



November 14, 2008

Another brutal week in Juarez and Chihuahua

by Frontera NorteSur

El Diario de Juarez journalist Armando Rodriguez Carreon was well-known for countless stories about gangland killings in his hometown of Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua. For years, the 40-year-old police beat reporter tirelessly published pieces about the latest executions in a violence-torn city.

Rodriguez launched his journalistic career as a technician and photographer for the Ciudad Juarez Channel 44 television station before moving into print during the early 1990s. His newspaper career closely paralleled the violent rise of the Juarez drug cartel and the women's slayings that became known worldwide as femicides. Popularly known as "El Choco," Rodriguez was among the first reporters to write about the discoveries of raped and slain women on the outskirts of Ciudad Juarez.

Rodriguez's stories, which relied a lot on police sources and often did not implicate any particular suspects, were characterized by an almost matter-of-fact quality that kept to the narrative even as violence kept escalating. On Thursday morning, Nov. 13, Rodriguez became a victim himself when he was shot outside his home by a gunman who reportedly fled in a waiting car.

No possible motive for the homicide was publicly disclosed, but it was reported that Rodriguez received a text threat on his cell-phone earlier this year. His killing occurred one week to the day that a severed human head was discovered at a monument to journalists in Ciudad Juarez.

Local media, government officials and Mexican and international journalist organizations quickly condemned Rodriguez's killing, which carried the trademark of organized crime.

Numerous public commentaries about the murder were posted on news websites in Ciudad Juarez and neighboring El Paso. The Rodriguez slaying was covered on the Nov. 13 prime-time newscast of the U.S.-based Spanish language television network Univision, which reaches millions of viewers.

A Mexico City-based press freedom advocacy group, the Center for Journalism and Public Ethics (CEPET), said crimes against journalists like Rodriguez "represent attacks against society because they damage the right to be informed." The non-governmental organization urged authorities to conduct "an exhaustive investigation, clarify the facts and punish those responsible so impunity does not feed other crimes."

Rodriguez's murder topped a spectacularly violent week in Ciudad Juarez and the state capital of Chihuahua City four hours down the highway to the south. Incidents included the gunning down of victims in public thoroughfares during peak business hours, the firebombing of businesses and the dumping of murdered bodies with intimidating messages in public places.

The Rodriguez murder also came amid a new wave of threats and pressures against the Ciudad Juarez press. For instance, CEPET reported that the Ciudad Juarez daily El Mexicano was the target of intimidation by individuals purporting to be agents of the Chihuahua state attorney general's office last week.

According to CEPET, a state police officer identified as "Perez" and accompanied by other men in official vehicles strolled into the newspaper's office Nov. 4 and demanded to interrogate columnist Mario Hector Silva about sources the writer used in a story. When informed that Silva was not on the premises, the officers allegedly grew angry, threatened other employees and threw a photographer's camera in the trash.

With the Rodriguez killing, at least six journalists have been murdered in Mexico this year so far. Other victims

include Oaxaca radio announcers Teresa Bautista Merino and Felicitas Martinez Sanchez, Tabasco radio man Alejandro Zenon Fonseca Estrada, Michoacan newspaper director Miguel Villagomez Valle, and Chihuahua writer David Garcia Monroy.

An international observer mission spearheaded by the Committee to Protect Journalists, Article 19, Open Society Institute and other press advocacy organizations traveled to Mexico this year to investigate conditions confronting journalists. Despite legal reforms, the mission concluded that Mexican journalists are in dire circumstances due to violence, impunity and governmental indifference.

Most of the 2008 journalist murders, as well as earlier cases like the 2006 murder of U.S. journalist Brad Will in Oaxaca, remain unsolved and unpunished. In a statement issued on November 11, Will's family and lawyer took strong issue with the contention of the Office of the Federal Attorney General (PGR) that the documentarian's killers are in custody.

Criticizing the arrests of anti-government activists for the murder, the Will family said the PGR ignored forensic evidence and eyewitness accounts that point to pro-government paramilitaries and public officials as the probable killers.

In its statement, the Will family called on Mexican and U.S. civil society, as well as human rights, to "speak out about the impunity that is blocking this case from advancing and in defense of the rights to freedom of expression."

Only hours after Armando Rodriguez was murdered, the PGR informed the Mexican media that the same special unit assigned to investigate the Will homicide was looking into the killing of the Ciudad Juarez journalist.

Additional sources:

- El Diario de Juarez November 13, 2008.
- Newspapertree.com, November 13, 2008. Article by Sito Negrón.
- Frontenet.com, November 13, 2008. Article by Sergio Valdez.
- Univision, November 13, 2008.
- CEPET, November 6 and November 13, 2008. Press statements.
- Lapolaka.com, October 14, 2008 and November 13, 2008.
- El Universal, November 13, 2008. Article by Maria de la Luz Gonzalez.
- La Jornada, October 11, 2008. Article by Ernesto Martinez and La Jornada Michoacan.
- CimaNoticias, August 14, 2008. Article by Lourdes Godinez Leal.