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## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

# Honduras

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Freedoms of speech and of the press are constitutionally protected in Honduras, but the killing and intimidation of journalists limited press freedom in practice during 2012. The ongoing lack of accountability since the 2009 coup d'état continues to have a negative effect on freedom of expression. Despite President Porfirio Lobo's stated determination to bring perpetrators of violent crimes against journalists to justice, no more than a handful of cases have been investigated. Given this culture of impunity, many journalists fear that the killings are carried out on the orders of, or with the concealed approval of, the police, the military, and other governmental authorities. However, in September 2012, a court handed down a rare conviction and 28-year prison sentence for the 2010 killing of journalist Jorge Alberto Orellana. In another positive step against impunity, 10 arrests were made in relation to the May 2012 murder of a prominent radio journalist, Ángel Alfredo Villatoro.

Despite the 2005 abolition of the penal code's *desacato* (disrespect) provision, which was aimed at protecting the honor of public officials, other restrictive press laws remain on the books and can be used to subpoena and punish journalists who report on sensitive issues such as government corruption, drug trafficking, and human rights abuses. A freedom of information law was passed in 2007, but access to public information continues to be problematic in practice.

The government indicated early in 2012 that it was considering a law to "regulate" news media activity, and the National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) took initial steps to introduce a bill that would give it oversight of national broadcast networks. Critics claim the proposal would permit major restrictions on media independence. The plan had not moved forward by the end of 2012.

Community radio stations are not clearly recognized by law, meaning they operate under threat of closure. Such stations, particularly those that carry opposition views, are regularly harassed and persecuted on dubious legal grounds. In February 2012, the electricity was disconnected at community stations La Voz Lenca and Radio Guarajambala FM by unknown men dressed in utility uniforms. At the time of the incident, the outlets were voicing support for a protest by local indigenous people against the construction of a power plant in Intibucá. In November, CONATEL ordered Radio Guarajambala FM to change frequencies and lower the strength of its broadcasts based on a five-year-old complaint that had already been rejected by CONATEL legal experts.

Government pressure and censorship continue to threaten press freedom. In October, the mayor of Talanga ordered the suspension of cable television channel Telecentro's broadcast signal, attempted to obstruct the circulation of the newspaper *El Heraldito* by buying up copies, and prohibited media outlets from selling advertising space to his political opponents. Also that month, the online newspaper *Hondudiario* was disabled for 48 hours following a cyberattack. The owners stated that the attack was a reprisal for the outlet's investigation into a large debt accrued through the superfluous use of government helicopters.

Self-censorship has been exacerbated by an increase in intimidation and regular reports of death threats against journalists and their families, largely by criminal groups. In August, two men on a motorcycle fired gunshots at the home of journalist José Encarnación Chinchilla López of Radio Cadena Voces in El Progreso. Chinchilla's 24-year-old son was injured. In November, three armed men threatened the son of prominent journalist Renato Alvarez outside his home. Local press freedom advocates have also faced threats. In February, Danilo Osmar Castellanos, the vice president of the Committee for Free Expression (C-Libre), received telephone calls and text messages threatening his life and the lives of his family members.

High levels of violence have made Honduras one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists. According to C-Libre, nine reporters were killed in 2012, although in some cases it was unclear whether the murders were directly tied to their work. In March, journalist Fausto Elio Valle Hernández Arteaga of Radio Alegre de Colón was found hacked to death in Sabá, Colón Department. The May murder of Villatoro, the news director of Radio HRN, led to large protests by journalists and human rights activists calling for justice and better protection for media personnel. Villatoro was found shot to death on a Tegucigalpa sidewalk a week after he was kidnapped. The country's human rights commissioner made a number of arrests, including that of a police officer, in

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connection with the murder, and investigations into the crime were ongoing at year's end. In July, Adonis Felipe Bueso Gutiérrez, a reporter with Radio Stereo Naranja, was kidnapped and murdered along with two of his cousins in Villanueva, Cortés Department. In August, journalist José Noel Canales of *Hondudiarío* was shot to death on his way to work. Many attacks occur in retaliation for journalists' coverage of organized crime, drug trafficking, corruption, or other sensitive issues.

Honduras has at least nine daily newspapers, six private television stations, and five radio stations that broadcast nationally, as well as a large number of community radio stations. Most of the major outlets are owned by a small group of business magnates who have political and commercial interests and exercise considerable control over content. Corruption among journalists and government manipulation of state advertising purchases remain common. According to a 2008 report by the Open Society Institute, journalists often entered into contracts with government officials and received payments in return for favorable reporting.

About 18 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2012, but poor infrastructure in rural areas limits penetration.

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