

The Dallas Morning News

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“Threats to Press Freedom in the Americas”

My name is Alfredo Corchado and I am the Mexico Bureau Chief for The Dallas Morning News based in Mexico City. On behalf of my colleagues in Mexico I thank you for the opportunity to talk about such a critical issue... freedom of expression.

I would also like to personally commend Chairman Jeff Duncan and the members of the House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere for holding this important hearing.

I live in, work in, call home a country where every 26 hours a reporter is attacked - most of them by either the government, or criminal gangs. Too many journalists in my homeland of Mexico have paid the ultimate price. Today I hope to honor their memory.

Mexico, as many of you may know, is one of the most dangerous places to be a journalist.

Everyday, I walk in the shadow of more than 120,000 people killed, or disappeared in just over eight years, according to government statistics. Among them: dozens of Mexican journalists, colleagues who are more vulnerable and face a much more dangerous and precarious situation than I do.

Drug traffickers and corrupt government officials bully reporters—harassing them if they are lucky or silencing them for good, if they are not. Today, I speak to you in the memory of more than 50, or as many 120, some organizations, like Freedom House estimate, journalists who have either been killed or disappeared since Mexico's political transition began in 2000.

Today, there are regions in Mexico where reporters have elected to censor themselves. In other words, *see nothing, say nothing*. These are known as *regions of silence*.

Who can question the logic of my Mexican colleagues? The vast majority of those cases remain unsolved. Mexico's rule-of-law remains so, so weak. Institutions are virtually nonexistent. Crimes go unpunished. As my Mexican colleague Javier Garza, who collaborates in a project called Journalists at Risk that documents attacks against the press, says..."the most worrying aspect of this growing trend of violence is that Mexico is going backwards. "

This is a sad irony, because even with advances in elections, government transparency and media competition in the last 15 years, "...press freedom in Mexico is smaller ... not bigger," Garza said.

According to Freedom House, Mexico, from 2001 to 2011, was considered a "free country." Since 2011, Freedom House has rated Mexico "Not Free," in its annual Freedom of the Press report. That's right up there with Ecuador, Venezuela and Cuba. This is a designation that the Mexican government vehemently denies. Having worked in Cuba, I can say that when it comes to freedom of expression Mexico is indeed no Cuba. Yet, Mexico's inability to protect its journalists and defenders of freedom of expression against criminals is beyond shameful. It is both shocking and offensive to those who believe that journalism is a powerful tool to shine the light and hold the powerful accountable.

Just as outrageous, my Mexican colleagues say: In Mexico they still kill you twice: Once with a bullet, a blow to the head, or in a barrel of acid and then they kill you again through character assassination by spreading rumors about you, or even pressing criminal charges as we have seen repeatedly with journalists, especially those working in rural communities across Mexico.

The cause of so much violence against journalists, not only the most extreme form, such as murder,

kidnapping or beatings, but also threats, spying and harassment, is simple: impunity. Every attack against a journalist that goes unpunished invites the next one. Any politician, public official, police commander or criminal who wants to kill, kidnap, beat or threaten a journalist can do so because most of the people who have done it before got away with it.

Even in Mexico City, where we thought journalists like Carmen Aristegui were untouchable it appears now we were wrong. One of the most influential journalist in Mexico, Aristegui and her team uncovered, among other big stories, that the president and his wife had purchased a \$7.1 million dollar home from a government contractor, clearly a conflict of interest. Aristegui and other journalists organized a website for whistleblowers. In democratic countries such acts of courage in journalism would be awarded. In Mexico, Aristegui and her team lost their job.

Whatever, whoever is behind the firing, one thing is certain: freedom of expression in Mexico is threatened even further.

I was born in Mexico and grew up in the United States, earning along the way, a blue U.S. Passport. Today, I'm a binational citizen, holding both US and Mexican citizenship. Yet, I believe that being American is the reason I report on stories that many of my colleagues don't live long enough to tell. Those are stories about

the very same people who now hold pockets of the country hostage.

On July 2007, I got a call from a trusted U.S. source asking me, "Where are you?"

"In Mexico City, in La Condesa," I replied. Why?

"We have information that the Zetas plan to kill an American journalist within 24 hours and I think it's you. Get out."

The Zetas are Mexico's vicious paramilitary criminal organization. Some of the members, originally Mexican soldiers, were trained by US special elite forces to help defend the country from drug traffickers. A small group deserted and later formed their own criminal enterprise, known as the Zetas. They took over police departments, mayor's offices, newsrooms, entire regions. Now they were after me.

I felt the ground under me collapsed, my legs weaken, the life in me sucked away. I felt betrayed. I had always wanted to believe that I was a son of Mexico, and now someone wanted to kill me. I was a mess.

I had once asked this source about the likelihood that an American journalist would be targeted by a cartel. He said he had good and bad news: the good news, a Mexican cartel doesn't want to harm an American

journalist. It would bring too much attention to their estimated \$30 billion to \$40 billion industry. The consequences could be too messy for them. The bad news: You don't look American, carnal, bro.

See, I tell that story because I want to make something very clear: I am by no means more courageous or braver than any of my Mexican colleagues. I just want to believe that if something happens to me, someone, somewhere, someone in this room, will seek justice. I won't be just another number. I won't be a faceless victim.

Because as bad as my situation may sound, the danger I face pales in comparison to what my Mexican colleagues confront. If there's one take away today it is this one, one that I grapple with everyday. I believe I have been able to take more risks in my job simply because I am an American citizen and cartels fear the wrath of the U.S government. I have more protection.

In Mexico, Latin America, and across the world, journalists will only be safe when the aggressors – whether criminal groups, or public authorities – are brought to justice, when they pay a price. Today, in Mexico attacks against journalist are rarely, if ever solved. Mexico's National Human Rights Commission, CNDH, reported last year that nearly 90 percent of the attacks, murders and disappearances of journalists remain unpunished. As we say in Mexico: *La Vida No*

Vale Nada (Life is not worth a thing).

The Mexican government has a mechanism in place to protect journalists, one that the U.S. government supports. The government also has a special prosecutor. But both the mechanism and the prosecutor have been rarely enforced and largely ineffective. The US government needs to continue pressuring Mexico by raising concerns about attacks against Freedom of Expression.

Otherwise as WOLA (The Washington Office on Latin America) recently stated: Freedom of expression will continue to be limited in Mexico unless Mexican authorities conduct thorough investigations and prosecutions of these crimes, and implement effective mechanisms to protect human rights defenders and journalists at risk. We couldn't agree more.

Again, thank you very much.