cases—the 2004 murder of Tijuana editor Francisco Ortiz Franco, and the 2005 disappearance of reporter Alfredo Jiménez Mota in northern Hermosillo—the reporters were investigating possible links between criminal groups and officials.

The impact of organized crime on investigative reporting can be traced back more than a decade, one expert said. Alberto Islas, head of Risk Evaluation, a private Mexico City firm, noted that military dictatorships were the biggest threat to the media more than 20 years ago. Organized crime structures began to rise gradually during the last two decades of democratization in the region, becoming a serious threat in the late 1990s. The criminal organizations have since cast their influence over state institutions, he added.

The situation has created fear across many sectors of Mexican society. Scores of reporters and numerous news outlets are engaging in self-censorship for fear of retribution. Pablo Piccato, director of the Institute of Latin American Studies at Columbia University in New York, cited the attempted assassination of Zeta editor J. Jesús Blancornelas a decade ago as a turning point in security conditions for the press. The attempted slaying stemmed from a Zeta investigative article describing how the Arellano Félix drug cartel recruited gunmen from violent street gangs in San Diego’s Barrio Logan neighborhood. Since then, Piccato said, the number of press attacks has escalated. Piccato, who specializes in Mexican history, argued that arrests and killings of several drug lords in recent years have sparked ferocious battles between groups. The drug trade, in turn, has become decentralized, the organizations more diverse, and the tactics more vicious. “Drug traffickers are very concerned about what journalists say,” Piccato said.

More than 530 metric tons of cocaine are smuggled annually from South America through Mexico and into the United States, according to the 2008 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, released in February by the U.S. State Department. Central America is a crossroads and staging ground for the traffickers.

In Guatemala, drug-related violence has escalated in recent years as gangs compete for smuggling routes into Mexico. Sixteen people are killed on average every day, said human rights ombudsman Sergio Morales. Nine out of 10 killings remain unsolved in a country where impunity is the norm.

Journalists in the country’s interior muzzle themselves in fear of retaliation. Self-censorship is so pervasive that massive gun battles between drug traffickers go unreported, according to the local press group Centro de Reportes Informativos Sobre Guatemala (Cerigua). In late March, 11 people died after a shootout in the province of Zacapa, 80 miles (127 kilometers) from Guatemala City, where crime is rampant. The shooting, later linked to Mexican drug kingpins, was nearly ignored by regional media, Cerigua reported. Even editors of national outlets acknowledged that crime-related issues are often off-limits for their correspondents. “We can’t take that risk,” said Gonzalo Marroquín, editor of the largest daily, Prensa Libre, in Guatemala City.

More than a decade after the end of Guatemala’s civil war, illegal armed groups and clandestine security networks have merged with criminal organizations and become deeply entrenched in state institutions, undermining democracy, analysts said. In 2007, the Guatemalan Congress approved creation of a U.N.-sponsored body, the International Commission Against Impunity, to help investigate and prosecute illegal organizations. If successful, the commission would not only strengthen the rule of law, but encourage media to make crime and corruption part of their daily reporting agenda.

In neighboring El Salvador, gang violence is widespread, especially in the poor neighborhoods outside the capital, San Salvador. Nearly 3,500 people were murdered in 2007, the intergovernmental Central American Observatory on Violence said. Salvadoran journalists say that while crime coverage has improved in the last three years, in-depth reporting remains elusive. In the early 2000s, crime reporting was filled with sensationalism, graphic scenes, and unsubstantiated rumors.

Today, reporting on crime is more sober and reliable, in part because of a period of self-reflection in the media spearheaded by the San Salvador-based daily La Prensa Gráfica, which issued a manual for reporters who cover crime. But training deficiencies and safety concerns have prevented media from undertaking investigative reporting that would examine the origins and causes of gang violence. “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,” said José Luis Sanz, news editor of La Prensa Gráfica.

During the last decade, as drug consumption in Latin America continued to swell, organized crime has focused increasingly on territorial control, said Risk Evaluation’s Islas. Criminal groups, he said, have effectively taken over vast regions where the government is absent. Journalists who attempt to uncover gang activities, Islas said, are immediate targets.

In several isolated areas of Brazil, where state presence is weak and governments are besieged by organized crime, provincial reporters face grave danger. According to CPJ research, Brazil is the 12th deadliest country for the press worldwide, with at least 15 journalists killed for their work since 1992. Yet provincial reporters are not the only ones in peril. Their colleagues in urban centers such as Brasília, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro face risk whenever they report on organized crime, drug trafficking, or political corruption. Shantytowns, also known as favelas, offer fertile ground for drug traffickers and dangerous zones for reporters. According to the Brazilian press, powerful gangs control most of the slums in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Police raids rarely occur in these areas where gangsters collude with law enforcement.

Journalists who dig deeply into crime stories in the favelas have paid the price. The May kidnapping and torture of two reporters and a driver working undercover for the daily O Dia in Rio de Janeiro was particularly alarming. O Dia had been investigating how paramilitary groups—composed of drug traffickers, as well as active and former police—charged slum residents for protection and controlled local politics. The kidnappers beat the journalists and the driver repeatedly, gave them electric shocks, put plastic bags over their heads, and threatened to kill them. The O Dia team was released after seven horrible hours. At least one of the attackers allegedly identified himself as a member of the local police. After being released, the three staffers left Rio de Janeiro and received psychological care, according to O Dia.

Brazilian media were shocked by the brutal attack and reminded of the 2002 slaying of Tim Lopes. The prominent TV Globo reporter also disappeared in a poor Rio de Janeiro neighborhood, while working on a report about the sexual exploitation of minors by drug traffickers. Lopes, who had been tortured and slain with a sword, was found dead 10 days after his abduction.

Drug trafficking, extortion, and kidnapping have become major sources of funding for the illegal armed groups in Colombia's five-decade civil conflict between leftist guerrilla groups and right-wing paramilitary forces. Both sides have been involved in serious human rights abuses, including murders, attacks, and threats against journalists.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Colombian traffickers began using well-established smuggling routes to move marijuana to the United States. Over the next decade, they moved to cocaine and built powerful international cartels based in the cities of Medellín and Cali. Coca grown in Peru and Bolivia was moved through Colombia and Mexico, where traffickers built powerful local organizations with the complicity of corrupt government officials. In order to diversify their operations, the Colombian cartels also built smuggling routes through Central America and the Caribbean. The cartels in Colombia grew so powerful that they challenged the power of the state. Journalists who exposed their operations—some of the best-known reporters in the country—were threatened and often killed.

In the early 1990s, the Colombian government began a concerted counteroffensive against the Colombian cartels, arresting or killing many of the top leaders and eventually dismantling their major operations. But this did not slow the regional drug trade. Instead, criminal organizations that had developed to support the Colombian operations became autonomous groups, particularly in Mexico, which became a center for the drug trade. Distribution networks also emerged throughout Latin America, as drug consumption increased in the region. The result has been a web of loosely structured transnational drug syndicates operating in many Latin American countries and using violence, including attacks against the press, to protect their operations.

While violence in Colombia has eased in the last four years, it remains one of the world's most murderous countries for the press. Forty reporters, photographers, and editors in all have been killed since 1992, and the country has the highest per capita rate of unsolved journalist murders in Latin America, according to CPJ's Impunity Index, a ranking of countries where governments consistently fail to solve media slayings. Local journalists who report on the civil conflict continue to receive threatening messages from guerrilla and right-wing paramilitary groups, CPJ research found. In 2008, four provincial journalists were forced to flee their homes after serious threats.

Fighting transnational organized crime demands extraordinary cooperation among countries and support from the international community. The development of new independent media outlets and the future of investigative journalism will depend, analysts said, on the creation of better legal structures to protect the constitutional right to free expression and the dismantling of criminal groups.

In Mexico, the Calderón administration and congressional leaders have pledged to improve the country's dismal press freedom record by promoting legislation that would make crimes against free expression federal offenses. In Guatemala, the year-old anti-impunity commission may provide some lessons for fighting violence and corruption. And in newsrooms across the region, managers must step up their efforts to provide staff with personal security training and to impose precautions and strict professional standards on risky beats.

Carlos Lauría, CPJ's senior program coordinator for the Americas, traveled to Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala in 2008 to research crime and its effects on the press.