

**The Grave Risks for Journalists and Those Who Stand
for Freedom of Expression in Honduras
Testimony of Rev. Ismael Moreno Coto, S.J.
for the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
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Standing up for freedom of expression is, without a doubt, one of the most uncomfortable experiences in life; and in a country like Honduras, it means living with anxiety, insecurity, suspicion, distrust, demands, warnings, and threats. It also means having to come to grips with the idea of death.

How can opinions be freely expressed, news and information given, and analysis shared in a country where the very institutions of the state have been distorted? How can freedom of expression be exercised in a country where all of the rules have been broken and we have been left with violence and death as the only criteria and parameters to guide ourselves by?

In the last three years, 25 journalists and social communicators have been murdered in Honduras. The names and further information about them are included at the end of this report. Why were they murdered? What is the common pattern in these crimes? It is not an ideological or political pattern, because the dead include people who were part of the resistance to the coup, but also those who worked for media outlets that supported the coup. Some had not sided with any of the various ideological currents of our very polarized political sectors. What is the pattern, then, of so much death?

It is true that in the murders of journalists and social communicators, express political or ideological patterns do not emerge as the major pattern. However, the murders do show a clear pattern; they have all occurred in a place where institutional state structure that has been deformed and adulterated, where the government has stopped being an expression of the rule of law, and has chosen instead to represent and channel the interests and decisions of those who believe in rule by the strongest.

And this is the most terrible thing about these deaths: in Honduras today, a person who works in front of a microphone (or a computer or a camera) only has to publish or disseminate some news that negatively affects the interests a powerful person with money and influence in the community, municipality, or province for the life of that news reporter to be endangered. The risk increases when these journalists and social communicators touch on unresolved controversial issues, such as the defense of—or demand for—land, natural resources, health, or education; or when they talk about having a tax policy where everyone contributes to the government according to their profits, income, and property; or about the need for impartiality in the law; or simply the need for a justice system that works; or the fact that people are demanding democratization, access to public information, and access to the media.

The institutions of the state have been so crushed that it is easy to manipulate them in favor of groups that already have power, money, and other privileges. The Honduran state is being used as an instrument to strengthen the impunity of the most powerful. If social communicators in a municipality decide to publish news that impacts the interests of a person or a family with power and money, that person or family can easily hire a couple of hit men to eliminate whoever had the temerity to mention them on the radio or in the local media. The government knows this is happening, but its institutions and officials have become a shield that protects the strong and makes sure they are immune to prosecution so they can act with complete impunity.

The situation is the most serious at the level of a community or a municipality, because those who benefit from “the law of the strongest” there know that the state will not touch them no matter what. People with power and money have protection from policemen, prosecutors, and judges. Public officials enjoy the relationship with these “strong” groups because of the economic benefits and perks they receive, which end up being much higher than the wages they earn. And those who exercise “the law of the strongest” know for sure they can act with complete impunity because the most a state will ever do is arrest and try someone who has executed a crime; it will never touch those who actually gave the orders, because those people are protected by the state. In some cases, a powerful few actually take the place of the state itself in certain localities.

In the system of “the law of the strongest,” power may be wielded by a policeman, a lumber magnate, an agro-industrialist, a congressman, a mayor, an owner of a national media outlet, a cattle rancher, a businessman, or a drug trafficker. It doesn’t matter what the person’s affiliation is. They are all protected under the shadow of illegality, which knows how to move down the halls of legality and official institutions. Most of the powerful few have tourist visas to come in and out of the United States. Not a few of them are prominent businessmen or politicians. Some are invited on an ongoing basis to celebrate Independence Day in the residency of the American ambassador in Tegucigalpa.

The primary protectors and promoters of impunity in the Honduran state are: 1) the current justice system, from the local judges to the magistrates of the Supreme Court of Justice; 2) the Public Ministry, headed by the Attorney General; 3) the Ministry of Security; particularly the Police, both preventative and investigative; and 4) the Armed Forces. Many people who operate with impunity have some protection in one or all of these institutions, and these institutions look to the National Congress, starting with its president, to find a kind of political backing where everything is negotiated, calculated, and decided upon to ensure different levels of impunity to protect people with power and money.

In this highly precarious context and environment of arbitrary actions by government institutions, the death of journalists and social communicators will continue to be cloaked in impunity, because impunity is part and parcel of a society like Honduras that props itself up using the law of the strongest. Even today, in the agreements signed after the coup d’état, political matters have been touched on, and

politicians have maneuvered so that their conflicts so they can be played out in the political electoral sphere. But impunity remains intact and it continues to be untouchable, because we are talking about the intimate conspiracy between the state and those who exercise the law of the strongest.

This explains why the work of journalists and social communicators has become the most dangerous of all jobs in Honduras. I want to speak clearly without beating around the bush: the deaths of journalists and social communicators represent the most sophisticated of all political crimes in Honduras today. According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Freedom of Expression and Opinion, Frank La Rue, “in proportion to its population, Honduras has the most alarming violation of the freedom of expression in the world, and is the country in which the most journalists have been killed in the least amount of time.”

How can we reach a place where the press is independent and autonomous when so many and diverse powers are pressuring, blackmailing, threatening, and seducing the media and its journalists? How can a journalist act with independence in an environment that conditions his/her salary and job security on loyalty to the interests of the proprietor, particularly in a society like ours where having a stable job is a luxury? How can the media become independent in a society where democratic institutions are subordinated to the arbitrary decisions of those who abide by “the law of the strongest”? How can freedom of expression be defended in country like Honduras where the biggest violators of this fundamental freedom are the friends and partners of a “democracy” backed by policies and agencies of the United States government?

It is also clear that, in Honduras, no system exists to monitor threats to journalists, and none of the protective measures provided actually guarantee the safety of threatened journalists, a situation aggravated by the weakness of the Honduran state. Drug trafficking and political violence are defining the patterns of violence. And the sectors that are able to intimidate others with their power or to threaten the freedom of expression have at least tacit protection from the government of the United States.

At Radio Progreso, we are committed to building a democratic, inclusive, and participatory society with an institutional structure and functioning that translates into real rule of law. As long as the international community—and the United States in particular—channels its support to the current Honduran institutions, such as the Ministry of Security, the Public Ministry, the Supreme Court of Justice, and the Armed Forces, impunity will continue to be a macabre expression of the Honduran landscape, and we will continue to see journalists die, as we ask ourselves anxiously when it will be our turn. We need new institutions that grow out of a deep questioning of the current system. The commitment to a new set of institutions and to the rule of law must grow out of a confrontation with those who are operating with impunity in today’s institutions, and it can only come from bringing diverse sectors of society together to create a social pact based on basic common agreements. This is the only way we can create conditions that will guarantee freedom of expression.

In Honduras we do not reach for the “maximum,” because our entire institutional system is broken, and because the human, social, ethical, political, and institutional fabric of our nation has been torn. In Honduras, the maximum is found by seeking consensus around “minimum” shared agreements. As long as we do not build those minimum shared agreements, freedom of expression will always be a precarious reality. In that struggle, we are on the side of the communities and populations whose voices are seldom heard in the diverse forums and spaces that exist today. We do our work accompanied by the spirit of Monsignor Romero, who told us that “no matter what is happening politically, no matter who has power, the poor are the most important group to keep in mind.”

Journalists Murdered in Honduras

This is a list of Honduran journalists and social communicators who have been murdered since 2009, according to information from the files of Radio Progreso and ERIC-SJ.

2009

Gabriel Fino Noriega (July 2)

Executed in the community of San Juan Pueblo by men who fired on him from a moving vehicle. Preliminary information indicated that he had received threats earlier after covering the activities of the organized popular resistance on local radios after the coup d'etat, and after having expressed his personal repudiation of the coup.

2010

Nicolas Asfura (February 18)

This journalist, aged 42, was found dead in his apartment in Colonia Santa Barbara in Tegucigalpa. He graduated with a degree in Communication Sciences in 1988 from the National Autonomous University of Honduras. He worked as a journalist on Channel 45 and was also a radio announcer for stations in Comayaguela and Tegucigalpa.

Joseph Hernandez Ochoa (March 1):

This television journalist, age 26, was shot to death as he was traveling by car in Tegucigalpa. His colleague Karol Cabrera was also wounded in the attack, which she blamed on the followers of former-president Manuel Zelaya. She is now in exile in Canada.

David Meza Montesinos (March 11):

51 years of age, he was shot to death in La Ceiba (Honduran Atlantic Coast), the third largest city of Honduras. He was a correspondent for the Channel 10 TV news show “Abriendo Brecha,” broadcast from Tegucigalpa, and he also worked for local radio stations.

Nahúm Palacios Arteaga (March 14):

Dead at 34 years of age. Murdered while driving home in the municipality of Tocoa in the department of Colón. He worked for Channel 5 and Radio Tocoa. The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights had asked for precautionary measures for him in 2009 after he received threats from members of the military after the coup d'état.

Bayardo Mairena y Manuel Juárez (March 26):

Journalist Jose Bayardo Mairena Ramírez, 52, and his assistant Manuel Juárez, 54, were shot to death as they were driving near Juticalpa, 200 km east of Tegucigalpa. Mairena was the host of program called "Asi es Olancho" on Radio Excelsor, and he worked on Channel RZ, Channel 4, and "Super 10" Radio.

Luis Chévez Hernández (April 11):

Radio announcer Luis Chévez Hernández, 23, was murdered in San Pedro Sula. He did musical programming at Radio W105, a station aimed at a young audience. He was murdered along with a family member.

Jorge Alberto Orellana (April 20):

The journalist popularly known as "Georgino," 48 years of age, was shot and killed as he left the television station where he was working in San Pedro Sula, the second largest city in Honduras. He was the host of the program "Live with Georgino." He worked for many years for the television station, Televicentro, a business that supported the coup d'état, but he had stopped working for that organization before his death. He was a professor of journalism at the UNAH in its San Pedro Sula campus.

Luis Arturo Mondragón (June 14):

This communicator, age 53, was reported dead in eastern Honduras. He was murdered at 10 pm on June 14 in the community of Santa Clara in the municipality of Danlí, department of El Paraiso, some 150 kilometers from Tegucigalpa. He was the News Directors on Channel 19.

Israel Días Zelaya (August 4):

Known popularly as "Chacatay," he was found dead on a sugar cane plantation in Villanueva, Cortes, 30 minutes from San Pedro Sula. He worked on the program "Claro y Pelado," under the direction of journalist Carlos Rodríguez Panting on international radio. He also worked on the program "Comentando la Noticia" directed by Jesus Vélez Banegas. He was a collaborator on the television program "Tele-Diario" directed by Gabriel García Ardón.

Henry Suazo (December 24):

A correspondent of HRN, he worked for the company Cable Vision del Atlántico (CVA) which owns Channel 9 in Santa Ana and Channel 29 in San Juan Pueblo. He was also a correspondent for Channel 6 in San Pedro Sula. For two years he was a correspondent for Radio Progreso. He was murdered in San Juan Pueblo, 20 minutes from La Ceiba, Atlántida, in the northern part of the country.

2011

Hector Francisco Medina Polanco (May 10):

This social communicator lost his life at Mario Catarino Rivas Hospital in San Pedro Sula after being shot three times in the back as he was leaving his workplace at Omega Vision in Morazán, Yoro by presumed hit men who were riding a motorcycle. He was born March 5, 1974.

Luis Mendoza (May 19):

The owner of a media outlet in Danil, El Paraiso, Mendoza was murdered in eastern Honduras by several heavily armed men shot at him at close range. This happened near the Manuel Adalid Gamero school, a half-block from the station where he worked. He was an agricultural engineer by profession, having graduated from the Zamorano Agricultural School in 1992. He was the owner of a business called Microsistemas, which owned the rights to Channel 24. The vehicle carrying Luis Mendoza's murderers was burned by the police.

Adán Benítez (July 4):

He was killed on July 4 in La Ceiba, Atlantida on the Atlantic Coast of Honduras. This murder happened at night when he was on his way home to his place of residence in the city of La Ceiba on the street that goes by Hospital Dantoni, the main care center in the city. He worked for several media outlets: radio Mackintosh, and Channel 14 (local channel and closed circuit). He had also worked at Channel 36, Tele Ceiba, Channel 7, and on other radio programs. One week earlier, he had reported being threatened by a band of robbers. But the police maintain that his murder was a result of common crime. He was 42 years old and had worked in journalism for more than 15 years.

Nery Jeremías Orellana (July 13)

Communicator and correspondent for Radio Progreso in Candelaria, Lempira. General Administrator of Radio Joconguerra. On July 13, 2011 he was assassinated on his way to work, intercepted on the highway by hit men who murdered him while he was on his motorcycle. A week before his murder, he made several reports on the Radio Progreso news shows about the problem of healthcare in his area.

Medardo Flores (September 8)

On September 8, Flores, 62, was ambushed in his car and killed as he was travelling back from a property located near Puerto Cortes. He died of nine gun-shot wounds. He was a very well-known communicator in the northern city of San Pedro Sula, and was part of the cultural collective of Radio Uno.

Luz Marina Paz and Delmer Canales (December 6, Journalist and Cameraman)

Murdered in Comayaguela, as they were riding in their car on December 6, 2011. Paz died alongside cameraman Delmer Canales, who was also her cousin, in the Colonia San Francisco de Comayaguela in the capital city of the country. She worked on the program "Tres en la Noticia" which is broadcast through Radio Globo. Then she began to work at the Cadena Hondurena de Noticias (CHN) radio station. The vehicle they were riding in had 47 bullet holes in it, according to information provided by the police.

2012

Fausto Evelio Hernández (March 11)

Murdered March 11, 2012 in the department of Colón. He worked for 15 years in Radio Alegre. He led the radio news team along with his colleague Holver Velásquez. At the time of his assassination, he was riding a bicycle in the municipality of Saba, Colón. He died at the hands of an unknown man who killed him with a machete. He was 54 years old when he died.

Saira Fabiola Almendaries Borjas (March 1)

A 22-year-old journalism intern, murdered with two other companions in San Pedro Sula, March 1, 2012. She was murdered in a sector of Rio Blanquito, Choloma in the department of Cortés. She was completing her degree at the Metropolitan University of Tegucigalpa. She worked on the sports program "A ras de Cancha" and on the sports program for Radio Cadena Voces.

Noel Valladares (April 23)

Better known as "el Tecolote" (the owl), he was presenting a forecast program on the local lottery in Tegucigalpa. He died April 23 when four unknown men shot at him at the gates of the Maya TV Channel. This communicator was very tied to entertainment through a TV program. He was 28 years old.

Erick Alexander Martínez Avila (May 7)

32 years old, and a member of the group KUKULCAN, a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender group in Honduras, he was kidnapped May 5 two days before his death. His lifeless body was found in the community of Guasculile on the highway from Tegucigalpa to Olancho. According to forensic experts, his body did not show signs of any injuries. It is presumed that his death was caused by asphyxiation. He was last seen in public at the May 1st march. He was part of one of the factions of the Libertad y Refundacion (LIBRE) Party.

Angel Alfredo Villatoro Rivera (May 15)

He was kidnapped on May 9, 2012 on his way to his workplace for his usual presentation at the Radio HRN News Program where he was News Director. Married to journalist Karla Fonseca, he had been a journalist for more than two decades and was very tied to the ruling party and at one of the channels with the most influence on the political and social life of Honduras. A native of a northern area of Honduras, in the former banana fields of El Progreso, Yoro, he was found dead May 15 in the southern part of the capital city. When his body was found, he was dressed in the uniform of the "cobras," which is military and police attire.

Adonis Felipe Gutiérrez Bueso (July 8)

Murdered July 8 along with two of his cousins, identified as Francisco Iraheta López and Miguel Angel Gutiérrez, both 18 years of age. They were kidnapped by several individuals who shot at them repeatedly on one of the streets of the Colonia Siboney of Villanueva, Cortes.

Adonis Felipe lived in Colonia Jefry in Sonaguera in the department of Colón. He had been working in the media for more than six years. Until a few months ago he had been working for Radio Naranja, where he had a program called “Noticias de la Tarde” from 6 to 7 pm. Since 2007, he had been working for Radio Songuera, which belongs to a network of community, popular, and alternative radios in Honduras. He was buried in his hometown Arenas, in Sonaguera, Colón.

According to information gathered by Radio Progreso and by ERIC, 25 people linked to journalism and communications have been killed since the June 2009 coup d'état. Eight were under the age of 35, two were women, and one belonged to the LGBT movement. Several of them worked on news shows, were hosts for entertainment or sports programs, or they administered media outlets.

The following number of journalists have been killed, by year: 2009 (1); 2010 (11); 2011 (7); and 2012, to date (6).

National Human Rights Commission statistics. The National Human Rights Commission (CONADEH) has records of the violent death of several members of the field of journalism between 2003 and the 2009 coup d'état. They include: German Rivas, Carlos Salgado, Rafael Munguía, Osman Rodrigo López, and Bernardo Rivera Paz. CONADEH reported more than two dozen journalists who have lost their lives during the government of Porfirio Lobo.

Journalists killed violently

2007

1. Germán Rivas (Corporación Maya Visión Channel 7) Copán, firearm.
2. Carlos Salgado (Radio Cadena Voces, RCV), Francisco Morazán, firearm.

2008

3. Fernando González (Radio Mega FM 92.7), Santa Bárbara, firearm.

2009

4. Bernardo Rivera Paz (Copán)
5. Rafael Munguía (Radio Cadena Voces, Cortés) firearm.
6. Osman Rodrigo López (Channel 45), Francisco Morazán, firearm.
7. Gabriel Fino Noriega (Correspondent of Radio América), Atlántida, firearm.

2010

8. Nicolás Asfura (Construction company), Francisco Morazán.
9. Joseph Hernández (Channel 51), Francisco Morazán, firearm.
10. David Meza (correspondent of “Abriendo Brecha” program), Atlántida, firearm.
11. Nahún Palacios (Channel 5 of Aguán), Colón, firearm.
12. Bayardo Mairena (Channel 4 of Juticalpa), Olancho, firearm.
13. Manuel de Jesús Juárez (Channel 4 of Juticalpa), Olancho, firearm.

14. Luis Chévez Hernández (host on W105), Cortés, firearm.
15. Georgino Orellana (Cable TV Honduras), Cortés, firearm.
16. Carlos Humberto Salinas Midence (sports writer), Francisco Morazán, firearm.
17. Luis Arturo Mondragón (Channel 19), El Paraíso, firearm.
18. Israel Díaz Zelaya (Radio Internacional), Cortés, firearm.
19. Henry Orlando Suazo (correspondent for HRN), Atlántida, firearm.

2011

20. Héctor Francisco Medina Polanco, Yoro, firearm.
21. Luis Mendoza (owner of company called Macrosistema and Channel 24), El Paraíso, firearm.
 22. Adán Benítez (televisión producer), Atlántida, firearm.
 23. Nery Geremías Orellana (Radio Joconguera), Lempira, firearm.
 24. Medardo Flores (volunteer for Radio Uno), Cortés, firearm.
 25. Luz Marina Paz (Honduran News Network), Francisco Morazán, firearm.

2012

26. Saira Fabiola Almendares Borjas (Channel 30 and Radio Cadena Voces), Cortés, firearm.
27. Fausto Elio Hernández Arteaga (Radio Alegre), Colón, arma blanca.
28. Noel Valladares.
29. Erick Martínez (Spokesperson for the Kukulcán group), Tegucigalpa. May 7, 2012
30. Alfredo Villatoro (Radio HRN), Tegucigalpa, May 15, 2012.
31. Adonis Felipe Gutierrez Bueso.