

## ENTREVISTAS PBI MÉXICO

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**Entrevistas** is a publication of PBI Mexico that highlights situations that increase risks to the physical or psychological integrity of Mexican human rights defenders, or that damage the legitimacy of their work. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the opinions of PBI Mexico

### The Opinions of Mexican journalists in the context of the visit to Mexico of two Special Rapporteurs for the Freedom of Expression from the UN and the Inter American Commission for Human Rights

*The Special Rapporteur for the Freedom of Expression from the Inter American Commission for Human Rights, Dr. Catalina Botero Marino, and the Special Rapporteur from the United Nations for Freedom of Expression Dr. Frank La Rue visited Mexico from August 9<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup>. In this context, PBI interviewed two journalists who work in the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca: Juan Angulo Osorio and Pedro Matias. Juan Angulo Osorio is the Director of the newspaper 'El Sur de Acapulco'. Having written an article, 'The lines of investigation: The Counterinsurgency', which analysed the assassination of PRD Congressman Armando Chavarria Barrera, the State Attorney General of Guerrero ordered his detention and interrogation. Pedro Matias is a well-known Oaxacan journalist who writes for the local daily 'Noticias', as well as the national magazine 'Proceso'. Having been kidnapped and subjected to physical aggressions in 2008, Pedro went to live in Germany. However, he recently returned to Oaxaca where he continues his work as a journalist.*

#### *What do you hope for from the visit of the Rapporteurs?*

**Juan Angulo Osorio:** I hope that they realise the situation which is facing journalists in Mexico and make urgent recommendations so that those carrying out this profession can count upon better protection from authorities at all levels of government. We hope that this visit serves to pressure the State so that it recognises that it is obliged to protect our labour. As journalists we don't have any more privileges than any other citizens but we are a medium of expression for society before the different sectors of power. Because of this, we have a profession which requires a special protection from the State – in general the authorities don't understand this.

**Pedro Matías:** I hope that the documentation which they have received helps them to form recommendations. But it is more important that the State is obligated to fulfil them. In Mexico they believe that, upon accepting a recommendation, it is as if they have already fulfilled it. To fulfil it is: to accept it and to respond to it.

It is vital that the international organisms and their rapporteurs be stricter with the Mexican



State and demand that it comply with the international treaties which it has signed. [At the moment], it is on the contrary: there aren't advances, there aren't results.

In the case of journalists, there have been more than 65 assassinated between the year 2000 and today, as well as 11 disappeared. These cases haven't been solved. According to the National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH), there is no political will in the Government to attend to

these cases.

***What types of risks face journalist in Guerrero and Oaxaca, and in Mexico in general?***

**Pedro Matías:** We can talk about two Mexicos: The Mexico of the North and the Mexico of the South. In the Mexico of the North there is more industry, more employment, a bit more of the democratic transition; and in the Mexico of the South, there is a concentration of poverty and the highest levels of social inequality but also, in Oaxaca, there is a community tradition. In the North of the country there is a violence which is the product of organized crime and, in the South, there is another type of violence, political and *caciquil* because there has not been democratic change. Here in Oaxaca you have to deal with these powers. They react against all the journalists who dare to question them or to highlight acts of corruption, of abuse of authority, of different forms of repression: dismissal, a conditioning of governmental advertising which, when it is taken away, hangs the media outlets and obliges them to disappear. This is the least of it, the most is when they kidnap you, they threaten you or they disappear you or, in the worst of cases, they kill you.

**Juan Angulo Osorio:** We are a very vulnerable sector because we are close to what is going on, many times we are witnesses to clashes. In this war [of the State against the drug traffickers], the authorities, as much as the drug traffickers, want to have control of information. When a journalist does his job and informs, he or she can pay for it, perhaps with their life. The most worrying thing is the impunity which affects the majority, if not all, of the cases of murders of journalists. This provokes much of the media to auto-censure itself and stop offering information about organised crime, or they limit themselves to only publish official information. This situation would be very different if, once a journalist were assassinated, the guilty party were found; if the price to pay for killing journalists were to rise. But whilst there is impunity, we remain in this situation of vulnerability.

The majority of the methods used to harass journalists here in Guerrero are through indirect pressures. One is through an advertising boycott. These newspapers don't sell enough copies because they are expensive in comparison to the minimum wage in the country. So, newspapers don't depend upon their readers but their advertisers. In many states the principal advertiser is the Government. In Guerrero, to not

have advertising from the State is practically a death certificate because there doesn't exist a strong enough business community to sustain the newspapers. What's more, if a media is standing up to the Government, even if the Governor doesn't give the order, it will still stop getting advertisements of businesses. In Guerrero the Government is not only the principal employer, but it is also the main [purchaser]. If the businesses believe that, if they advertise in a certain daily they will make the Governor angry, then they will stop advertising in that media.

We shouldn't forget that institutions of the State are used to carry out audits of the accounts of the journalistic businesses. One would imagine that they choose at random the businesses which they will audit each year, but they have audited us practically every year. Neither should we forget the function of the Attorney General's office: they obliged me to make a statement about something which I had written an article about, using the argument that us journalists are just like any other citizen. That is not true, if I steal from somebody then they should put me in prison and punish me but for something which I wrote, no, that is untouchable. Also, we suffer from a discrediting of our profession: they say we lie, we twist the facts, that we're not objective. And, finally, one way to discredit those journalists who were murdered in Guerrero is to say that they were not murdered because of their work.

***Taking into account the aggressions which journalists are facing because of their work, what protection mechanisms could be useful for minimising their risks?***

**Juan Angulo Osorio:** The first step would be a fundamental change of attitude. There is no country where politicians love journalists, but in many they respect them. It should be understood that our work is very important for society. The first step is recognition by the authorities. 15 years ago, the right to information was put in the constitution but there is still no law which indicates how this constitutional principal is going to be put into practice. There is nothing more than a paragraph in the constitution. There is a public prosecutor for attention to journalists who are victims. But it doesn't function well.

It could be useful to combat the indirect forms of pressure towards the media and make crimes against media workers federal crimes. In Mexico, in general, the institutions are weak; the factions of power have more influence than the powers which are constitutionally established. The

television, organized crime, some unions, some business chambers, have more influence than the President, the Chamber of Deputies, the Chamber of Senators. That is a national problem and it is exacerbated and arrives to extremes in the states, I mean, in the states if the republic, the institutions are even weaker.

**Pedro Matías:** In Mexico we have lived incredible situations which are forcing the journalists to organize themselves in order to protest and demand guarantees from the Mexican Government. We have also observed that international organisms have focused their attention on Mexico. This is very positive because only when the eyes of the world put their attention upon Mexico will the Mexican State react.

Independent mechanisms are needed because if it is the State which is hitting you then you are not going to go and report it. There has to be a mechanism which is independent from the executive, legislative and judicial powers. The CNDH (National Human Rights Commission) is documenting murders and disappearances but it does not have a mechanism in order to sanction State authorities or to give compensation.

**What role does the right of access to information play in the strengthening of democratic institutions in Mexico?**

**Juan Angulo Osorio:** The fundamental problem is that journalism does not have the specific weight which it ought to have. The auto-censorship [of

the media] affects the whole of society. Society ought to be informed about what is happening in their environment in order to be able to intervene, mobilise, form opinions, question the work of authorities, construct instruments in order to influence the reality they are living in. If we auto-censor ourselves, we are taking away the weapons from society for their self defence.

**Pedro Matías:** It is indispensable. 2006 in Oaxaca, for me, is a point of reference. There were different commercial media outlets, some with commitments to the Government, to which the people listened and went to to understand [the situation].

After 2006, the people were fed up because the media had opted to be loudspeakers for the Government and [vilify] a social movement of great magnitude. *Radio Plantón* became a reference point. In August, this movement decided to take the commercial medias which, afterwards, the Government re-took. Finally they only conserved *Radio Universidad*. When the Government decided to take away *Radio Universidad*, it became a bunker because it was the only media which [the social movement] had. Afterwards, the media returned to their day-to-day but without credibility in the eyes of society. So then alternative media began to appear: community radios and web pages. It became necessary to seek spaces where one could say what others were silencing. This is one of the big lessons which the movement left us.

For more information about the visit of the Rapporteurs to Mexico, see the web page Office in Mexico of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: <http://www.hchr.org.mx/> (Spanish).

For information about the journalist Juan Angulo (in Spanish) see: 'Las líneas de investigación', *La Jornada*, September 3 2009. 'Detienen al periodista Juan Angulo por caso Chavarría', *El Proceso*, December 29 2009.

For information about the journalist Pedro Marías (in Spanish) see: 'Fundación alemana ofrece becas a perseguidos políticos', *La Jornada*, March 19 2010.