

Over 140 dead in 20 years: can Mexico save its journalists?

Various press organisations have called for justice after the total death tally of journalists in Mexico has risen to more than 140 over the last 20 years. Five have already been murdered this year, with the latest being Eduardo Ochoa, a freelance reporter shot dead outside his home in the city of Uruapan On August 5th. This followed the death of Pablo Murragares, a journalist who was killed in the early hours of August 2nd alongside his police bodyguard in the city of Iguala. Many are outraged with the situation and demand answers as to why journalist protection is failing. Much of the violence has been linked to gang warfare, with many reporters receiving death threats as a common occurrence. So, what exactly is happening in Mexico and why is the number so staggering?

In an interview with Reporters Without Borders, Mexican journalist Julio Cesar Zubillaga speaks of death threats and a gun attack on his office following his outspokenness on the shooting of Murragares. "At least 10 journalists from Iguala have received death threats. It was a brutal assassination... I had to dress him for those who wanted to come and see him off, but fewer than four colleagues came. Everyone is afraid. We live in terror". It was only four years prior that Murragares had survived another assassination attempt after his numerous reports detailing criminal behaviour in regions controlled by various groups. Three other journalists have been killed this year: Jorge Armenta, Victor Alvarez, and Maria Elena Feral. Zubillaga adds intimidation is nothing new for Mexican reporters, "but we're now seeing those threats being carried out". Many journalists have consequently begun self-censoring for fear of losing their lives, with a significant number changing address, avoiding lengthy public contact with families and switching routes to work.

The targeting of reporters is nothing new for Mexico, with many rights groups claiming it is one of the most dangerous places in the world for the profession. Shocking assassinations have been reported since 2000, with many being targeted for speaking out against organised crime. One particularly disturbing case occurred in 2016 when Miroslava Breach, a national reporter investigating links between gangs and corrupt officials in western Chihuahua, was shot eight times in front of her 14-year-old son. Left by her body was a note stating: "por lengua larga", meaning 'for your loose tongue'.

Another high-profile case occurred in 2017 when award-winning journalist Javier Valdez was brutally murdered for dedicating his life to exposing the workings of bandits. Wearing his iconic panama hat, Valdez was dragged from his car into a busy street at midday and shot 12 times. His death sent shockwaves throughout the community as many were shocked a writer with such a high-profile could be targeted.

In an interview with the BBC, newspaper journalist Oscar Murguía said he had decided to close his publication for good as a result of the violence. "It's a tragedy... It's an attack on our society, not only on journalists. There's no respect for the work of journalists. I prefer to have a journalist without a job than without a life". Numerous police bodyguards have also been murdered in the violence, with Pablo Murragares' personal protector also shot dead in Iguala. Human rights groups have pleaded with the Mexican government to intervene, with many reporters claiming to have a lack of trust authorities. However, the violence has only escalated. This year, Victor Alvarez, a news website editor in Acapulco was found beheaded and dismembered after authorities conducted an extensive search into his disappearance. RSF (Reporters Without Borders) demanded better protection for journalists, with the head of the non-profit NGO's Latin America bureau, Emmanuel Colombié, declaring: "President Andrés Manuel López Orbrador's government must... urgently take bold decisions to end the terrible spiral of violence against the media".

The situation in Mexico only appears to be worsening, with the death toll seemingly rising each passing month. It is clear more has to be done by the government and authorities to provide greater protection for those facing violence whilst exposing facts. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) found 90% of murders committed against journalists since 1992 have gone unpunished or unsolved. Though it is too late for some 140 reporters brutally killed for simply doing their jobs, action is needed to prevent further violence. It appears the Mexican media industry is haunted by a war on free speech, with many reporters having to go to extreme lengths in an attempt to avoid a similar fate. As the death toll rises, more and more outrage spreads throughout the international community, with everyone echoing the same sentiment: something has to be done.