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EDITORIALS

Mexico's Press in the Crossfire: World Press Freedom Day

Op-Ed by Amb. Antonio O. Garza published in Spanish by Mexican newsgroup "Reforma"

May 3, 2008

In the words of one of our founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, "Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost." Some newspapers, radio and television stations in Mexico admit that they have begun to censor themselves in the face of violence and intimidation from the narco-traffickers that seek to undermine every pillar of Mexican society. Others bravely carry on reporting the news, working out of offices under 24-hour police protection, hiding the identity of reporters for fear of reprisals, willing to pay the ultimate price to defend not their own freedom, but the right of their countrymen to be informed, to know the truth.

I am inspired by the courage and persistence of the Mexican press corps. In what some independent observers have called the most deadly country in the Americas for journalists, reporters here continue to ply their trade, to inform the people in defense of democracy. On International Press Freedom Day we must recognize that the human toll on reporters in Mexico threatens the fundamental political right of people in a free society to be informed.

So far in 2008 five journalists have been murdered, at least one has

disappeared and many others have suffered attempts on their lives or been subjected to threats and harassment. Last year's grim toll was two reporters killed and three newspaper distributors slain. The violence is multi-faceted, from narco-violence to attempts at political intimidation, from the north to the south of the country.

President Calderon has repeatedly recognized the importance of protecting the press, stating in February that, "...the authorities are duty-bound to punish with the full force of the law those who attempt to silence the media through violence and intimidation. Every attack against the press is an attack against free expression and an attack against Mexico." And beyond the federal level, at the state and local level more can and should be done to protect journalists, publishers, newspapers and broadcasters.

Brad Will's family and the American people are still waiting for results of the investigation into his death. The Committee to Protect Journalists and the Inter-American Press Association have both demanded a full investigation. Brad was in Oaxaca City in 2006 to tell the world an important story about political unrest there, when he was shot and killed while covering a protest. The Mexican authorities have now agreed to allow independent experts to examine evidence in the case, and I sincerely hope the investigation will move forward to identify and prosecute those responsible for Will's death.

Another crime in Oaxaca has recently shocked the world. On April 7, two young women working for an indigenous community radio station were gunned down as their car drove through an apparent ambush -- three other people including a three-year old child were wounded in the attack. In response to the apparent political intimidation, another reporter at the station has bravely declared, "No one

will silence us - they cannot shut us up or scare us off." Authorities have yet to name suspects in this attack.

In the face of this brave spirit, this defiance of those who wield the sword, who would not be moved to support those who defend our right to know carrying nothing but a pen or a camera? Not only on International Press Freedom Day, but throughout the year, we must insist on the right of journalists to be our eyes and ears, to pursue a story and follow the facts where-ever they lead, whether to the lair of a drug dealer or to the halls of power. We must call on the police to shield the press from violence, on government officials to open their doors and their files, and on the courts to bring to justice those who commit crimes against journalists.

As Mexico moves forward to end the impunity of the narco-criminals, let us call as well for an end to the impunity of violence against journalists, for full investigations of the cases of Brad Will and the others who have lost their lives protecting our freedoms, and a better day for journalists in Mexico.

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