The press in Colombia continued to work under dangerous conditions in 2014. Although the government has made attempts to strengthen protection mechanisms for journalists in recent years, security concerns still pose a serious challenge. Revelations of illegal surveillance during January peace talks between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebel group further complicated matters for journalists, whose communications with FARC sources were reportedly intercepted.

Legal Environment

The 1991 constitution guarantees the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of information, but defamation remains a criminal offense. Media outlets also face civil lawsuits related to their coverage of sensitive topics, such as organized crime and corruption. Although most suits are eventually dropped, fighting them in court requires substantial financial resources and time, meaning they can have a deterrent effect.

In January 2014, the Constitutional Court validated the 2012 Law on Transparency and Access to Public Information, and President Juan Manuel Santos duly enacted it in March. The law, which entered into force in September, buttresses existing information rights guaranteed by both the constitution and the 1985 Law Ordering the Publicity of Official Acts and Documents. It requires that government agencies make documents related to
contracts, budgets, and personnel available to the public. It also reduces the maximum period that such information can be kept confidential from 30 to 15 years, though the government may extend this period for an additional 15 years under certain conditions. Before ratifying the law, the Constitutional Court required that key passages be reworded in order to limit the scope of information the government can withhold for reasons like national security. While these changes satisfied some of the objections expressed by press groups, the law stops short of designating a single agency to implement its provisions, raising concerns about its effectiveness.

Two official bodies are responsible for regulating and licensing Colombia’s broadcast media. The Ministry of Information Technologies and Communications regulates the licensing of radio outlets, while the nominally independent National Television Authority (ANTV) regulates television licensing. In May 2013, the ANTV issued Resolution 0433 to bolster the community television sector. Although the resolution lengthens operating licenses and provides channels with access to government resources necessary for expansion, critics contend that other provisions, such as a limit on the maximum number of subscribers, are actually intended to stifle the sector. No licensing is necessary for print media.

The confidentiality of journalistic sources is protected under the constitution and by judicial rulings, but illegal surveillance has presented an ongoing challenge in Colombia, with dozens of journalists filing complaints against the administration of President Álvaro Uribe (2002–10) and distrust peaking after a series of 2010 phone-tapping scandals. In February 2014, the Miami-based television network Univision reported on allegations of illegal Colombian government surveillance during peace talks between the Colombian authorities and the FARC rebel group that were held in Havana in January. The revelation centered on the interception of some 2,600 e-mail messages between representatives of the FARC and both foreign and Colombian reporters.

Political Environment

Independent and privately owned print and broadcast media are generally free to express a variety of opinions and cover sensitive issues without official restrictions. However, journalists throughout the country, particularly in rural areas, face harassment from various actors, including paramilitaries, local criminals, drug-trafficking groups, guerrilla movements, and the government. Sensitive topics include corruption, organized crime, drug and human trafficking, land conflicts, indigenous rights, and extrajudicial executions. A pervasive climate of fear has led to self-censorship, particularly in rural settings and during election periods. The government operates an extensive program that provides protection to scores of journalists, although reporters have criticized the program’s effectiveness.

Harassment often comes in the form of death threats. In January 2014, threats were issued to Erika Londoño, Gustavo Chicangana, and Jorge Ramírez, three radio journalists working for Caracol Radio Guaviare, after they reported on a vote to recall José Octaviano Rivera from office as Guaviare’s governor. They reportedly received protection from the National Protection Unit (UNP). In May, the authorities warned journalist Gonzalo Guillén that there was a credible threat to his life. Guillén has been subject to slander, threats, and
harassment since he investigated links between Kiko Gómez, a former governor of La Guajira currently serving time in prison, and a crime syndicate; he had already been forced to flee the country twice over the previous year due to death threats.

In August, journalist Javier Osuna was the victim of targeted vandalism at his home in Bogotá, resulting in the destruction of 18 months of research he had carried out on victims of paramilitary violence in Norte de Santander. In September, a gang called Los Rastrojos threatened to kill 24 people in Montería in northern Córdoba state, including two journalists who report on local criminal activity—Leiderman Ortiz Berrío of the newspaper La Verdad del Pueblo and Edgar Astudillo of Radio Panzenú. Both received police protection. In October, threats intensified against Gustavo Rugeles, editor of the Bogotá-based news website Las 2 Orillas. Although the police protection afforded to Rugeles—who has faced threats since he began investigating links between neo-Nazi groups, paramilitaries, and local authorities three years ago—had recently been reduced due to a perceived decrease in risk, he remained an active target of intimidation.

In at least two cases during 2014, individuals who had received threats while working in the media were murdered, though it was unclear whether they were killed in connection with their journalism. In February, television cameraman Yonni Steven Caicedo was shot to death in Buenaventura. He had begun receiving death threats after reporting on a murder in mid-2013, and had subsequently left the city for seven months and refrained from working as a journalist. He was murdered by two assailants after returning in early 2014. In August, Luis Carlos Cervantes Solano, director of radio station Morena FM, was killed in Antioquia state. Cervantes had been receiving death threats since 2010, when he began covering stories about local corruption and alleged ties between authorities and paramilitaries. Although he had been under police protection for a time, he left journalism to focus on musical programming in late 2013, and his security detail was removed in July 2014.

Several other journalists fled the country or relocated within Colombia because of harassment and threats during 2014. In January, for example, Cartagena-based freelance journalist and animal rights activist Eva Durán went into hiding after receiving threats of physical harm and death in relation to her work. In August, freelance photographer and indigenous rights activist Juan Pablo Gutiérrez was forced to flee his home in central Colombia after receiving death threats from the Águilas Negras paramilitary group. Gutiérrez, who sought protection from the UNP, became a target of harassment after he published work that drew attention to threats against the indigenous Nukak tribe in the Colombian Amazon. The same paramilitary group later issued a series of threats against 14 journalists and 12 media organizations in December. Separately, Amalfi Rosales, a reporter for the Barranquilla-based paper El Heraldo and a correspondent for the Bogotá-based independent news network Noticias Uno TV, fled her home in northern La Guajira state in September after she received death threats and gunmen fired shots at her residence. Rosales began to be targeted in 2013 after reporting on ties between local authorities and criminal groups.

Impunity for those who threaten, attack, or kill members of the press continues to prevail in Colombia. While a 2010 reform extended the statute of limitations for violent crimes against journalists and human rights defenders from 20 to 30 years, the extension applies only to crimes committed after 2000. The few murders classified by the attorney general as crimes against humanity have no statute of limitations, however. In September 2012, it
was announced that the torture and sexual assault of journalist Jineth Bedoya—who was kidnapped in 2000—constituted crimes against humanity. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) accepted Bedoya’s case against the Colombian state in July 2014 and began investigating allegations that authorities were involved in the crimes against her. In August, President Santos designated May 25, the anniversary of the attacks on Bedoya, as a “national day of dignity” for victims of sexual violence during the decades-long civil conflict.

Although those who harm or murder journalists are rarely held accountable, one other recent case stands as a positive example. In December 2014, a court sentenced Hugo Daney Ortiz, the former deputy director of operations for the Administrative Security Department (DAS), the Colombian national intelligence service that was disbanded in 2011, to 11 years in prison for carrying out a campaign of “aggravated psychological torture” against investigative journalist Claudia Julieta Duque and her daughter. Duque was investigating the involvement of DAS in the 1999 murder of journalist Jaime Garzón when the harassment began; it caused her to flee the country three times between 2003 and 2004. Several other former DAS officials have been accused of participating in the harassment; one of them, Jorge Armando Rubiano Jiménez, pleaded guilty in March 2014.

**Economic Environment**

Media ownership is concentrated among a few groups of private investors, and television is the dominant news medium. All print media in Colombia are privately owned. The government operates three public television stations, but the two private free-to-air networks dominate the ratings. The pattern in radio is similar, with the two public national radio stations attracting a small audience share. There are hundreds of community radio stations, which have sometimes faced pressure from the government and armed groups. Local media depend heavily on advertising by regional and municipal government agencies to stay in business, encouraging collusion among media owners, journalists, and officials.

As of 2014, the country’s internet penetration rate reached nearly 53 percent. The public is making increasing use of social-networking websites such as Facebook and other digital tools, all of which are providing a new arena for journalists to cover sensitive topics like corruption and organized crime.

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