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Guatemala: Amnesty International and ARTICLE 19 warn of attacks on freedom of press

On occasion of World Press Freedom Day, Amnesty International and ARTICLE 19 condemn the fact that journalists and media professionals are having to work in an increasingly hostile environment. They are constantly subjected to threats, intimidation and defamatory campaigns in retaliation for their legitimate media work, as well as to unfounded criminal prosecutions without a fair trial, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance and lethal violence.

Of particular concern is the increasing use of criminalization by the Public Prosecutor's Office to silence journalists and media professionals.

The recent re-imprisonment of journalist Jose Rubén Zamora Marroquín on 10 March highlights the extent of political persecution against freedom of expression and of the press in one of the most emblematic cases in the region of legal harassment of journalists because of their activities. Zamora, declared a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International, has been unjustly persecuted for over 1000 days simply for working as a journalist and calling out corruption. Despite UN experts declaring his detention arbitrary and demanding his release a year ago, he was returned to the Mariscal Zavala prison, where former Indigenous leaders of the 48 cantons of Totonicapán are also being held for their participation in the protests of 2023. Amnesty International and ARTICLE 19 warn that not only are the criminal proceedings against Zamora being delayed, but that this is resulting in the accumulation of arbitrary and illegal actions against him and, indeed, against journalism in the country, as unfounded criminal proceedings amount to censorship of the press.

Unfortunately, like him, dozens of journalists and media professionals from different organizations are facing unfounded criminal proceedings as a result of the instrumentalization of the criminal justice system against dissenting voices, as is the case of Juan Luis Font, Lucía Ixchíu and Andrea Ixchíu, currently in exile, and Robinson Ortega, among others. They are also subjected to virulent campaigns of stigmatization and intimidation, in both the digital and physical space, without receiving either protection or justice from the authorities. Attacks against journalist Nelton Rivera and media outlets Prensa Comunitaria, Ruda, Vox Populi and La Hora are other worrying examples of the violation of press freedom in Guatemala.

In this context, the End the Fear Network in Guatemala (*Red Rompe el Miedo Guatemala*, RRMG) registered a total of 77 attacks against the press in 2024, mainly through intimidation, information censorship and judicial harassment, with an increased number of attacks in the digital space. In the case of community and Indigenous media, direct threats and physical attacks are the most widespread. Public servants, and in particular those working at the community level, continue to be the main perpetrators of such violence.

Despite the actions of the current government, such as facilitating a formal visit by the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) early in 2024, creating a special body for analysis of attacks against human rights defenders and the press, or the signing of the Declaration of Chapultepec on freedom of expression and press freedoms by President Bernardo Arévalo, among others, no specific improvements for the practice of journalism have materialized.



In the face of impunity, a lack of effective protection measures and persistent judicial harassment, journalists are forced to take their own security measures and even go into exile when persecution becomes untenable. The government must make progress in fulfilling the reparations ordered by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in the case of “Human Rights Defender *et al.* v. Guatemala”, and specifically on a policy for the protection of human rights defenders that will pave the way towards the creation of a specialized mechanism with the capacity to address the different forms of violence experienced by the Guatemalan media in all its diversity.

We recognize and value the work of those who bravely continue to practice journalism and hold those in power to account, both from within and outside Guatemala. Receiving and generating information is a human right, and we urge the Guatemalan authorities to fully guarantee such right. We also call on the Guatemalan government to protect journalists, and on the Public Prosecutor’s Office to immediately stop their criminalization of them.

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