



COLOMBIA

Paramilitary “black eagles” poised to swoop down on the press

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They use various code names, pseudonyms and trademarks. One day it could be the “United Self-Defence Groups of Colombia” (with AUC as its acronym) or the “Free Colombia Self-Defence Groups, United List.” Another day it might be “Free Colombia Democratic Front” or “Social Front for Peace.” When they want to clearly announce their colours and carry out targeted murders or threats against peasants, unionists, human rights activists and sometimes even former comrades-in-arms, they call themselves the “Black Eagles.”

Recruited from the 1980s onwards with the aim of neutralising far-left guerrilla groups, Colombia’s roughly 30,000 paramilitaries were officially demobilised between March 2003 and March 2006. But in fact they are far from being disarmed and far from putting an end to their criminal activities. Three years of negotiations with President Alvaro Uribe’s government have resulted in only a very small proportion of these professional fighters being reintegrated into society. Many have become drug traffickers or contract killers. The “Justice and Peace” law adopted on 21 July 2005 guarantees them virtual impunity. The judicial hearings in which a very few have confessed to crimes have been held without their being confronted with their victims.

According to the estimates of both the government and human rights groups, between 5,000 and 8,000 paramilitaries, organised into 22 groups, are still active or have been revived in a total of 12 departments. These so-called “demobilised” paramilitaries are press freedom predators, murdering two journalists in 2006 and forcing around 10 others to flee the region where they lived and worked. Have of these cases occurred in the course of a terror campaign by the “Black Eagles” against the media in the northern coastal departments of Córdoba, Sucre and Bolívar last September and October.

Demobilisation was supposed to cure the problem of the paramilitaries, but has the remedy become worse than the disease? Colombia and its press are debating this question, at time when the country has recently discovered 3,700 mass graves and the Uribe administration is

being openly criticised for its links to paramilitary groups.

Reporters Without Borders visited Colombia from 28 April to 5 May, partly to attend a UNESCO World Press Freedom award ceremony in Medellín on 3 May, but primarily to carry out a field investigation into the impact that the demobilisation of the paramilitaries is having on the activities and security of journalists. As well as Medellín, the press freedom organisation also visited Bogotá and the capital of Córdoba department, Montería, which is where the paramilitaries first emerged.

Reporters Without Borders spoke to journalists of all kinds, both local and national, both those who are still working and those who have had to flee. It also spoke to politicians, elected officials, civil servants and representatives of press freedom and human rights groups. Far from trying to get to the bottom of the entire situation of a country at war, this field trip concentrated on highlighting demobilisation’s perverse effects, the enormous difference between the way the national and local media cover the war, and the scant protection received by threatened journalists. The local journalists spoke only on condition of anonymity, for obvious safety reasons.

Devoting this report to the paramilitaries is not meant to divert attention from violence against journalists by the leftist guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Reporters Without Borders regards the FARC as press freedom predators, just as it does the AUC militias and other paramilitary groups. Germán Hernández Vera, editor of the *Diario del Huila* regional daily in the southwestern city of Neiva, was forced to flee his region in March after receiving repeated threats that were thought to have come from guerrillas. The FARC blew up the studios of local radio station *HJ Doble K* on 22 March, injuring 10 people. *Radio Caracol* news director Darío Arizmendi Posada had to leave the country in March after receiving death threats from guerrillas. The FARC were also responsible for a sabotage campaign against radio and TV installations in the southwest of the country in the first quarter of 2005.

A state within the state



Salvatore Mancuso

“That is Mr. Salvatore Mancuso’s house,” said a Montería taxi driver. “Down there, on the upper floor, is Mr. Carlos Castaños’s apartment. Just below it was the apartment of Mr. Salvatore Mancuso until his murder in Medellín.” There was an unexpectedly nostalgic note to his commentary. He referred to the paramilitary celebrities as if they were neighbours. He even referred without too much hesitation to the “Black Eagles,” who have been back in the news “for some time.” But there was no question of referring loudly to “paramilitaries” and even less to “paracos” (a derogatory term) or the “demobilised ones,” as “they” are never very far away. There are nearly 5,000 of them in this northern, Caribbean-coast department, where the AUC were originally recruited by coffee and cotton plantation owners, with government support, to resist guerrilla incursions.

“The turning point came after the 1985 murder of Ernesto Rojas, the long-standing leader of the People’s Liberation Army [a leftist guerrilla group that stopped fighting in 1991],” said José Francisco García Calume, a local Conservative Party parliamentarian and president of the Departmental Peace Commission. “Once they had achieved their military goals and acquired a real military structure, the AUC got involved in politics and, at the same time, drug trafficking,” Rojas continued. “AUC units started extorting money from municipal governments and to form trafficking networks. They also started investing in agriculture, construction and even health services. So you can speak of a state within the state.” Andrés Angarita, a demobilised paramilitary from the Bloque Córdoba, was gunned down in Medellín at the start of April for being ready to talk about the links between the paramilitaries and municipal health chief Manuel Troncoso, the brother-in-law of Salvatore Mancuso.

By dint of massacres, expropriations and forced eviction of peasants, the department of Córdoba was carved up by parallel armies that

were the forerunners of today’s “Black Eagles,” groups with such names as the “Tangueros” or “Mochacabezas “ (literally, “decapitators”) led by brothers Fidel and Carlos Castaño. A total of 30,000 displaced persons swelled Montería’s population to 350,000.

Two local journalists were killed in the course of a bloody crackdown at the end of the 1980s on members of the political opposition suspected of being guerrilla sympathizers. One was freelance journalist Oswaldo Regino Pérez, a contributor to the Cartagena-based daily *El Universal*, who was murdered on the Medellín road in 1988. The other was William Bender, the host of two programmes on radio *Voz de Montería*, who was killed the following year after accusing paramilitaries and drug traffickers of joint involvement in the August 1989 murder of Liberal Party leader Luis Carlos Galán, who had been expected to win the following year’s presidential election.

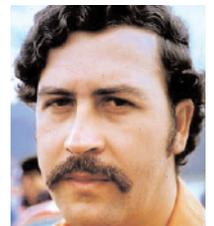


Luis Carlos Galán

“This is how Montería became one of the epicentres of paramilitary violence against the press,” said a local radio journalist who fled to Bogotá after being the target of a paramilitary attack in 1988 and only recently returned to Montería. “These two murders are emblematic. Regino’s murder highlighted the collusion between the paramilitaries and army, represented here by the 11th Brigade, which had classified him as a ‘subversive’. While Bender’s murder revealed how the paramilitaries and the drug traffickers, especially Pablo Escobar’s Medellín cartel, were converging. The problem here is that the paramilitaries became one of the leading economic forces in the region, if not the leading one. At the same time, they managed to convince people they were responsible for the defeat of the guerrillas. As a result, the press is inaudible.” And those who do not accept this situation must take great care.



Carlos Castaño



Pablo Escobar

A media maverick is killed



Gustavo Rojas Gabalo

Paramilitary hatred of the press reemerged in all its violence with the murder of Gustavo “El Gaba” Rojas Gabalo, the star presenter of one of the three local radio stations, *Radio Panzenú*, on 4 February 2006. Tubby, cheeky and very outspoken on the air, “El Gaba” was having a drink with a friend in the southern part of Montería when he heard his car alarm go off twice. When he went over to see why, two men on a motorcycle opened fire, hitting him in the head and collarbone. He never regained consciousness and died 44 days later in a Medellín hospital.

Three suspects were arrested on 1 April 2006 – Ramiro Antonio “El Guajiro” Berrio, Santiago “El Negro” Luna Primera and Manuel “El Pambe” Pérez Jiménez. All three are currently detained, but in connection with another crime. “Under pressure from El Negro’s brother, a councillor in the neighbouring department of Bolívar, the witnesses changed their stories, the prosecution was abandoned and the media were never able to follow subsequent developments in the case,” said a newspaper journalist who tried to find out. A fourth suspect, known as “Fuego Verde,” who had been identified as the person who fired the shots at El Gaba, was himself murdered on 19 March of this year.

A traumatic blow for the Montería press and a glaring case of impunity, El Gaba’s murder continues to be the subject of theorizing. Calling it a “political crime,” a *Radio Panzenú* journalist said: “El Gaba” did not investigate. He denounced the corruption of local officials in his outspoken way. His diatribes could affect careers, and this was particularly so with Manuel Prada, a staunch AUC supporter and candidate for Córdoba department governor. “El Gaba”’s murder happened to come on the eve of the May 2006 elections, at a time when the process of paramilitary demobilisation was close to completion.”

The victim’s daughter, Eryln Rojas, expounded another theory with a great deal of care: “Senator Gustavo Petro of the [left-wing]

Democratic Pole accused nearly 2,000 close supporters of President Uribe of paramilitary links in February, triggering the so-called ‘para-political’ scandal. It was alleged that Salvatore Mancuso had himself ordered my father’s murder and that a recording was available on the Internet, except that the webpage could not be accessed. It was said the former AUC leader could not stand my father’s allegations that he was linked with municipal public health director Manuel Troncoso.”



Gustavo Petro

Distinguishing between the “mendicant” local press, in this instance, small local radio stations that “depend on state money and so cannot say anything,” from the bigger, regional news media that dare to say more but risk violent reprisals, Calume, the parliamentarian, offered a more global analysis of the “El Gaba”’s murder and its impact, not only on the press but also on Colombian society as a whole. “Gaba” was one of the first, certainly here, to make a distinction between demobilisation and disarmament as regards the paramilitaries,” he told Reporters Without Borders. “And he paid for that with his life.”

“El Gaba” approved of the process launched by the government but realised its limitations. The Fátima accord signed on 3 May 2004 between the government and the former AUC was a failure as regards social reintegration. Nonetheless, it gave the paramilitary chiefs two major guarantees – no extradition and no detention in top-security prisons.

Calume added: “Of the 5,000 paramilitaries demobilised since March 2006 in this region, a third of whom are in Montería, only 3 per cent have found a job in the formal sector, that is to say, working for security companies, and 17 per cent in the informal sector, namely makeshift methods of public transport such as motorcycle-taxis. As for the rest, they have gone back to criminal activity, this time on an individual basis and without ideology. As a result of internal feuding among paramilitaries, 150 people have died in Montería alone in the past two years.”

Journalists with little backing

At the Montería city hall, where people would rather forget such figures, they conceded that ex-paramilitaries who have been recycled into new forms of employment “pose major law and order problems.” One municipal official said: “There were 32,000 registered motorcycle taxi drivers in the city on 31 December, many of whom were former paramilitaries but many others were the children of people displaced by the paramilitaries. Two former AUC members working in this sector were murdered in February.” Insisting, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that press freedom was “doing rather well,” she condemned “the irresponsibility of some media, that don’t do any thorough investigation and indulge in partisan exaggeration.”

The press does not get much more support from the Defensoría del Pueblo (People’s Defence), a governmental human rights body that was created under a 1992 law with powers that are limited to making recommendations. Its representative in Córdoba department, Julia Rodríguez, who has held the position since last November, tends to play down the threats to press freedom. “We sometimes receive demobilised paramilitaries, who want to sort out their administrative situations, but it is above all victims who come to see us,” Rodríguez said. “We have not had any complaints from journalists, but we applied some pressure in the “El Gaba” case. I think press freedom is in better shape here.” Rodríguez also acknowledged that “the demobilisation process has had the perverse affect of fuelling ordinary crime and of allowing the guerrillas to stage incursions again, not to speak of phenomena such as the Black Eagles.”

She also said there continued to be few complaints because “the public is still not taken seriously by the army and police, and people are afraid to make a report when they are victims.” The 2,000 complaints addressed to the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation by Montería residents who suffered at the hands of paramilitaries were fewer than those addressed to civil society organisations such as Comfavic (Córdoba department’s Civil Committee for Families who are Victims, for Reconciliation and Peace), which is defen-

ding 5,000 people. A woman crossed herself on hearing the words “Black Eagles” in the run-down office of one of its representatives, lawyer Mario Enrique de Oca Anaya. Nearly 2,000 human rights complaints have been registered at this office, 1,300 of them concerning the army, police and the intelligence agency known as the Department for Security Administration (DAS). “Eighty per cent of the murders in this department are blamed on paramilitaries,” De Oca said, adding: “In a single week, the “Black Eagles” managed to recruit 60 youths from displaced families.”

No let-up in self-censorship

“To think that the paramilitaries nowadays talk of justice, peace and even respect for the environment... at this rate, the public will end up believing them and we really won’t be able to talk about anything,” a radio journalist said to Reporters Without Borders. Nidia Serrano, who runs the Cartagena-based *El Universal’s* Córdoba office, which employs seven journalists, added: “The most terrible thing here is that all economic, political or judicial activities are to some degree or another linked to the paramilitaries. Even when you tackle the most neutral and apparently risk-free subject, you don’t know if in fact you are talking about them.”

The department of Córdoba has two daily newspapers (*El Universal’s* Córdoba edition and the *El Meridiano de Córdoba*, suspected by some of being controlled by Salvatore Mancuso), three radio stations (*Radio Panzenú*, *Voz de Montería* and the Catholic station *Frecuencia Bolivariana*, which gives two hours of news a day, as against nine hours a day in the case of the other two), three TV stations (*NotiCórdoba*, *Nortevisión* and *Telecinco*) and 22 community radio stations. These media cover a total of 28 municipalities. The editorial policy everywhere is to comply with the law of silence, especially when bullets are flying. “There may be less fear since demobilisation, but not less self-censorship,” said one radio journalist with irony. “Anyway, it is impossible to have anything but the official news, such are the risks that our personal sources would run if we tried to investigate,” he said. “So we wait for the news to come from elsewhere before relaying it.”



Diego Fernando Murillo Bejarano

Here is an example. A Liberal Party departmental parliamentarian, Orlando Benítez Palencia, travelled on 11 April 2005 to the municipality of Valencia, where the AUC installed their “Fidel Castaño” school. As a precautionary measure, he told Salvatore Mancuso in advance. But another paramilitary chief, Diego “Don Berna” Fernando Murillo Bejarano, one deeply involved in organised crime and drug trafficking, regarded Valencia as part of his territory. So he allegedly had Benítez murdered outside his rival Mancuso’s finca. Under house arrest since 27 May 2005, “Don Berna” is nowadays allowed to enjoy a comfortable retirement in exchange for his cooperation with the demobilisation process.

“Everyone knew who did what and why,” said a journalist. “The public was the first to know. We had the information, with which our public was perfectly familiar. But we had to wait two days until the national daily *El Tiempo* published it before we in turn could publish. That way, we protect ourselves from threats. But just imagine, we are in a situation in which the public already knows what we dare not broadcast or publish.”

The correspondent of a daily newspaper based in a different region put it like this: “There is no need for internal censorship. The external threat is fully applied. The ‘paracos’ always begin by threatening people close to the journalist, to deter them from going to far with an investigation. As I want to avoid using anonymous sources, I rely on official statements. The other solution, when a story really takes off, is to send in a journalist from headquarters to protect the local correspondent. This is what the national press have long been doing.”

Although some former AUC members have started to trust him, this journalists fears that things could get even tougher for the local press in the coming months. “Nothing of substance has been envisaged for reintegrating the paramilitaries into society. In December, the paramilitaries will cease to be paid governmental aid [8 million pesos or about 3,000 euros] in return for their demobilisation. What will happen after that?”

Moving towards “legalizing” the paramilitaries

The situation looks even more alarming at the national level and some people argue that the three-year demobilisation process and the adoption of the Justice and Peace law amount to “legalisation” of the paramilitaries. This is the view of journalist Camilo Tamayo and sociologist Teófilo Vásquez, who work for the Centre for Investigation and Popular Education, a Bogotá-based organisation specialising in information about political violence founded by Jesuits in the late 1960s. For them, the reappearance of such groups as the Black Eagles last October and the many abuses associated with the demobilisation process have come as no surprise.



Alvaro Uribe

Uribe gave himself a year to crush the FARC guerrillas when he became president in 2002, but the FARC military structure remained intact and only one of their chiefs, Simon Trinidad, was captured and extradited because of his drug-



Raúl Reyes, FARC

trafficking links, they said. The failure of the fight against the FARC is one of the reasons why there has not been more demobilisation. When the AUCs leave, the guerrillas move back in.

The other reason, they said, is that the government completely ignored paramilitary involvement in drug trafficking. As a result, demobilisation split the former AUC into two camps, the pro-narcos and the rest. And unfortunately, it was the former, including such people as “Don Berna”, who gained the upper hand.

This explains the significant presence of revived paramilitary groups such as the “Black Eagles” in the “drug trafficking triangle” – the departments of Nariño and Valle del Cauca, where 60 per cent of Colombian cocaine is produced, and the cocaine exporting centres of the Caribbean coast departments and those bordering Venezuela.

Liberal Party senator Juan Manuel Galán, the son of the politician assassinated in 1989, is

equally severe in his assessment of demobilisation, saying Colombian history is repeating itself. “The demobilisation process ignored the central issue of drug trafficking, whose exports have never been so high,” Galán said. “It also fostered impunity with the Justice and Peace law, which envisages only five to eight years in prison for the most serious crimes. Some drug traffickers have even claimed to be paramilitaries in order to take advantage of this leniency. As for narco-trafficking paramilitaries like “Don Berna”, the authorities made direct use of them to pacify cities such as Medellín and get rid of Pablo Escobar’s cartel. This is how the paramilitary chiefs manage to avoid being extradited by the government. Now the demobilised paramilitaries can implicate a government that made allowances for them or relied on them. Officials and paramilitaries are bound by an ability to blackmail each other.”

CINEP’s staff said they understand “why the United States, unhappy with the results of efforts to combat drug trafficking, kept its distance from the demobilisation process.” And why the new Democratic majority in the US congress is now blocking funding for the Colombian army’s fight against drug trafficking.

No access to judicial information

Long known for its cartel, Medellín is the country’s second largest city and the capital of Antioquia department. It is currently the setting of another of demobilisation’s failures, its judicial component, and the media are among those paying the price. Around 30 per cent of former AUC members are located in this department. The regional media, such as the daily *El Colombiano* and the TV station *Teleantioquia*, find it very hard to provide regular coverage of the armed conflict and related aspects, although the situation is not quite as bad as it is in Montería thanks to a significant national media presence in Medellín. At stake is the security of its approximately 400 reporters, photographers and cameramen. Print media reporters leave their bylines off their articles. But also at issue is the physical inability to attend the judicial hearings - for want of trials - held for demobilised paramilitaries.

“The constitutional court ruled last September that these hearings should be public, as they would help people to understand all the aspects of the paramilitary phenomenon and the scale of its human toll, and - who knows - to begin a process of reconciliation,” a Medellín journalist said. “But the paramilitaries filed a petition against this ruling and the prosecutor’s office is denying us access to it. The judges also cite ‘reserva sumarial’ – the ability under Colombian criminal law to refuse to give out information about an ongoing judicial procedure – to keep the hearings under wraps. At the same time, the paramilitaries are not brought together with their victims at these hearings. The victims are installed in separate room and have to follow the proceedings on a video monitor. This is also a way of preventing the victims from talking to much. And they are banned from taking notes or making recordings.”

Several “paisa” (Antioquian) journalists said just one photographer and one cameraman are allowed into the building when the hearing beings. “The judges take their seats and the hearing’s participants arrive at 8:30 am,” a broadcast journalist told Reporters Without Borders. “The cameraman and the photographer than have three quarters of an hour to film and take photos for all their colleagues. They are made to leave at 9:15 am.”

As they are so effectively sealed off, information about the hearings is hard to verify. “We are reduced to becoming rumour mongers,” another regional journalist complained. “We could not, for example, confirm a leak about the involvement of a general and the DAS [the intelligence agency] in senator Luis Carlos Galán’s murder. Similarly, we had to hastily put out a correction about an unconfirmed report on the role of a paramilitary chief nicknamed ‘Macao’ in the murder of José Emeterio Rivas.” A journalist with radio *Calor Estéreo*, Rivas was murdered on 5 April 2004, shortly after criticising contacts between paramilitaries and municipal officials in the northeastern city of Barrancabermeja.

The way local journalists portrayed the situation did not entirely match the description given by Alvaro Sierra, the editor of the daily *El Tiempo*’s opinion pages, a veteran specialist in coverage of the armed conflict. “You cannot say there is

no access to the paramilitary hearings,” he said. “Information discreetly circulates between judges and the media. But it is true that we are talking about the national media. Working for *El Tiempo* or one of the two leading rival commercial TV stations, *Radio Caracol* and *RCN*, in itself offers protection. The ‘reserva sumarial’ cited by the judges in practice concerns the regional media much more than the national media.”

Media under attack for criticising government

The creation of a National Federation of Colombian Journalists on 3 May, bringing together 1,000 journalists from 24 regional organisations, will doubtlessly not suffice to patch up the deep divisions in the country’s press – divisions that are ideological as well as professional and territorial. Elected on a security platform in 2002 and reelected in May 2006 without having to submit to a run-off, President Uribe has long enjoyed broad support thanks to a fall in crime rates. “The number of murders in Antioquia fell from 9,000 in 2001 to 3,000 in 2006,” said departmental governor Aníbal Gaviria Correa – whose brother was murdered by the FARC – at the closing of the World Press Freedom Day ceremonies on 4 May.

Medellín is one of the few cities to offer demobilised paramilitaries support and retraining programmes. Press freedom is one of the beneficiaries of this, said Vice-President Francisco Santos Calderón, who was also at Medellín. “Until 2002, an average of 12 Colombian journalists were being killed each year, as against two in 2006 and none since the start of 2007,” Santos said. “It was the restoration of law and order that reduced this grim toll, even if illegal armed groups still pose the biggest threat to journalists,” he added.

Not everyone was convinced, especially some of the journalists present. “One can concede that everyday security has improved but not to the point of ending the armed conflict, which is what the government would sometimes have you believe,” said a journalist working for the national press. Press coverage of opposition senator Gustavo Petro’s allegations of links bet-

ween the paramilitaries and the government and Uribe family have led to a distinct cooling in the already fraught relations between the media and the president. Three days after the publication of an article on the subject, Uribe refused on 26 April to invite the print media to meet with him at the Case de Nariño (his official residence).

More seriously, journalists often complain of a “lack of editorial pluralism” in the leading media and their “manipulation by the authorities.” Hollman Morris, a specialist in the armed conflict and the producer of the programme “Contravía” on the state-owned *Canal Uno* TV station, said: “Before Uribe became president, media that criticised the government were not attacked the way they are now.”

Morris and fellow journalists Carlos Lozano of the communist weekly *Voz* and Daniel Coronell, the head of the Noticias Uno news and current affairs production company (who is now in exile) have all been in the president’s sights. They have also received threats believed



Hollman Morris

to have come from military intelligence officials. Morris was described as a “FARC spokesman” in a video circulated in late 2005 by a mysterious paramilitary offshoot called the Social Front for Peace. He was also one of the people whose phones were illegally tapped for two years by the Directorate for Police Intelligence (Dipol)



Carlos Lozano

in a major scandal revealed by no less a person than defence minister Juan Manuel Santos on 13 May.



Daniel Coronell

A journalist at Noticias Uno, whose programmes are carried by *Canal Uno*, condemned “the silence of the authorities about these scandals, starting with the ‘para-political’ scandal, which after all resulted at the end of last year in the arrests of 13 national parliamentarians and 22 local parliamentarians, the resignation of two ministers and the DAS deputy director, and the initiation of judicial

proceedings against the governors of five [Caribbean coast] departments, all of them Uribe supporters.”

Are leading media groups too closely allied with government?

A total of 35 privately-owned broadcast companies with frequencies granted by the state went bankrupt between 1998 and 2001, Reporters Without Borders was told by Noticias Uno director Jaime Honorio González. “This situation resulted in a complete overhaul of Colombian television and a reduction in broadcast time reserved for news,” he said. “Two major commercial TV stations today have 80 per cent of the viewers, while *Canal Uno* has what is left. The possibility of covering sensitive news topics, not to speak of ones seriously critical of the authorities, is reduced to the minimum.” A colleague added: “Alvaro Uribe built his career with the support of the paramilitaries when he was governor of Antioquia and mayor of Medellín. He hates it when the media remind him of it now, but he also has ties with the communication sector. In the days when he was a locally elected official, he managed the *Comunica S.A.* group and wrote columns in *El Colombiano*.”

Accusations of pro-government attitudes, kowtowing and nepotism are not appreciated at the leading privately-owned media. “Everyone knows that the *El Tiempo* newspaper is jointly run by two cousins, Rafael and Enrique Santos,” said Alvaro Sierra of *El Tiempo*. “Everyone also knows that the former is the vice-president’s brother and the latter is the defence minister’s brother. There may be a conflict of interest, but it is false to say that the newspaper is controlled.” Another *El Tiempo* journalist nonetheless recognised the existence of “embarrassment at reporting certain delicate information.”

Charges of being “Uribista” are also rejected by staff at the two leading radio and TV broadcasters, *Caracol* (owned by the Santo Domingo holding company) and *RCN* (owned by the Ardilla Lulle industrial group, which also owns the airline Avianca). *Caracol TV* joint news director Darío Fernando Patiño went out of his way to

give what he saw as evidence of independence when he spoke to Reporters Without Borders. “When the president speaks, we check that he did not say the opposite last year. We have not even had an exclusive interview with him since his reelection. We refuse to let the security forces accompany us when we are doing reports in the provinces, and politicians and judges put a lot of pressure on us when we do corruption stories.”

Called “Paracol” by its detractors, *Caracol* employs 70 journalists at its Bogotá headquarters and 32 regional correspondents. It reports having the same problems as other news media when trying to cover the paramilitaries. “It is virtually impossible to establish contact with the paramilitaries,” said Patiño. “They put out whatever information they like, information that is unverifiable and never confirmed by the judicial or police authorities.” Patiño claimed to pursue “socially aware” editorial policies. “It is a matter of principle for us that we don’t interview participants in the armed conflict if they are not seeking peace with the government. We could interview a demobilised AUC paramilitary or a guerrilla from the National Liberation Army (ELN) if they are currently in peace talks with the authorities. It is also all right to interview the FARC if they are releasing a hostage, but not if they just want to make propaganda.”



Nicolas Rodríguez
Bautista, ELN

Installed in a virtual fortress in Bogotá since a FARC rocket attack in 2002, *RCN* employs about 100 journalists, half of them at its headquarters, and devotes about 35 per cent of its programming to news. Executive producer Jorge Medina Moreno said: “Each edition has a large degree of autonomy and we prefer to develop ‘lighter’ news, on health or education for example, in the morning or at midday. The more political subjects are grouped together in the evening editions.”

Coverage of the armed conflict is more a matter of constraints and obstacles for *RCN*, rather than choices. “On the one hand, the TV format leaves little time and money for the thorough investigation required by subjects such as demobilisation of the AUC or negotiations with the ELN, in which the office of the president is

almost obligatory as a source,” Medina said. “We did not get authorisation to attend the paramilitary hearings. But we were the only ones to cover the negotiations in Cuba between the ELN and the government. Then, the constant threat to our regional correspondents forces us to ‘make life simpler.’ Violent crime does not allow real press freedom. Three of our journalists have had to go into exile in recent years because of the risks and our director, Alvaro García, and one of our women journalists are currently getting special protection.”

In Medina’s view, the current threats to *RCN* come more from non-political criminals and appear to be linked to the twice-weekly programme “Caza Noticias” (Chasing the News), in which viewers can report crimes on the air for three minutes. Because of its unprecedented ratings, the *RCN* management is planning to give it a daily slot.

All protection for journalists is not equal

The leading news organisations can afford the services of costly private security companies but the rest have only the rather unreliable state authorities to turn to. Provincial journalists often have no choice but to flee to the capital after being threatened or attacked by armed groups or ruthless local officials. Some of them were brought together for a meeting with Reporters Without Borders by the Bogotá-based Foundation for Press Freedom (FLIP), a Reporters Without Borders partner organisation. They were from Antioquia, Norte de Santander (in the northeast), Tolima (in the centre), Huila (in the southwest) and from the Atlantic coast. Their only offence was to have reported on the human rights situation or the armed conflict in their region. The paramilitaries tried to kill one. Another was the target of FARC reprisals. Others were followed by the DAS or, worse still, investigated by the DAS in complicity with “demobilised” AUC members.

They describe themselves as “paralysed” and condemned to an underground existence. They do not dare make themselves not known for lack of confidence in the authorities. But they know they cannot resurface unless they accept

protection... which is not always reliable. The work of press freedom organisations such as FLIP or Medios para la Paz, which specialises in training, has been complicated by demobilisation. Paramilitary organisation calling itself the “Social Front for Peace” threatened 28 NGOs - including these two - several times in the second half of last year.

The national police has a Human Rights Group (GRUDH) with 64 offices throughout the country including ones in Medellín and Cali and a central one in Bogotá. Around 60 threats are reported to the GRUDH each week, but few involve journalists. Its leadership acknowledges that its investigative resources are limited. So far, five Colombian journalists are benefiting from an Organisation of American States protection programme in which it is the GRUDH’s job to ensure good implementation “in accordance with the risk estimate.” Under the programme, the police have to know the threatened individual’s location at all times and include that location in their regular rounds. Three of the journalists are in Norte de Santander department, one is in the far-north department of César and one is in Bogotá. An interior and justice ministry vehicle has also been lent to a journalist in the eastern department of Arauca.

But not everyone can afford to go into internal exile either. The representative of an organisation that supports community news media offered this ironic comment: “For the small media, above all the community media [of which there are about 700 legalised ones in Colombia], the choice is between exposing oneself to danger or letting oneself be controlled by the armed groups. In the latter case, at least protection is guaranteed.”

Recommendations

A fall in the crime rate in Colombia has on the whole contributed to a reduction in the number of journalists being murdered each year there. But Reporters Without Borders continues to be worried by the situation of press freedom and free expression. Firstly, the fall in the number of journalists being murdered is also due to the fact that many of those working for local media opt for internal self-exile as soon as they start getting threats. Secondly, the principal source

Colombia : Paramilitary “black eagles” poised to swoop down on the press

of these threats and attacks on the press continues to be the armed groups, above all the paramilitaries, whose demobilisation has not resulted in their disarmament and their reintegration into civilian life. Thirdly, the inequalities between the national and local media have increased as regards not only their capacity to cover the armed conflict but also their access to public information. Finally, journalists in danger do not get equal protection.

Reporters Without Borders therefore recommends that:

- the process of demobilisation of armed groups should be extended in such way that they are properly disarmed and their members are reintegrated into society.
- in line with the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, the national police Human Rights Group should be given adequate resources and personnel so that it can not

only protect journalists but also investigate the source of the threats against them.

- the media should provide more coverage of violations of press freedom and free expression in Colombia.
- the press should be granted unrestricted access to the hearings involving paramilitaries, as their public nature was established by the constitutional court in September 2006.
- the leading media should help to reinforce the structures that are created to represent and defend journalists, such as the National Federation of Colombian Journalists, which was created on 3 May.
- every effort should be made to shed light on the scandal of the illegal tapping of the phones of opposition journalists and others that was revealed by the defence minister on 13 May and, if necessary, the composition and duties of the intelligence services should be overhauled.