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Reporters Without Borders  
Contact: Jean-François Julliard  
Tel: (33) 1 4483-8484  
E-mail: julliard@rsf.org

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**Contribution of Reporters Without Borders (a non-governmental  
organisation in special consultative status) about press freedom in  
COLOMBIA**

**Introduction: Overview of press freedom situation**

Colombia is one of the countries of the Americas where journalists are directly and physically threatened. The media, especially in the provinces, still risk severe reprisals if they tackle sensitive topics such as drug-trafficking, armed conflict and corruption. The “predators” are many.

The main enemies of Colombian journalists are the paramilitary forces that once fought leftist guerrillas but have not disarmed and still have influence among politicians, despite the government’s demobilisation programme between June 2003 and June 2006. Some members of the United Self-Defence Groups of Colombia (AUC – once 30,000 fighters) have joined together again and now operate independently.

The “Black Eagles” group in the Atlantic provinces terrorised the local media in late 2006 and early 2007. They also made death threats to prominent journalists in the capital, including Carlos Lozano, editor of the Communist weekly *Voz*, Hollman Morris, producer of the “Contravía” programme on the public TV station *Canal Uno*, and Gonzálo Guillén, correspondent of the US daily *El Nuevo Herald*, because they criticised President Alvaro Uribe’s government. Morris was among well-known people sympathetic to the opposition whose phones were tapped by police intelligence officials, a scandal disclosed by defence minister Juan Manuel Santos in May 2007.

Colombian correspondents of the Latin American TV station *Telesur*, founded by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in 2005, received threats from the Colombian army after the Uribe government accused Chávez of tolerating guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Several journalists, including Pedro Cárdenas, editor of the magazine *La Verdad*, and Rafael Gallego, head of community radio station *Ecos de Tiquisio*, were threatened by paramilitaries. Threats to journalists increased in the northeastern department of Santander in the first quarter of 2008.

The guerrillas are also a threat to journalists despite the military setbacks suffered by the FARC in early 2008. The other main guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), kidnapped freelance journalist Mario Alfonso Puello and two other people in the northern department of La Guajira on 17 February for unknown reasons. Antonio Macías Carrera, of *Radio Surcolombiana* and also a town councillor, was shot dead on 9 February in Algeciras, in the southeastern department of Huila, where the FARC has often attacked media offices. Those responsible have not been found and the motive for the killing is unknown.

Fewer journalists have been killed during Uribe's eight-year rule and only one of the six deaths in 2007 was apparently because of journalistic work. But more and more journalists are fleeing their home regions or the country itself as soon as they get death threats. Seven fled in 2006, six in 2007 and three so far this year.

### **1. Online freedom**

No specific data but the situation is generally satisfactory.

### **2. Government steps to improve the situation**

Five journalists obtained protection in 2007 under the Organisation of American States (OAS) journalists protection programme, that includes the police human rights group (GRUDH), which has 64 offices around the country and is headquartered in Bogota. The programme involves constant knowledge of the whereabouts of threatened journalists and routine surveillance of them. "Security packages" (partial surveillance, bodyguards and bulletproof vehicles) can also be provided by the interior and justice ministry. But most journalists involved say they do not trust the authorities.

### **3. Working with non-governmental organisations (NGO)**

FLIP, a Reporters Without Borders partner organisation founded in 1996, set up an alert and protection network (RAP) for journalists in 1998, operated by 12 correspondents around the country. Since 2000, FLIP has been among the organisations consulted by the government's journalist protection programme.

### **4. Recommendations**

- Demobilisation of armed groups should continue, with effective disarmament and reincorporation of their members into civilian life.
- The police human rights group should have enough staff and money to both protect journalists and investigate threats to them, as agreed with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IAHRC).

- The media should give more publicity to attacks on freedom of expression and press freedom in the country.
- The media should be allowed free access to judicial hearings of paramilitaries, a right recognised by the constitutional court in September 2006.
- The most important media outlets should help strengthen journalist trade unions and protection programmes, such as the new Colombian National Journalists Federation founded in May 2007.
- A full investigation should be made of the recent phone-tapping scandal, revealed by the defence minister in May 2007 and involving several opposition journalists, and a shake-up of intelligence services should be considered.

*The data in this report has been gathered and verified by Reporters Without Borders, which has a network of correspondents in 130 countries and partner organisations in a score of countries.*

*In some countries, a journalist can be imprisoned for several years just for a word or a photo someone does not like. Reporters Without Borders, founded in 1985, works daily to support press freedom because imprisoning or killing a journalist removes a key witness and threatens the right of all of us to be kept informed of the news.*