

# Mexico: The most dangerous country for journalists outside of war zones

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6 March 2018

On February 13, reporter Pedro Damian Gomez was found dead in his house in the Lomas de la Amistad area of Tijuana in the Mexican state of Baja California. Gomez produced a social media show called “Political Panorama,” which covered topical news stories and featured political interviews. While the initial reports by local media of a violent death have been denied by the state attorney’s office, the case is far from resolved.

Just prior to his death, Gomez posted a message on his social media account about the mysterious gift of a new car that had been left outside his house with keys and documentation in his name. Beyond the timing of the curious gift, what has fueled suspicions of foul play is the fact that the targeting of journalists working on political stories has become tragically routine in Mexico.

In 2017, Mexico was ranked 147th out of 180 countries on “World Press Freedom Index” that is released annually by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). The group condemned the “appalling level of impunity” in Mexico, where it claims there have been at least 21 unsolved disappearances of journalists since 2000. Mexico’s own National Human Rights Commission has backed this claim, further highlighting the fact that at least 8 of the 21 journalists have been missing for more than a decade.

RSF’s condemnation of the Mexican state’s treatment of journalists coincided with the 10th anniversary of the disappearance of Maurizio Estrada Zamora, who was a crime reporter for local daily *La Opinión de Apatzingán*. As reported in the *PressGazette*, Zamora had written a story that “reflected badly” on a federal agency police officer known as “El Diablo.” Zamora disappeared shortly after its publication. He was last seen leaving the offices of the newspaper on February 12, 2008.

However, it is not just disappearances that seem to afflict Mexican journalists.

The Committee to Protect Journalists, a non-partisan group that tracks press freedoms, reported that the number of journalists killed in the line of duty or in retaliation for their work declined worldwide last year, but remained quite dangerous in some countries. There were eight journalists killed in Iraq and seven in Syria. Mexico was right behind, according to the report, with the recorded deaths of six journalists. RSF pointed out, however, that this was half the number of *actual* deaths, thus in fact giving Mexico the dubious honor of being the most perilous country for journalists in the world.

In a list compiled last December, the *Los Angeles Times* provided a snapshot of the lives of the 12 journalists who were killed in Mexico in 2017. Despite differences in age, gender, work experience, and the kinds of media in which they worked, what was common to all the assassinated journalists was a focus on the nexus between organized crime, drug cartels and political corruption. Many of them had faced numerous threats to their lives and had carried on their work despite knowing the grave danger they faced.

Javier Valdez Cardenas, one of the assassinated journalists, had in fact been awarded the Committee to Protect Journalists’ International Press Freedom Award in 2011. On receiving the award, Valdez declared that he was dedicating it to “the brave journalists, and to the children and youths who are living a slow death. ... I have preferred to give a face and a name to the victims, to create a portrait of this sad and desolate panorama, these leaps and bounds and short cuts towards the apocalypse, instead of counting deaths and reducing them to numbers.”

A well-known journalist and author, Valdez was a correspondent for the Mexico City-based daily *La*

*Jornada* and a cofounder of the regional weekly *Riodoce*. When fellow correspondent Miroslava Breach was gunned down in the city of Chihuahua on March 23, 2017, Valdez tweeted, “Let them kill us all, if that is the death penalty for reporting this hell. No to silence.” Two months later, Valdez was dragged out of his car on a busy street and shot at least 12 times.

A significant number of journalists have given up their work, their homes and their families in an attempt to save their lives. While some have attempted to claim asylum in other countries, particularly the United States, others have gone into hiding in government designated safe houses in Mexico.

The Mexican government has claimed that it is committed to protecting press freedom and the lives of its journalists. As an example, the government cites the establishment of the “Mechanism to Protect Human Rights Defenders and Journalists,” a program that provides reporters and photographers who have been threatened or attacked with security guards and a panic button that summons authorities. In the five years of its existence, at least 368 journalists have sought these protections. However, as a recent *Los Angeles Times* story points out, this remains far from a guarantee of safety.

Julio Omar Gomez, a 37-year-old reporter from La Paz, used to run a popular news web site that reported on the growing violence in the region, as well as stories of government corruption. Hired assassins set fire to vehicles in his garage twice in an attempt to kill Gomez and his family, even leaving a crudely worded note on the scene, “Don’t involve yourself in politics.”

Initially, Gomez refused governmental protection since it appeared as though local politicians were involved in the murder attempt. But, after his mentor Maximino Rodriguez—a well-known and respected *La Paz* journalist—was murdered in a parking lot while assisting his disabled wife, Gomez decided to accept the protection of 24-hour security guards.

Despite this, a third attempt was made on his life, this time resulting in a gunfight that took the life of one of the guards. After this attempt, Gomez has taken refuge in an anonymous safe house, which he leaves only for appointments with a therapist, who is treating him for anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. Gomez’s time at the safe house is limited. In six months, he will have to fend for himself.

The journalists who fled north of the border have not necessarily fared much better. Despite its claims of prioritizing combating violence against journalists in Mexico, the US government has been singularly reluctant to provide asylum to targeted journalists. Last May, Mexican journalist Martin Mendez dropped his asylum claim in the US and agreed to be deported after he was held in detention for nearly four months. Emilio Gutierrez Soto, a celebrated journalist who has been in the US for nearly a decade after fleeing Mexico, was denied asylum last November and is currently being held in a detention center in El Paso, Texas.

Gutierrez made the decision to flee Mexico after the publication of a series of articles about soldiers ill-treating migrants in boarding houses and stealing their money drew the ire of military commanders. After withstanding a ransacking of his house and ominous drive-bys by military personnel, Gutierrez left in 2008 after a tearful call from a friend who told him to leave immediately since the army was about to kill him. He had assumed that his story would ensure him political asylum in the United States, but that was not to be. Despite being awarded the National Press Club’s prestigious Press Freedom Award in Washington, D.C. last year, Gutierrez now awaits potential deportation. As quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, he is convinced he will be killed by the government the minute he returns to Mexico. “I feel like I’m another dead journalist,” he said.

Far fewer Mexicans receive asylum in the United States than citizens of other countries, including India, Ethiopia and China. The denial of asylum in cases such as that of Gutierrez only underscores the inhumane enforcement-driven logic that has become the guiding force of US immigration policy, notwithstanding its lip service to prioritizing humanitarian concerns.



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