



**Testimony of**

**Viviana Giacaman**  
**Regional Director for Latin America Programs**  
**Freedom House**

## **Violence against Journalists in Honduras**

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**  
**Human Rights in Honduras**

**Thursday, July 25, 2013**

## **Introduction**

Mr. Chairman, Honorable Members, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Commission today and provide my thoughts on the situation of violence against journalists in Honduras. I am aware that this Commission and individual members of Congress have been engaged in the human rights situation in Honduras, particularly after the 2009 coup, and I commend your efforts to highlight this issue.

Very few people can locate Honduras on a map or name its capital, yet, this Central American country of eight-and-a-half million inhabitants beats some world records, including having the highest murder rate in the world and hosting the most violent city in the world outside of a war zone, San Pedro Sula, with 177 killings per 100,000 inhabitants. (By comparison, all of Honduras has a rate of 86 murders per 100,000, the U.S., 5 and the UK, 1). Honduras is also one of the most dangerous countries in the world to practice journalism.

In my remarks, I will focus precisely on the situation of the press in Honduras, drawing from the analytical and programmatic work of Freedom House in Honduras, as well as the information I gathered in extensive interviews with local stakeholders during my last trip to the country two months ago.

I will structure my comments around four topics. First, I will describe the situation of press freedom and violence against journalists in the country, particularly after the 2009 coup. Second, I will present some of the arguments that explain this persistent violence against media. Third, I will show some of the hopeful reactions and responses that the violence against the press has triggered. And, to conclude, I will offer some recommendations for how to address the problem.

### **1. The Situation: Deterioration of press freedom**

Freedom House – the oldest human rights organization in the United States – has been systematically tracking the state of press freedom in each country of the world since it published the first edition of its Freedom of the Press survey in 1980. The study, which looks at the entire enabling environment for media freedom, has shown a steady decline in press freedom across Latin America in the past few years, the deepest and fastest deterioration of any other region in the world.

In its 2013 edition of the survey, 5 out of the 35 countries of the Americas were considered to have a “Not Free” press: Cuba, Ecuador, Paraguay, Venezuela and Honduras. Based on the numerical scores assigned in the survey, Honduras ranks 140 out of 153 countries analyzed. In Latin America only Cuba and Venezuela have a worse press situation than Honduras.

Press freedom in Honduras showed a sharp decline after the 2009 coup, making it the ninth fastest deteriorating country in the world. The violent climate, including intimidation, threats, attacks and killings of journalists are the most acute problems, along with a rampant impunity and self-censorship.

## 2. The Causes of Violence

Unlike many countries in the world – where violence against the press stem from governmental repression against dissident voices – the threat to journalism in Honduras is more multidimensional, complex and obscure, and because of that, it is more difficult to tackle. Transnational criminal organizations, drug traffickers and select economic groups, all of which wield considerable economic resources and power are likely behind attacks to the press. In addition, public officials, police forces and other security sector personnel – a often acting in complicity with illegal groups – a also have interests in silencing the press. Through their work, journalists affect the interests of many different powerful groups and individuals and open so many flanks simultaneously that it is challenging to pinpoint the sources of the threats.

Impunity in Honduras is particularly worrisome and is a decisive contributing factor to violence. According to local human rights groups, there have been 82,000 killings in Honduras since 1990 and only 2% of those cases have resulted in convictions. Moreover, the acknowledged capacity of the judiciary to investigate cases brought to them is limited to about 60% of the complaints they receive. Of them, only 20% are actually investigated and 1% of them result in convictions. Without a deterrence, violence only spirals.

A fundamental question one has to ask when analyzing attacks against the press is whether violence is a direct consequence of the journalists' work. In the case of Honduras, where judicial investigations into these crimes is almost non-existent, an analysis of the press may provide some insights. Is there strong investigative journalism in Honduras? No. Is the press particularly savvy and combative? No. However, an analysis of the available data shows that in the vast majority of the 55 cases of violence against journalists since 2009, the targeted journalists were reporting or investigating organized crime activities, drug trafficking, local government corruption, land distribution disputes or issues related to the 2009 coup.

It is also important to note, Mr. Chairman, that there are those who argue that as trafficking of drugs through Honduran territory has increased, so has the overall violence that typically accompanies this illicit activity. Journalists, in this view, are not being specifically targeted, but are victims of the environment.

The next important question is whether these acts of violence have affected the quantity, quality and issues journalists report on. In the case of Honduras the answer is: Yes. Regardless of its causes, violence has resulted in a great deal of self-censorship, and there, Mr. Chairman, is where the most important danger lies. All of us who care about human rights have the imperative to prevent Honduras from turning into another Mexico. In Mexico, the challenges for the press are similar, but the situation has reached such levels that several states are now information "black holes": there is simply no reporting, no information available about any issue related to organized crime or narcotrafficking. Even worse, many newspapers barely report when one of their own journalists is killed. Without an effective press, citizens cannot participate in the decisions that affect them and the very basis of democracy is compromised.

### **3. Reactions and Responses**

Violence-reduction strategies require a comprehensive and a long-term commitment, including technical assistance and financial resources. They also require the political will to address the underlying causes of violence, including institutional weakness, corruption, lack of transparency of the judicial process, impunity, poverty, and social exclusion. The G-16, or group of 16 donor countries and international organizations plus the government of Honduras, of which the U.S. is a part, has engaged in a number of initiatives related to security sector reform, judicial reform, citizen security, crime prevention, economic growth and more. In this process the Honduran government has performed below expectations and has shown neither strong leadership nor robust political will to effectively carry out reforms.

The Honduran government did make an important step with the creation of the Ministry of Human Rights, which has taken the initiative of establishing a National Human Rights Plan and a Human Rights Public Policy.

But how has society responded to violence? Are there reasons for hope?

In October of 2012, the 22-year-old son of Julieta Castellanos, the rector of Honduras' largest university and a well-known public figure was killed, along with a friend, as they left a party. The perpetrators were several police officers, and there is an ongoing judicial process against them thanks to the persistence of Ms. Castellanos to push for the investigation and trial of her son's case.

The case represents a milestone for Honduran society. The prominence of the rector and her determination in pushing for an investigation and trial of those responsible made the case extraordinarily prominent. Regular citizens empathized with Castellanos' pain and admired her courage. For the first time, individuals and civil society organizations mobilized against impunity while she firmly stood in front of the government and the courts demanding justice. And the institutions responded.

Whether the fight against cartels in Honduras is successful, analysts say, will depend in large part, precisely on persuading the public to stand up to the intimidation that has impeded investigations and justice.

### **4. Recommendations**

1. With general elections coming up in November, it is critically important to keep an eye on each candidate's stand on press freedom. So far, violence against journalists has not been a part of the campaign agenda of any of the political parties, although some of them have expressed their commitment to solve the issues related to organized crime. The U.S. Congress's role urging candidates to specifically focus on addressing violence against journalists could have a tremendous impact.

2. The U.S. government has created a number of initiatives targeting human rights specifically. First, the bilateral Human Rights Working Group brings together the U.S. and the Honduran government to discuss strategies and programs to improve the human rights situation of the country. Also, the U.S. has supported the creation of the Special Victims Task Force, which aims to break the cycle of impunity against vulnerable groups, including journalists. While the real impact of these efforts is yet to be seen, they are steps in the right direction and the U.S. Congress should encourage the administration to continue these efforts, monitor their impact and improve them as appropriate.
  
3. While supporting long-term and comprehensive strategies to address the underlying causes of violence, it is equally important to avoid the slaughter of journalists by providing some level of protection. One of the recommendations the Honduran government received at its Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations in 2010 was the creation of a national mechanism for the protection of journalists, to provide timely and effective preventative measures for at-risk journalists. The Honduran government and civil society worked on a law to create such a mechanism, but it is currently unimplemented, allegedly due to a lack of funding. The U.S. Congress should specifically target part of its aid to Honduras for the effective implementation of this mechanism. Assistance should include technical advice from the Colombian government, which has over a decade of experience managing a similar program.
  
4. The U.S. Congress should finally encourage the administration to provide technical, financial and political support to the Ministry of Human Rights, in particular for the implementation of the recently created National Human Rights Plan and human rights public policies.