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Violence silences journalists

By **Lise Olsen** - Express-News

Ciudad Juárez has long been known for its gutsy newspaper reporters who never shrank from a grisly crime scene.

I sat with several at a reception for investigative journalists in Ciudad Juárez years ago when one editor's police radio crackled: A man fell dead in his plate of sushi at a nearby restaurant in an apparent organized crime hit. Everyone rushed out.

Despite disturbing spates of violence and the serial killings of women, law-abiding residents in Ciudad Juárez until recently experienced a murder rate generally below that of large U.S. cities.

That changed with this year's murder boom that has claimed an astounding 1,300 victims.

The crime scene — and victim — at the Nov. 13 slaying was familiar. El Diario's veteran crime reporter, Armando Rodriguez, was shot dead in a company car in front of his home.

He apparently was killed for doing a job vitally important to us all. Rodriguez was the only reporter in Juárez to keep a complete count of victims in the 2008 bloodbath. In 10 months, he'd written 901 stories.

For nearly two decades, Rodriguez had been part of a small but vitally important network of border truth-tellers. Together, these journalists collect first-person witnesses' accounts and describe murder scenes — providing the most reliable reports on murders that are part of the ongoing war between drug cartels and the Mexican military.

Molly Molloy, a New Mexico State University librarian who runs a leading border Web site and mailing list, was among those who relied on his tally and coverage to draw attention to the alarming wave of homicides in Juárez. The Mexico City-based press freedom group, the Center for Journalism and Public Ethics, condemned all such “attacks against society because they damage the right to be informed.”

Elsewhere on the border, several other key Mexican journalists had already fallen victim to violence.

In 2004 alone, two top editors were executed: Francisco Ortiz Franco, of the influential weekly Zeta in Tijuana and Roberto Mora, of El Mañana in Nuevo Laredo.

A few months later, Alfredo Jimenez Mota, primary crime reporter for El Imparcial, flagship in a chain of family-owned newspapers in Sonora and Baja California, disappeared while investigating drug trafficking and organized crime.

Journalists at those papers believe organized crime engineered the killings to silence them — conclusions

backed by evidence later unearthed by non-profit groups who investigated the murders.

The three murders affected newspapers in Northern Mexico that had long been among the most professional and most persistent in covering drug trafficking and related violence in Northern Mexico along with others, such as El Diario and Norte in Ciudad Juárez and El Debate in Sinaloa, which earlier this week had a grenade lobbed inside its offices.

Newspaper leaders denounced killings and pushed authorities to seek justice. But El Imparcial then announced it would no longer investigate organized crime. El Mañana eventually abandoned coverage of many murders and took bylines off crime stories after its newspaper office was subsequently attacked in 2006 by gunmen carrying automatic weapons who set off a hand grenade and killed a reporter.

Even Zeta — a Tijuana weekly famous for its mix of investigation and advocacy — became less aggressive after the murder of Ortiz and the subsequent death from cancer of founder Jesus Blancornelas in November 2006.

By comparison, journalists in Ciudad Juárez had reason to feel somewhat more secure. Until 2008. This year alone, at least two reporters have fled from death threats into El Paso — one filed for asylum.

Editors at El Diario, a family-owned newspaper with considerable clout and respect, tried to reduce risks, yet continue coverage. His editor recently had asked Rodriguez to change beats after he got a threat via text message, but he refused, according to CPJ.

Yet in a disturbing story El Diario published last Sunday under the byline “Staff,” the newspaper reported many Juárez journalists have changed jobs, beats or homes in 2008. One Web site editor abandoned his work after being told he was “next.” El Diario also reported that narcos had used official municipal police radio frequencies to warn journalists away from crime scenes.

It seems clear both from what's happening in Juárez and elsewhere that drug traffickers want to both continue to kill with impunity and to halt all coverage. They seem to be getting closer to achieving that terrible goal.

Rodriguez' own murder happened almost a week after criminals left a human head in the city's Plaza of the Journalist.

Since 2000, 24 journalists have been killed in Mexico, at least seven directly because of their reporting on crime, according to CPJ. Seven others have disappeared.

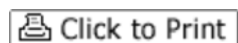
Rodriguez' death has left a heavy burden on his colleagues — and on all of us. Who will continue his work? Who will speak for the dead? Who will pressure for justice in his case and others that remain unsolved?

And who will allow the wave of violence on the very doorstep of the United States to be ignored?

Lise Olsen is a reporter for the Houston Chronicle.

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